

Accord could be crucial fork in the trail

SUMMARY: Collaborative approach promising constructive change on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest deserves your attention.

It's been about a month since several timber companies and environmental groups joined in proposing an almost revolutionary plan for managing Montana's largest national forest, the Beaverhead-Deerlodge. Stepping outside the familiar conflict-filled forest planning arena, loggers and fishermen and hunters and wilderness advocates discovered through informal collaboration huge areas of common ground. Their proposal for forest management would protect and improve fish and wildlife habitat; protect forever as wilderness more than half a million acres added to existing designated wilderness; make steady progress toward restoring healthier, more natural forest conditions; provide better long-term protection from catastrophic wildfire; and, at the same time, provide sawmills with a dependable and larger supply of timber.

Parties to the proposal include five wood products companies, the National Wildlife Federation, Trout Unlimited and the Montana Wilderness Association. What they came up with through months of negotiation is what they call a "Partnership Strategy." It calls for using an innovative approach, replacing piecemeal timber sales and forest projects with more holistic management of large tracts. It would make greater use of so-called "stewardship contracts," in which companies could obtain timber in exchange for thinning, improving watersheds, reclaiming old and eroding forest roads and other beneficial work. This approach effectively plows back into the land and local communities much of the

value reaped through logging. As an alternative to sending timber-sale dollars into the black hole of the U.S. Treasury, only to defer needed conservation measures for want of congressional appropriations, stewardship contracts have great appeal. The Partnership Strategy sets no exact timber-harvest quotas but designates 713,000 acres of the 3.3-million-acre forest as suitable for logging. Another 573,000 acres would be recommended to Congress for addition to the wilderness system. It's an elegant compromise. The fact that these parties, scarred veterans of many past public land skirmishes, see eye-to-eye on ways to better manage a forest is reason enough for excitement.

Their plan, however, has been greeted by a remarkable and resounding silence.

Oh, it's attracted attention in some small circles. Some of the more zealous environmentalists oppose it, in good measure because it involves logging, including along the fringe of a few roadless areas. Some off-road vehicle enthusiasts object because the plans resource-protection provisions include limitations on where four-wheelers are allowed to tear up the hillsides. Some local politicians recoil from it because it includes expansion of areas permanently protected as wilderness, which they oppose no matter what other benefits come in return. And even within the Forest Service, this grand compromise has detractors. They say the proposal arises too late to incorporate in their planning process, which is well under way. As if overcoming agency inertia weren't hard enough, the plan also suffers from the Forest Service's NIH

Syndrome – "not invented here." It's just human nature, but there's an institutional resistance to ideas not originating within the meeting rooms of the Forest Service. Also, having at some point swapped the motto "Land of Many Uses" for "All Things to All People" – a fool's errand – key Forest Service officials reflexively shun a proposal coming from some but not all groups representing forest users.

Publicly, however, there's been almost no discussion, much less expressed enthusiasm for the Beaverhead-Deerlodge Partnership Strategy. Those who joined in this collaborative effort have had little luck rallying support, even among leading politicians and opinion leaders who might generally be expected to embrace, at least conceptually, anything that substitutes better stewardship for the bitter stalemate that dominates forest management.

Debate over the future of our public forests tends to revolve around opposition. An entire industry of associations and nonprofit organizations exists to oppose what's been done in the past, what's being done now or what land-management agencies might do in the future. Listen carefully, and you'll hear a lot more of what people don't want from their forests than what they do want. And even among the affirmative arguments for this or that, the narrow focus of so many forest-user groups promotes advocacy of single, seemingly mutually exclusive interests. So much of the battle over forest management is fought by proxy, with a few dozen industry and organization spokesmen doing the talking for large constituencies, that the public winds

up playing the role of spectator, not participant, even though it's the public's lands and resources they're talking about.

Are we so accustomed and content to view our national forests as battlegrounds for intractable conflicts that we can't recognize the path toward peace and prosperity when we see it? We've studied the Partnership Strategy and talked to some of its architects and their critics. The worst that can be said about the proposal is that it may not be perfect. Some people might prefer more of something and less of another. Overall, though, it represents exactly the kind of forest management most people say they want, yielding productive, healthy forests with all of the qualities that we value – among them, clean water and air, wild places, accessible places, wildlife, healthy fisheries and useful wood products. This plan, with its emphasis on stewardship contracting on a large scale, suggests the possibility of a seismic shift in forest management – one that helps replace today's "analysis paralysis" with constructive change.

There's ample room for disagreement, of course. Perhaps the balance of the compromise won't satisfy public expectations. Maybe there's some fatal flaw someone will discover. Maybe a competing idea will emerge and prove superior. But if this plan dies, let's hope it's on the merits of its well-understood substance. It should not be left to wither by an entrenched forest Opposition Industry, an inertia-driven government bureaucracy, elected practitioners of political polarization and an overly complacent public.