

OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
STATE OF MONTANA

STEVE BULLOCK
GOVERNOR



ANGELA McLEAN
LT. GOVERNOR

April 7, 2014

U.S. Forest Service
Attn: Tony Tooke, Associate Deputy Chief for NFS, 5NW
201 14th Street SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Mr. Tooke:

Enclosed is Montana's submission of proposed priority landscapes pursuant to Section 8204 of the 2014 Agricultural Act (Farm Bill)

Montanans are concerned about the health and vitality of our national forests. For many years these forests have anchored a quality of life that is the envy of the nation: providing clean and abundant water, world-class wildlife habitat and blue-ribbon fisheries, diverse recreation, and a steady supply of wood products for Montana mills. Our forests play a significant role in our economic well-being, attracting new businesses, supporting a booming tourism industry, and providing good-paying jobs in the timber industry in many smaller communities.

Unfortunately, we stand today on the verge of losing the many benefits those forests provide to us.

There is a lot of work to be done in the woods: to reduce fire risk, protect communities and municipal water supplies, and preserve and repair key streams and fisheries. In addition, our national forests, if sustainably managed, can be valuable carbon stores and play an important role in combatting climate change. The health of our integrated wood products industry is critical as we look toward the future – the forest industry workforce is a vital tool to implement forest restoration projects that address these issues.

The USDA Forest Service in Montana faces shrinking program budgets and staffing, more funding dedicated to fighting fires than mitigating them, and challenges from appeals and litigation. Until the last few years, it would have been easy to dismiss the issues around forest management as intractable – it seemed like the various stakeholders were more interested in seeking conflict than solutions.

More recently, diverse groups of Montanans have realized that our crisis in forest management is an equal-opportunity calamity in the making, and that we all stand to degrade the very landscapes we all treasure. They've been coming together around the state to roll up their sleeves and address these issues, getting past the conflicts of old and finding forward-looking solutions. However groundbreaking their efforts have been, they have struggled to see results, in part because of a statutory framework that does not reward and recognize the value of collaboration.

The recently-passed Farm Bill provides the U.S. Forest Service with several new tools that may help spur forest management, providing much-needed wood for our struggling timber mills, strengthening the role of citizen collaborative efforts in addressing significant management and restoration needs on the ground, and boosting local economies.

The Farm Bill sets forth a process where the Governor of a state may nominate area landscapes that are impacted by insects and disease to the Secretary of Agriculture. If those landscapes are then designated by the Secretary, forest management in those areas will be pursuant to an efficient and prioritized planning process, with rigorous science and allowing for full public involvement. Only those areas characterized by declining forest health, a risk of substantially increased tree mortality, or an imminent risk to public infrastructure, health, or safety, may be nominated. According to the Forest Service, 7,645,000 acres of forest lands in Montana are at risk of mortality from insects and diseases over the next 15 years. This is approximately 21 percent of our forested lands.

Included with this letter are my nominations to the Secretary of Agriculture. Although there were other eligible areas, these nominations are based upon several criteria, first and foremost being the pressing need for active management to address wildfire threats posed to communities and watersheds. Other considerations include the presence of strong citizen collaborative efforts (including Resource Advisory Councils), the need for active restoration work for fisheries and wildlife, the proximity to our timber mills and local jobs, and the capacity of local Forest Service offices.

My goals are simple. With these nominations I want to prioritize and focus the efforts of the USDA Forest Service to create jobs by increasing both the pace and scale of forest restoration, and strengthen the role of local citizen collaboratives in those efforts. At over five million acres across seven National Forests, these proposed priority landscape nominations are relatively large. However, I expect that these nominations will chart the course for national forest management for the next 15 years. The scale of these nominations provides the flexibility to address forest health and restoration needs during that time period, and creates broad opportunity for Montanans to work together.

It is worth noting, and I find it particularly gratifying, that many of these nominated landscapes arise from diverse groups of Montanans who are already working together to build forest management projects that meet a variety of needs, not only providing logs on trucks and reducing wildfire risk, but also restoring trout streams and elk habitat, among other community objectives. For example:

- 1) The Kootenai Forest Stakeholders is a citizen – based collaborative comprised of loggers, mill owners, environmentalists, business owners, local governments, educators, fire management personnel, and citizens at large. They requested that I nominate over 1.4 million acres of the Kootenai National Forest so that they can work together to build projects that meet a variety of community needs, including community protection, forest and watershed restoration, public safety, forest health, and community economic vitality. I have included those acres in this proposal.
- 2) The Southwest Crown Collaborative is comprised of neighbors and allies who seek to bolster rural economies and make our forests healthier in the long-term. The members, participants, and supporters include economic development firms, conservation groups, tribes, federal and state land agencies, timber groups and mills, local elected officials, land trusts, and the University of Montana. They focus their efforts on the lower elevation forests and communities of the Blackfoot, Clearwater, and Swan River valleys. The Lolo, Flathead, and Helena National Forests manage 59 percent of these lands, and have requested that I nominate approximately 855,000 acres to facilitate the Collaborative's work. I have included those acres in my nominations.
- 3) The Beaverhead-Deerlodge Working Group is a committee of Montanans who represent key interests, geographic balance, and knowledge of the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest, including timber, county commissioners, agriculture/ranching, quiet and motorized recreation, conservation, hunting and fishing, outfitters/guides, and other citizen interests. They work together to build agreement around priority areas and approaches for forest restoration and to help facilitate completion of those projects at the

local level. They submitted seven landscapes totaling almost 600,000 acres that are project- ready, and those landscapes are in this proposal.

There are many other noteworthy collaborative efforts that are going on across the state, as Montanans try to find common ground around these difficult issues, including the Whitefish Range Partnership, Montana Forest Restoration Committee, Elkhorns Working Group, Tenmile Watershed Collaborative Committee, Mineral County RAC, and others. I want the Forest Service to use these nominations to not only provide a significant boost to these ongoing citizen-based efforts, but also to provide encouragement to other folks to work together on other landscapes.

My proposals do not include any areas such as recommended wilderness, wilderness study areas, or wilderness designated by Congress. I have limited inclusion of roadless lands to a few small areas on the Helena and Gallatin-Custer National Forests that are characterized by acute wildfire risk and proximity to residential areas in the wildland-urban interface or municipal watersheds, or where non-mechanical treatments are anticipated by the Forest Service. It is my intention that any activities that occur in these few roadless lands be consistent with the Roadless Area Conservation Rule.

Montanans expect results. With these nominations I'm doing my part, and giving the Forest Service and our citizen collaborative groups new tools. Now we need to see results on the ground. I respectfully request that the Forest Service make a commitment that within 90 days there will be Montana projects moving forward that make our forest healthier, protect our communities, put Montanans to work, and restore and protect our fish and wildlife habitat.

As a yardstick to measure progress, it is my expectation that the Forest Service will prioritize projects that accomplish a few important objectives:

Meaningfully address forest health issues at a landscape scale, mitigating wildfire risks to make our communities safer;

Provide wood to local mills, sustaining and creating jobs and boosting our local economies;

Strengthen collaborative citizen efforts that build broad-based projects to not only address hazardous fuels, but also aggressively conduct needed restoration work for fisheries and wildlife;

Generate revenues that are sufficient to pay for the costs of implementing the projects.

I believe that the Farm Bill Forestry Title represents a tremendous opportunity to move national forest management in Montana beyond the conflict and stagnation of the past two generations. More effort will be necessary by all of those involved to improve the health of our national forests, but I am optimistic that these nominations are an important first step toward achieving that end.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Steve Bullock', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

STEVE BULLOCK
Governor

Enclosures: maps, thumb drive