

Clark Fork Chronicle

A birds-eye view of the wilderness-stewardship proposal

Thursday, May 17 2007 @ 10:16 AM MDT

Contributed by: [Admin](#)

Views: 75

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The subject line of the email message read: "Want to go for an airplane ride tomorrow morning?"

The Blackfoot Cooperative Landscape Stewardship Pilot Project "is doing a flyover of the Seeley/Swan where they are planning for wilderness and stewardship projects," the message said. "They have offered to let us go on the flight after the congressional staffers."

It sounded like fun. The weatherman predicted a beautiful sunny day with very little wind and temperatures in the mid 70's; it was a chance to see an area I'd hunted, and explored, from a totally new vantage point; an opportunity to learn first-hand about an innovative, first-of-its-kind, project that could well have a positive impact on our readers...especially those involved in the timber industry.

It sounded like fun, but my most recent experience in a plane pulled by a propeller, one smaller than a full-sized school bus, took place when I was about 18 years-old – a scant four or five years after the Beatles first appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show.

You can do the ciphering if you want to, but no matter how you run the numbers, new math or old math, it was a long time ago. Even though that experience was a positive one, I'll admit that a little trepidation filled my fingers when I typed a message agreeing to go.

The first step was to learn a bit about the project so I wasn't, pardon the pun, flying blind when I stepped into the six-seater's passenger compartment.

An overview received from Chris Mehl, from the The Wilderness Society, described the project as a proposal that "...would help keep historic and traditional activities as part of the landscape, add diversity and sustainability to the local economy with both recreation and forestry jobs, and enhance watersheds and the landscape."

"With the conversion of Plum Creek timberlands to other private, state and federal ownerships in the Blackfoot watershed," the overview reported, the residents of the Blackfoot River Valley have come up with a vision that "...includes protecting traditional ranching, hunting, fishing and other uses, in concert with conserving water and wildlife, wilderness and sustainable forestry activities."

Besides recommending that 81,000 acres be added to the Bob Marshall-Scapegoat Wilderness, and 6,000 acres to the Mission Mountain Wilderness, the legislative proposal that will be sent to Congress involves the Lolo National Forest's Seeley Ranger District; lands within the 41,000-acre Blackfoot Community Conservation Area, in the area of Monture Creek; and includes funding for a new boiler and a 3.2 megawatt Co-Generation facility on about two acres at the Pyramid Mountain Lumber Inc. plant site in Seeley Lake.

The Biomass Co-Generation facility is a private-public pilot project that, in addition to providing an outlet for excess forest fuels and meeting the electrical needs of Pyramid Lumber, is expected to add between 20 and 30 well-paying jobs to the area's economy.

The overview refers to the facility as: "...the model and vision for rebuilding lost infrastructure in the West."

The list of supporters and participants included in the media information packet that the reporters received, when they gathered in the conference room at Minuteman Aviation for the preflight

orientation, was truly impressive and reflected the broad base of support that exists for the project.

Gordy Sanders, the manager of Pyramid Lumber, discussed the project, and answered questions from three reporters while they were waiting for the congressional flyover to finish.

The Blackfoot Cooperative Landscape Stewardship Pilot Project, he said, grew from a chance meeting he had with John Gatchell of the Montana Wilderness Association – a discussion about how best to implement the Lolo National Forest Plan in and around the Seeley Ranger District and the Blackfoot Watershed.

Planning is all well and good, they both agreed, but it really doesn't mean anything until you begin to get something done on the ground.

That was about two years ago, according to Sanders, and with that vision in mind the Blackfoot Landscape Work Group was formed, a proposal developed for public review that was taken to the community through a series of public meetings, and appropriations requests were submitted to the Montana Congressional Delegation.

The appropriations request for the project amounts to \$750,000 per year for ten years. \$350,000 will be allocated to planning, management and monitoring, and \$400,000 is designated for restoration projects – with a dollar-for-dollar match of \$250,000 in funds from the private sector.

Implemented in two phases, the cost of the new boiler and the biomass Co-Generation facility is estimated to be \$7 million, with \$4.5 million derived through the appropriations request, and \$2.5 million provided through matching funds supplied by Pyramid Lumber.

A chronological report on the project's development lists 18 organizations, agencies, and individuals who have expressed their support.

It includes commissioners from Lewis & Clark County, Missoula County, and Powell County; the Montana State Governor's Office and Secretary of State; The Blackfoot Challenge, the Clearwater Resources Council, and the Seeley Lake Community Council; several ranches, snowmobile clubs, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, the Montana Wilderness Association, the Wilderness Society, the Montana Professional Wilderness Outfitters Association, and Pyramid Mountain Lumber.

An impressive, and diverse list with more names and letters of support to be added soon.

In response to a question about individuals, or groups who were speaking out against the project, the reporters were told that the group has not received any letters of opposition, and that there had not been any negative input during the public meetings where comments were taken.

"There will always be fringe groups that will resist every proposal that deals with wilderness," Sanders said, adding that thus far the project has been widely supported and that they have had great dialog with the County Commissioners.

The flight itself?

In a word: "Wonderful," thanks to the skill of pilot, and president, Bruce Gordon of EcoFlight, and the insight of our tour guide on the flight, Jack Rich from Rich Ranch Outfitting and Guest Ranch.

With an intimate knowledge of the wilderness and the watershed gleaned from nearly 50 years in the area, Rich provided the passengers with a perspective this reporter felt privileged to experience.

"It's not about commercial timber...it's resource management," he said, "stewardship sums it up in a single word."

"Our concept of stewardship is evolving," Rich said near the end of the flight, "it's different than it was fifty years ago. Science has changed our understanding of the natural world around us and it's helped us make better decisions."

The lesson learned from the experience was that great things can happen when self-interest is set aside and people work together towards a common vision.

The question carried away was: "If it works in the Blackfoot drainage, why not here in the Clark Fork and Mineral County?"

"We'd certainly love to do something similar," was the response from acting Public Affairs Officer Nick Stang from the Lolo National Forest Office, when asked if anything akin to the Blackfoot project was in the works for this area. "It's a matter of getting all of the groups to sit down and work together."

"Slowly, over time, I think that we are heading that direction," he said, "for now though it is more the exception than the rule."

Food for thought for everyone who cares about the future of our forestlands