

Forests in Focus Funding Helps Speed Up the Process

By Kelley Hirning

Forest restoration, fuels treatments and wildfire prevention/reduction activities are ongoing in the Southeastern part of Montana. Last month, the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) organized a tour of different Southeastern Montana fuel reduction projects to highlight all the work that is being done in the area to reduce wildfire risk and its threat to the public and property. In addition to DNRC staff, other attendees included a Rosebud County Commissioner, U.S. Forest Service, Northern Cheyenne and BIA staff, local landowners, Rosebud Conservation District, and members of the local forest industry.

DNRC Eastern Land Office Area Manager Chris Pileski showcased some of the projects that were a result of the partnership of those involved, as well as the various state and federal grants that provided funding. Pileski also recognized Bobbi Vannattan of the Rosebud Conservation District for all her great work in managing most of the projects. She and the Conservation District are an important partner in completing these projects.



The group toured the Ashland Forest Products Mill in Ashland and were able to see all the work the revitalized mill is undertaking. Reopened in the fall of 2014, the mill is producing lumber products out of logs from trees killed in the wildfires of 2012, including logs from projects that were on the tour.

After touring the mill, the group visited projects on state trust land, U.S. Forest Service land, and two private landowners.

Since 2009, DNRC has used state and federal funds to help restore forest land on 30 properties, totaling approximately 4,000 acres of private, tribal, and state lands in the southeast region of Montana. One of the funding sources was the Montana Forests in Focus Initiative, which has disbursed four million dollars for projects on tribal, state and private forests and two million dollars to USFS lands for fuel reduction and forest restoration. Tom Trusler Jr, a 5th generation rancher and grant recipient said, *“By utilizing the Forest in Focus money, this advanced us at least 20 years...with the Forests in Focus program it’s here now.”*

The Ash Creek fire in 2012 was one of the largest Montana had seen in many decades. It scorched almost 250,000 acres of Southeast Montana in less than 2 weeks. The tour included areas that were affected by this quick moving and devastating fire.

Brian and Maggie Dice remember that day like it was yesterday, and just talking about it brings tears to their eyes. Through the Rosebud Conservation District they also utilized the Forests in Focus funds. As Mrs. Dice stated, *“it’s just nice after a catastrophic fire to have the resources we need, because we couldn’t have done this without them.”*

