



GUEST COLUMN

# Collaborative Support for Ripley Forest Project

The Lincoln County commissioners, and the Montana State Department of Natural Resources, among others, have taken action to support the project

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**T**he governing board of the Kootenai Forest Stakeholders Coalition has voted unanimously to support a legal defense of the Forest Service Ripley project. This vote represents the strength and importance of the collaborative process the group is dedicated to.

The KFSC represents a diverse mix of forest users, including environmental groups, that work together to seek solutions to forest management issues. A fundamental reality we all recognize is that the ample public lands that surround our communities are suitable for a diverse mix of uses, including timber and recreation, wilderness and wildlife.

The Ripley project calls for a combination of timber harvest and fuels reduction in a large area of some 29,000 acres near Libby, just east of Highway 2 and south of the river. The project area includes a good deal of private lands, homes and development, the Libby airport and an extensive road system.

It seems crystal clear to all of us that a priority for management of this area, so close to town, should be to reduce fire risk and provide diverse recreation activities. The Ripley project, which benefitted from ample public involvement, is designed to do just that.

A legal challenge brought by the Alliance for the Wild Rockies, a Helena group, makes the case that the project should focus more on the needs of grizzly bears. The KFSC has long supported goals to protect and enhance grizzly habitat, but we consider it a matter of common sense that the Ripley area is not well suited for this as a primary purpose. The Kootenai National Forest in cooperation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has identified grizzly bear core areas and important grizzly bear habitat outside of core areas. This is not one of those areas. The Ripley project contains extensive mitigations to alleviate potential impact on the bear while balancing the other priorities.

In addition, a claim by the Alliance for the Wild Rockies that there are 3,223 acres of clear cuts is an exaggeration. This acreage actually includes a combination of different regeneration prescriptions including shelterwood, seed tree and clearcuts with reserves. These treatments are needed to reduce dense stands of Douglas fir that pose an extreme fire hazard while moving the landscape to a more desired species mix and stocking levels as dictated by the Forest Plan. The KFSC has long advocated for more landscape level treatments, particularly where there is an extreme risk of wildfire.

KFSC is not alone in acting to support the Ripley project. The Lincoln County commissioners, and the Montana State Department of Natural Resources, among others, have taken action to support the project.

As always, KFSC is open to input and suggestions from all community members, on this and other issues.

*Tim Dougherty and Doug Ferrell are co-chairmen of the Kootenai Forest Stakeholders Coalition.*

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