

Plan unveiled for Blackfoot Valley lands

By EVE BYRON - IR Staff Writer - 01/25/07

An unusual coalition of environmental groups, a timber company, the U.S. Forest Service and ranchers unveiled a plan Wednesday that could lead to the first expansion of Montana wilderness areas in more than two decades.

The proposal would also open new lands for snowmobiling and create a new power generation plant in Seeley Lake.

The Blackfoot Cooperative Landscape Stewardship Pilot Project would add 87,000 acres to the Bob Marshall/Scapegoat and Mission Mountain wilderness areas northwest of Helena, and open 2,000 acres in Lake Creek for snowmobiling.

In addition, the project is seeking congressional funding of \$7.9 million during a 10-year period for restoration, management and monitoring of lands within the Seeley Ranger District on the Lolo National Forest; and for \$4.5 million in federal monies for a \$7 million biomass energy generation plant in Seeley Lake.

"This proposal represents a common-sense approach that recognizes diverse uses of the land," said Bob Ekey, Northern Rockies regional director for The Wilderness Society. "The proposal fosters forest management, fuel reduction and restoration on lower elevation Forest Service lands that have already been roaded, and as one moves upslope, backcountry stewardship is emphasized, combining areas suited for backcountry recreation and wilderness."

The plan's genesis came from a conversation years ago between John Gatchell with the Montana Wilderness Association and Gordy Sanders with Pyramid Lumber, Inc.

"We were talking about revisions of the Lolo Forest plan and how we could do the important projects on the ground," Sanders said on Wednesday. "If plans don't result in anything on the ground, they have no use."

From there the conversation evolved to what's being called a "landscape-level conservation approach" for the greater Blackfoot River area to protect wild lands while providing economic development opportunities to local communities.

"For small communities in the Blackfoot, this is what we have tried to do for 30 years," said Ovando rancher Jim Stone. "This is about our land, our backyard . it's about economics and keeping the ranchers on the land and conserving wildlife for generations to come."

The wilderness designation wouldn't change activities on the ground, since the lands have no existing motorized uses, and have been recommended and managed as wilderness areas since the 1982 forest plan, according to Gatchell.

The proposal calls for adding 75,000 acres of high-elevation areas in the North Fork of the Blackfoot/Monture Creek area, and 6,000 acres in the Grizzly Basin/Swan Range, to the Bob Marshall and Scapegoat Wilderness areas. Another 6,000 high-elevation acres in the headwaters of the West Fork of the Clearwater River would be added to the Mission Mountains Wilderness.

Any new wilderness designations have to be approved by Congress, with Stone saying they hope to get something introduced this year.

Active management of the lower-elevation areas of the forest including livestock grazing, logging and restoration would be encouraged, and boundary changes are being made to recommend a new 2,000 acre snowmobiling area in North Fork, which currently is non-motorized/recommended wilderness.

Funding for restoration work - mainly taking out logging roads and enhancing bull trout, grizzly and elk habitat - along with management and monitoring of stewardship projects would come from a 10-year federal appropriation of \$790,000 per year, Ekey said.

The \$7 million biomass energy generation plant would convert excess "biomass" - like smaller trees and other materials - into power, heat and steam, according to Sanders. Pyramid Lumber would use most of the power, but anticipates any excess could be available to the local energy co-op, to schools or the nearby medical center.

He added that it allows the power Pyramid now buys from the Missoula Electric Co-op to go to other parties, which could be needed as the Seeley Lake area grows.

The plant would be paid with through a mix of public and private dollars. Sanders said they hope to pay for the \$3 million boiler through a \$1.5 million congressional appropriation that the company would match. Pyramid Lumber is seeking another \$3 million appropriation for the \$4 million co-generation facility.

Ekey acknowledged that with the dwindling Forest Service budgets, it might be difficult to secure the funding, but he and other members of the group that formulated the plan are cautiously optimistic.

"Our congressional delegation has been briefed on this, but we haven't asked them for support," Ekey said. "Right now we're asking for input from people

across the state."

Open House Feb. 20

An open house on the Blackfoot Cooperative Landscape Stewardship Pilot Project is set for 5 p.m. Feb. 20 at the Blackfoot River Challenge office in Ovando. For more information, contact Bob Ekey at 586-1600, ext. 102, or Gordy Sanders at 677-2201, ext. 27.

Reporter Eve Byron can be reached at 447-4076

MONTANANS FOR MULTIPLE USE has tried to get a copy of this project but we have not been able to at this time. There is nothing on the Blackfoot Challenge website about this. All we have is this article from the Helena Independent Record. We will continue to request for more information.

Until we have more details, we must be content to look at the main points.

1. 87,000 acres of designated wilderness.

Congressional designation means that it would take an act of Congress to allow anything but wilderness use on this lands. Although it is currently managed as wilderness, that can change with a new forest administration. Which is why Montana Wilderness wants designation so badly. They want it permanently locked up.

2. 2,000 acres of snowmobiling area.

Notice the huge imbalance in wilderness acreage and wilderness acreage. Depending on terrain, it would not take more than a few minutes for a snowmobiler to zip from one end of this to another. This is like locking up a blooded Arabian stallion in a corral and letting the mules loose in the pasture.

Will this area have the same guarantees and permanency as wilderness designation. Doubt it.

3. Federal money for a biomass electric generating plant

The biomass plant might be a good idea. But a similar plan in Trout Creek was squashed by environmentalists. What guarantees will there be that the plant will be built and that USFS will actually allow harvest of materials to run it?

4. Federal money for eco-restoration

This includes road obliteration which is never a good idea. If you don't need the roads, just put them to sleep and let nature take its course.

Once again there is an imbalance between the environmental benefits and the multiple use benefits of this bill. The biomass plant gets 4.5 million and road rip gets 7.9 million.

They say the devil is in the details so we will have to wait to see how devilish this one gets.