

**Briefing for the Joint House and Senate Natural Resources Committees
60th Montana State Legislature
Montana State Capitol – Old Supreme Court Room
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Briefing by Helena Forest Supervisor Kevin Riordan
Representing
Acting Northern Regional Forester Kathleen McAllister**

Chairmen of the Committees, Senate and House Members, my name is Kevin Riordan. I am the Supervisor of the Helena National Forest and I am here today representing Acting Regional Forester Kathy McAllister. Ms. McAllister regrets she cannot be here today due to other business out of state. Thank you for the invitation to brief you on important issues and concerns related to management of Montana's 9 National Forests. Accompanying me today are: Bruce Fox, Regional Director of Forest and Rangeland Management; Tom Rhode, Regional Planner; Eric Johnston, Deputy Regional Director of Wildlife, Fisheries, Watershed, Soils and Rare Plants; Jody Miller, Attorney Advisor from the Office of the General Counsel; and Chuck Stanich, Acting Regional Deputy Director of Fire, Aviation and Air.

The National Forests in Montana comprise nearly 17 million acres of the state. This area contains wilderness areas, research natural areas, destination ski resorts, hundreds of campgrounds, thousands of miles of roads and trails, vast timberlands and many other resource values held dear by Montanans. There are scores of issues and actions affecting these 9 Forests; however, our time is very limited today, so I will concentrate on 5 key areas that are critical issues for the Forest Service and the people of Montana.

The issues I will briefly touch on are: 1) Revision of the Forest Land Management Plans, 2) Fire Management, 3) Travel Management Planning, 4) Integrated Restoration and Protection Strategy and 5) Forest Service Reserved Water Rights Compact.

Currently, 5 of the 9 National Forests in Montana are in the formal land management plan revision process. The Beaverhead-Deerlodge has released the draft land management plan and it is being revised under the 1982 Forest Service planning rule. The Kootenai, Flathead, Lolo and Bitterroot released proposed plans last year and will release pre-decisional review plans later this year. These plans are being revised under the new planning rule, adopted in 2005. There are differences in how the rules apply to the manner in which the plans are implemented. The 2005 rule is designed to develop plans that are strategic and dynamic documents that are easier to amend in a timely manner to incorporate new information or science. Plans developed under the 2005 planning rule have 5 plan components: desired conditions, objectives, suitability of areas, special areas, and guidelines. Projects and activities must be consistent with these plan components. These plans do not require an Environmental Impact Statement. Plans developed under the 82 rule incorporate specific goals, objectives and standards and require an Environmental Impact Statement. The Lewis and Clark, Helena, Gallatin and Custer National Forests will be revised under the 2005 rule and formal revisions are scheduled to begin after completion of the plans currently being revised. Both rules require extensive public participation.

Regarding fire management...first I want to convey that the Forest Service enjoys an outstanding working relationship with our state partners. The Montana DNRC, DES and rural fire districts are essential to success in managing wildland fire in Montana. The cost of wildland fire suppression has been escalating at alarming rates over the past decade. Due to dryer climatic conditions and fuel accumulation, fire behavior has intensified and the duration of fires that escape initial attack often exceed 30 days. Fire suppression costs for the Forest Service now account for 42% of the agency's annual budget and this percentage is trending upward. As a greater percentage of the budget goes to cover fire suppression costs, other important programs are impacted as funds are transferred to cover the emergency fire suppression costs that exceed the annual appropriations. Usually by the time the

Montana fire season begins, the funds appropriated for fire suppression have been exhausted in other parts of the country where the fire season precedes ours. Clearly, we must approach fire operations in a different manner. We must reduce the annual costs (in fiscal year 2006 Forest Service fire suppression costs were about 1.5 billion dollars). In 2007, the Forest Service will implement a fire suppression strategy that will evaluate values at risk and move resources to those locations with the highest priority. We are calling this process "Appropriate Management Response." We have found that we have been getting to this point by default as resources become unavailable so it is incumbent upon managers to make these decisions in a calculated manner. This Appropriate Management Response continues to provide for aggressive initial attack as part of our core strategy.

Recently the Forest Service published regulations that govern how the agency manages motor vehicle use on the National Forests. These regulations establish a framework for making travel management decisions at the local level. Forests have been directed to complete travel management plans that designate roads, trails and areas for motor vehicle use by vehicle type and season of use. By going to a "designated system," "cross country" travel by motorized vehicles will be prohibited except in very limited instances. The decision to eliminate cross-county travel on Federal lands in Montana was already made in the joint BLM/Forest Service 2001 OHV decision. Travel management plans may be completed before, during, or after Forest Plan Revision. In all cases travel planning will be a separate decision from Plan revision. This process will be complex, controversial and time consuming. Nearly everyone has a stake in travel and access to the National Forests. Forests have been directed to complete this comprehensive travel management planning process and implement the new policy by the end of calendar year 2009.

Forest health and active forest management has been another complex issue for the Northern Region. The Montana forest products industry is concerned that declining timber supplies from federal lands are

threatening the economic stability of sawmills in several communities. They feel if the supply continues at current rates that many of the forest products processing plants will permanently close. Conversely, some conservation groups are opposed to timber harvest and road construction. Numerous lawsuits and appeals have been filed contending these vegetative management projects do not protect other values such as wildlife, old growth timber, soil, water and other resources. Approximately 550 million board feet of timber sale volume or two years of timber sale program is currently tied up in appeals and litigation. If this volume could be made available it would meet the supply need projected to maintain the wood products industry infrastructure in Montana. Like the wildfire situation, continuing dry and droughty conditions within the Northern Region are having serious impacts on the health of forest and rangeland vegetation. Moisture stressed trees have become more vulnerable to insect and disease attacks. These forest health problems have secondary effects that have impacts on other resources and make the wildland fire situation even more complex. The Northern Region has developed an Integrated Restoration and Protection Strategy to meet multiple objectives for restoration and protection in prioritized locations. This strategy combines resources from several discipline areas to meet multiple resource objectives. An example would be fuel reduction near the wildland-urban fire interface that protects communities and municipal watersheds while providing some level of forest products while enhancing aquatic and wildlife habitat through restoration activities. The Forest Service is coordinating with our DNRC partners to identify common priority areas to work along adjacent state and private boundaries to meet common objectives for both agencies.

In the west, water has always been in the forefront of issues that have dominated the socio-political landscape. For nearly 15 years, the State of Montana and the Forest Service have been negotiating toward a Forest Service Reserved Water Rights Compact. In late 2006 the Montana Water Rights Compact Commission and the Northern Region of the U.S. Forest Service completed those negotiations and agreed on a draft compact. This compact will protect aquatic and riparian resources on the National

Forests of Montana while preserving the existing rights of those holding current Montana water rights. This compact is now before the Montana State Legislature for review and ratification. We believe this compact will serve to conserve the resources that are highly valued by the citizens of Montana. The compact also avoids the protracted lawsuits that have been characteristic in other western states. We commend the state for their foresight in creating the Reserved Water Rights Commission and sincerely thank the state for their help in conducting public meetings in 17 communities across the state. We also thank this Senate Natural Resources Committee and the entire Senate body for their unanimous approval of the Compact and we eagerly await approval in the House.

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss these important issues this afternoon and I would be happy to answer any questions the Committees may have.

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