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Gail Kimbell, Regional Forester
USFS Northern Region
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Dear Regional Forester Kimbell:

As a resident of Missoula County, you know that our community is growing and our local economy is both robust and diverse. Much of this growth is tied to the National Forests that surround Missoula. The forests provide raw materials for the timber mills in the County and tremendous opportunities for all manner of outdoor recreation. Because of the tension that can sometimes exist between timber harvest and other natural resource values, we are keenly aware of efforts to balance resource uses on National Forest lands.

It is in this context that we write to endorse the Beaverhead-Deerlodge Partnership. The dialogue leading to the Partnership actually began in Missoula County last December at a hearing Senator Conrad Burns held on forestry issues. John Gatchell of the Montana Wilderness Association and Sherm Anderson, President of Sun Mountain Lumber, were on a panel together and agreed to talk further after finding they had many concerns in common. Since then, the Partnership has developed a strategy that comprehensively balances timber management, wilderness protection and forest restoration. As a County that is concerned with all of these issues, the Partnership Strategy represents a remarkable effort to move us past the gridlock that stalled many Forest Service initiatives.

Missoula County has a direct interest in the success of the Partnership Strategy. Not only do many of our residents hunt, fish and camp in southwestern Montana, but our mills depend on a steady supply of wood products from the Beaverhead-Deerlodge Forest. Together, the Pyramid Mountain mill in Seeley Lake (150 employees), and the Roseburg (190 employees) and Smurfit-Stone mills (496 employees) in Missoula make significant contributions to the tax base of Missoula County.

While these mills are vitally important to the employees working at them and to thousands of others who work in mill related businesses, the Missoula County mills are also important to the effective utilization of forest fiber and to the other mills in the Partnership and beyond. The Roseburg mill in Missoula relies on the mills operated by Pyramid Mountain Lumber, Sun Mountain Lumber and RY Timber for over 30 percent of the raw materials it uses to produce particleboard and melamine. Likewise, the Smurfit-Stone mill in Frenchtown uses chips produced at the other Partnership mills and logging operations across to the northern Rockies to produce its kraft liner products. The Pyramid Mountain mill in Seeley Lake, Montana is the town's largest employer. It produces lumber products and is actively bidding on timber sales across western Montana, including the Beaverhead-Deerlodge Forest.

These mills have made substantial investments over the last several years so that they can fully utilize small diameter logs and the entire range of fiber that comes from a timber sale – chips to tops and everything in between. To the extent that all of these mills are interdependent, and to the extent that a combination of mills maximizes the added value of timber produced on national forest lands, we believe that Partnership Strategy is much more than the sum of its parts.

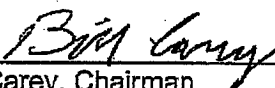
Beyond the importance of a well managed Beaverhead-Deerlodge Forest to the timber industry, we believe the Partnership Strategy will benefit hunters, anglers and outdoor recreationists by restoring damaged habitats on the Forest through steward contracting projects. The Clearwater Project, which was a stewardship contract between Pyramid Mountain Lumber and the Forest Service, serves as an example of what can be accomplished through stewardship contracting. On this project, five million board feet of timber was harvested from a 640 acre area for Pyramid Mountain's Seeley Lake mill. This harvest resulted in nearly \$1 million in "services" including:

- Treating 12.6 miles of roadside for noxious weeds
- Installing 7 bridges or arch culverts for bull and cutthroat fish passage
- Retiring and reclaiming 12.8 miles of roads for Grizzly Bear road density
- Reconstructing 15 miles of road to meet "Best Management Standards" for water quality
- Graveling about 2-1/2 miles of road in 5 separate locations for sediment reduction
- Rerouting an existing segment of road away from a bull trout stream
- Installing vault toilets and picnic tables at campgrounds around Seeley Lake

On the Beaverhead-Deerlodge, there is tremendous restoration potential in blue-ribbon drainages such as Rock Creek and the Jefferson and Big Hole Rivers. Existing and projected Forest Service budgets are not likely to fund much of this restoration work. Stewardship contracting provides a tool not only for getting the work done, but for building partnerships with the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Trout Unlimited, NWF and other NGO's. This work will enhance fish and wildlife populations and benefit Montana sportsmen and women.

We recognize that the Forest Service is well along with revising the Beaverhead-Deerlodge Forest Plan and that the Partnership Strategy emerged only after the draft plan had been released. But given the Partnership's importance, we believe the Forest Service should develop and assess the Strategy as an alternative management tactic and release it for additional public review. Such a process will build both public understanding and support for the Partnership Strategy and establish a strong foundation for moving forward in the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest.

With Best Regards,
BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS



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Barbara Evans, Commissioner



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