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GUEST VIEW

Kootenai Forest Stakeholders Coalition: Some facts about the Black Ram Forest project

Kootenai Forest Stakeholders Coalition

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Kootenai National Forest

Kootenai Forest Stakeholders Coalition

The Black Ram timber project on the Kootenai National Forest has been in the news recently, with controversial claims and counter-claims about the project's goals and scope. The Kootenai Forest Stakeholder Coalition, (KFSC) a local forest collaborative that focuses on sustainable natural resource management and conservation opportunities, has closely followed this project since its proposal. Since we believe the public deserves accurate information, we will provide some facts and context about the proposed project.

Black Ram opponents describe the project as “massive” and claim it will “devastate” and “eliminate” the ancient forests of the Yaak Valley in northwest Montana, and will “destroy our best hope for slowing the rate of global warming”. Statements like these misrepresent both the scale and the nature of the project. A close reading of the project proposal reveals the following:

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- The Black Ram project will result in active treatment of some 4,000 acres. This represents less than 1 percent of the Yaak River drainage, which is 793 square miles.
 - Minimal harvest of old growth trees is planned under the project. Treatments within designated old growth stands are intended to benefit large trees, mainly by removing dense understory vegetation to reduce available wildfire fuel.
 - Most project activities would use an extensive existing network of roads, which presently covers most of the Yaak Valley. The project proposes construction of 3.3 miles of new roads and decommissions some 20 miles.

- The Yaak Valley includes several large roadless areas, and the Black Ram project proposes no timber harvesting or commercial activities in these areas.

The main focus of the project is to restore desired conditions which existed previously in the area. Before the era of modern fire suppression, more frequent moderate intensity fires tended to create scattered openings and a mixture of age classes throughout this area of the forest, as well as extensive stands of fire-resistant old growth. These historic forest conditions were quite a contrast to the dense, closed canopy forests of today.

In the Black Ram project, there is a focus on establishing blister rust resistant stands of western white pine, that were formerly common in the area and have been modeled to be a climate resilient species. This process requires creating modest sized, irregularly shaped openings that opponents have labeled as clearcuts, though they have little in common with the practice of clearcutting.

The KFSC encourages all interested parties to use accurate information when discussing proposed projects. This is what the public deserves and needs. Forest management projects based on best-available research are mostly likely to provide for healthy and resilient forests for future generations. KFSC has not come to a consensus on Black Ram, but we share what we have here in the spirit of replacing misleading claims we have seen with facts. Fact-based forest management and dialogue will best serve our communities and our public lands.

The Kootenai Forest Stakeholders Coalition is a collaborative group founded in 2006, made of people with diverse interests and backgrounds, including timber, conservation, recreation, local business people and elected officials.

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