



January 19, 2024

Montana Environmental Quality Council
Chairman Steve Gunderson
Montana Capitol Building, Room
Helena, MT 59601

RE: EQC Good Neighbor Authority Panel

Dear Chairman Gunderson and Council Members:

MWPA was founded in 1972 and has served as a major voice for the forest products industry in the State of Montana while actively addressing timber, logging, and wood products manufacturing issues in both the private and public sector, and with state and federal agencies.

MWPA is a voluntary non-profit trade association whose purpose is to promote long-term management of Montana's forests, furnish opportunities for open discussion and appropriate interchange of information concerning all facets of the forest products industry, and accumulate and disseminate information regarding the forest products industry to foster the best interests of the industry and public.

MWPA's membership includes a diverse group of companies and individuals involved in all facets of Montana's forest products industry. This includes sawmills, manufacturers of plywood, particle board, fiberboard, pulp and paper, posts and poles, log homes, as well as timberland owners and managers and logging contractors. They produce value-added products through manufacturing and provide over 7,000 direct jobs for Montana families. All major sawmill companies in Montana are members of MWPA.

MWPA works to support a positive business climate for the forest products industry and its suppliers. In addition, MWPA promotes the positive contributions the forest products industry makes to Montana's economy and environment to the public. We work with federal agencies, tribes, non-industrial private timberland owners, and the State of Montana to ensure a steady, reliable timber supply for our mills.

MWPA's members purchase timber from national forests to supply their mills. Many of our members rely heavily on federal timber since not all members own their own forestland. The government is the dominant owner of forestland in the region.

MWPA members are vital to the health and stability Montana's economy, as they make up many of the top private employers in the state. The MWPA and its members have a strong interest in maintaining the economic vitality of our State and the availability of family-wage jobs the forest products industry provides.

The federal Farm bill requires each state to undertake an assessment of forest conditions every ten years. In response, Montana's effort led to the 2020 Montana Forest Action Plan, which identified over 9 million acres at risk of catastrophic wildfire with over 3.4 million of those acres in Montana's wildland urban interface. Unfortunately, forest stand conditions only continue to worsen as recent a Forest Inventory and Analysis report shows average annual growth of all live trees >5.0 in diameter totaled 887.6 million cubic feet while average net mortality (due to natural causes) of trees >5.0 diameter totaled 931.6 million cubic feet or a net growth of -54.0 million cubic feet.

As identified in the Forest Action Plan Assessment, Montana encompasses over 23 million acres of forested land, and 9.1 million of those acres are identified as "Areas with Elevated Fire Risk and Degraded Forest Health". The Assessment provided a critical updated analysis of forests, trends, and threats across Montana's forested landscapes. According to the Assessment, the updated statistics are staggering. Wildfire has destroyed 2.7 million acres over the past 10 years, with 8.5 million acres identified as having a "high" or "very high" wildfire risk and six million forested acres are within one half mile of the wildland urban interface. In addition, over nine million acres are currently at risk of insect and disease infestations.

Therefore, we strongly support state and federal strategies, including the Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) and deliverables that improve forest health, reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire, conserve working forests, create jobs and enhance opportunities for the public to enjoy our open spaces.

Congress originally authorized the Good Neighbor Authority in 2001 as a pilot program for FS lands in Colorado and later expanded the pilot to include BLM lands in Colorado and FS lands in Utah. In 2014, Congress passed the Good Neighbor Authority permanently into law. Permanent authority applied only to states. Congress also temporarily extended and expanded a version of the law in 2014, which differed in its requirements and was superseded by the permanent authorization.

In 2018, Congress expanded the authority to include counties, groups of counties, and federally recognized Indian tribes. Congress also authorized states to retain funds from timber sales made under the Good Neighbor Authority, subject to certain conditions. Congress also authorized certain road restoration activities.

In general, the Good Neighbor Authority allows the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management to authorize states, counties, and federally recognized Indian tribes to conduct certain projects on federal lands in pursuit of specified land management goals. To impact fire behavior, harvest should be a mixture of small and large diameter trees based on site-specific forest ecology. We cannot change weather or topography, the only way to impact fire behavior is through vegetative treatments on the ground.

The Good Neighbor Authority provides the necessary tools to deliver the scale of treatments necessary to make meaningful progress in reducing large scale wildfire disasters while providing a sustainable supply of wood fiber necessary to support Montana's remaining forest products industry. As such, Montana primary wood manufacturers provided \$500,000 in seed money to help kick-start the GNA program in the state.

Since that time, the state legislature, and both Governors Bullock and Gianforte have provided the necessary support and funding to grow the program over the past several years. Specifically, projects and funding for hazardous fuel treatments both inside and outside of the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) includes thinning and harvest of commercial wood fiber delivered to Montana's remaining mills.

In summary, the GNA program in Montana continues to seek opportunities to address forest health on the federal estate by treating acres, providing commercial timber volume for Montana's mills, and is vital to Montana's timber dependent communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony.

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