

Forest Restoration Projects Moving Forward

Eye on the Environment

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Community
Conservation
Education

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Over a decade ago many of us started working to initiate and sustain a program of work on both public and private forestlands in the Swan Valley that considers the needs of the whole ecosystem, treats forest health problems and provides a source of employment for local residents.

We have labored to get environmental groups, the Forest Service, state agencies and community members behind some common sense projects that meet multiple social, ecological and economic objectives. This year, some of that work is paying off.

The Swan Lake Ranger District is currently accepting bids on the Holland Fuels Stewardship Project. This project is made possible by the authority granted the Forest Service in the Healthy Forest Restoration Act.

In keeping with the direction provided by congress, the project area was defined using the Seeley-Swan Community Wildfire Protection Plan. That plan, which included input from the Swan Valley Fire Department, prioritized treatment on Forest Service acres that adjoin private residential parcels. The deadline for getting bids in on this stewardship contract is September 11, 2006 and contractors will have a two-year window in which to complete the work.

Like other projects developed under the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA) this one involves a "multiparty monitoring team," a diverse group of individuals who come together to collaboratively measure the ecological and social impacts of the work being accomplished.

Representatives from the community, the state and federal agencies, the timber industry and conservation groups met this spring and decided to monitor the impacts of the Holland-Pierce projects on fuel levels, forest health, wildlife habitat, noxious weeds and the degree to which the work actually benefits the community.

The goals are to assist the Forest Service in planning future projects in the Swan Valley and to build trust and a common understanding of local forest conditions. The group is open to any citizen interested in participating in field tours and data collection.

Although forest restoration includes fuels reduction, i.e. the mechanical removal of trees, it is much more than that. The Forest Service is also planning prescribed burns on 2,200 acres of the Swan Front to improve wildlife habitat, reduce fuels and promote whitebark pine restoration. These burns are located between Holland Canyon and Buck Creek in areas where fires have historically burnt frequently.

"These fires will not be lit in heavy fuels on north facing slopes,

but on south and west facing slopes where they bring the greatest benefit and where we have the greatest ease of control," said John Ingebretson at a recent fire information meeting in Condon. Ingebretson is a fire specialist with the Swan Lake Ranger District. "There are very narrow constraints on when these burns can be ignited, and they will only be done in either early spring or late fall. The first of these burns will likely occur in 2007."

A project is also in the planning stages for the Cooney-McKay area of the Swan Valley that will include a similar combination of mechanical fuels reduction and prescribed fire. This project has not gone out for public comment yet, so stay tuned for an opportunity soon.

A small project called Condon Private, is also in the planning stage for scattered Forest Service parcels around the community of Condon. This project will be about 300 acres in size and will focus almost exclusively on fuels reduction.

Most of these projects will be offered as stewardship contracts. The nice thing about stewardship contracts is that, unlike conventional timber sales, the dollars made in the removal of commercial wood products get put back into watershed restoration and stay in the project area. These projects are helping to upgrade culverts that currently inhibit fish passage along streams in the Swan Valley. They also include money for weed treatment and erosion control.

Another opportunity for restoration exists on Forest Service lands recently acquired from Plum Creek Timber Co. In the Swan Valley, we have roughly 8,000 acres that were put on the real estate market but were instead acquired and transferred to the Flathead National Forest. These lands are mostly in the Beaver Creek and Lindbergh Lake Area.

This summer crews consisting of NwC staff, the Forest Service and local volunteers were out on these lands conducting restoration inventories. They found many opportunities for watershed restoration through culvert upgrades, weed treatments, decompaction of soils and revegetation on road beds.

One of the most encouraging things that happened this summer was the Governor's Restoration Forum in Billings, Montana. In June, Governor Schweitzer brought together conservation, labor, business, scientific, tribal and community leaders to take a hard look at Montana's natural resource based economy. The purpose was to collectively find solutions to enhance our state's ecological integrity while building business opportunities for local communities.

The conference was inspiring; it highlighted national and re-

gional examples where the restoration economy has enhanced public access, recreational opportunities, water quality and wildlife habitat, while contributing to rural economies. Here in western Montana the removal of Milltown Dam was highlighted as one example.

More locally, the Seeley Lake Ranger District and Pyramid Mountain Lumber gave an excellent presentation on the Clearwater Stewardship Project, a project that provided employment not only to Pyramid, but to a number of local subcontractors. Folks on the ground have long recognized the economic potential of restoration, so it was very exciting to see the concept elevated to the state level.

It seems like the time has come when federal agencies, state leaders, local businesses, conservation groups and rural communities are coming to the realization that the active restoration of Montana's forested landscape is something that can benefit both the land and the people. It is nice to know that we are part of that larger movement here in the Swan Valley.