

LOCAL NEWS

Kootenai Forest Stakeholders Coalition gaining traction in Northwest Montana

Submitted by Sandy Compton

For the Kootenai Forest Stakeholders Coalition (KFSC), it's been a long, winding, and sometimes bumpy road. There are still curves ahead, but the way is getting wider and smoother, paved by support from diverse and sometimes surprising sources. In the past few months, the Coalition has gained the support of county commissions in both Lincoln and Sanders County, Montana, in which the majority of the Kootenai National Forest (KNF) lies. The Lincoln County Commission signed a Memorandum of Agreement with KVSC in late November of 2017, and the Sanders County Commission voted unanimously on January 9 to support the Coalition's forest management guidelines.

Tony Cox, commissioner for Sanders County District 3 — which contains most of the KNF land in the county — says of the commission's endorsement, "It seems like we needed to change how we've been doing things. Everybody has different wants and needs, and the collaboration method is where people can come together and compromise and everybody get a piece of the pie."

"It was great to have the County Commissioners sign on," said Doug Ferrell of Trout Creek, who is on the board of KVSC. "It's a remarkable achievement. The idea that people with opposing interests can sit down and

work together with respect and appreciation for each other is something a great many people support. KFSC's focus on listening and problem solving has resulted in a strong package of agreements that is especially valuable and meaningful today."

The process to reach the agreement began over twelve years ago when a group of individuals with mixed personal and economic interests in the future of the KNF began discussing what might be done by working together instead of what was then a familiar pattern of plans derailed by conflict and litigation. It wasn't easy — KFSC executive board member Tim Daugherty of Idaho Forest Group likened it to "a ten-year-long root canal" — but the KFSC Common Ground committee finally — in December of 2015 — came to consensus on a number of economic and cultural issues concerning the future of the local landscape, including timber, restoration, wilderness, recreation, and economic and ecosystem sustainability.

Amy Robinson, Montana Wilderness Association (MWA) Northwest Montana Field Director has been involved in the Coalition for five years and holds a seat on the Common Ground Committee. "I feel very fortunate to be involved in this whole process," she says, "I've seen continuous momentum and progress, particularly in the Wilderness component."

KFSC might be called

the poster child for multi-use collaboration. The list of business and organizational supporters ranges from the Troy and Ten Lakes Snowmobile Clubs to Thompson River Lumber and Idaho Forest Group to Friends of Scotchman Peaks Wilderness and MWA.

The document the KFSC Common Ground Committee came up with (available to read at www.kootenaifuture.org) covers a spectrum of subjects ranging from permanent motorized trails to new Wilderness to lynx and grizzly bear habitat to a sustainable timber harvest on the Kootenai — recommended at between 70 and 90 million board feet per year. This is far short of the hay-day harvests of the 1960s and 70s but significantly more than has been harvested recently.

"The timber component is pretty important," said Cox, "because county road budgets depend a lot on harvest from federal lands."

The harvest volume agreed upon is seen as sustainable and healthy by timber companies and conservation groups as well, and includes recommendations for treatments that benefit the local economy, recreation, ecology, hunting and non-game wildlife.

Support has been building in Lincoln County for some time, and includes several dozen civic organizations and entities; as well as businesses like Western Building Center, the Cabinet Mountain Brewery and Kootenai

River Outfitters; and the personal support of County Commissioner Mark Peck and State Senator Chas Vincent, who also served on the Common Ground Committee. In Sanders County, the agreement has earned supporters that include the Sanders County Community Development Corporation, Thompson Falls Main Street, Big Eddy's Deck Bar, the Sanders County Ledger, Inland Empire Builders and Thompson River Lumber.

Shawn Morgan, forester for Thompson River Lumber, became involved in the KFSC about four years ago. "This is a step forward," he said, "and any step in the right direction is helpful. I think it will keep evolving and changing, and that's good. We have to keep the ball moving."

Ferrell began attending Coalition meetings to speak up for Wilderness. He later joined the KFSC board, though he was skeptical about something coming out of it without having to give up a lot. "There was a lot of energy spent hammering out the timber component and we eventually came up with some solid agreements on Wilderness recommendations as well," he recalls, "so I think the process was really worthwhile in terms of reaching compromises that are a net gain for all involved. I think most members of the coalition would agree that it is an honor to be part of this group, even though the work has sometimes been difficult and time consuming."

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