

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Stimulus Bill Helps Clean up the Woods

By Keith Hammer

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Friends have recently commented how trashed Forest Service lands are in the Patrick Creek area southwest of Kalispell, in terms of garbage strewn around, abandoned bon fires sites, piles of spent firearms casings, and the numerous remains of beer parties. Perhaps the stimulus bill passed by Congress in January can help a little.

Formally known as the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the bill includes \$650 million dollars for the Forest Service to use for "priority road, bridge and trail maintenance and decommissioning, including related watershed restoration and ecosystem enhancement projects." The bill calls on public land management agencies to give priority to projects that "create the largest number of jobs in the shortest period of time." Hence the focus on "shovel-ready" projects.

The Flathead National Forest is well situated to put scores of people to work restoring watersheds for the sake of fish, wildlife and people. The Flathead currently has 238 miles of shovel-ready road decommissioning waiting for funding, some of it promised in decisions made 17 years ago as mitigation for the impacts of logging projects that long ago delivered their public logs to the mills. Vital jobs have languished, along with the promised improvements to wildlife habitat security and watersheds, as the Forest Service failed to fund this backlog of road decommissioning work.

When properly done, road decommissioning puts both people and machinery to work keeping unneeded roads from bleeding dirt into the watershed. Excavators are used to carefully remove the road fill and culverts from mountain stream crossings so the dirt doesn't end up in the creek when the culverts fail, which they inevitably do. Once dozers and dump trucks have moved this dirt far enough away from the stream, hand labor plays an important role planting vegetation on the re-contoured landscape.

This work is good-paying and highly rewarding as streams are returned to their native streambeds and wildlife is once again provided security from the intrusion of motorized vehicles. And along with the reduction in motor vehicles comes a reduction in the garbage that goes along with them.

With plenty folks too lazy to pick up their own beer cans, trash and target shooting cartridges, the end of the road can hardly come soon enough for the more caring as they seek to escape the filth left behind by others. Indeed, public land beyond the end of the road remains not just available but desirable for those able and willing to get out of the car. And some 1,600 miles of open road on the Flathead provide ample opportunities for those who can't or won't get out of the car.

The Forest Service has long recognized that it overbuilt its 380,000-mile road system and, after falling \$10 billion behind in trying to maintain every last mile of it, has concluded it is cheaper to decommission an unneeded road than continue to maintain

it. It has also been promising for decades to decommission some of its roads to compensate for the destructive impacts of logging in prime fish and wildlife habitat.

The stimulus bill provides funds to the Forest Service at a time when logging equipment sits idled by a sagging home-building market, not a lack of timber sales. Road decommissioning projects like those promised on the Flathead can put some of that equipment to work restoring watersheds alongside youth and job corps members hand-planting native vegetation. The results are good paying, honorable jobs that benefit fish, wildlife and people by removing a modest number of roads from an overbuilt landscape.

The Flathead's 238-mile road decommissioning backlog includes a dozen projects dating as far back as 1992, including one in the Patrick Creek area. Perhaps the stimulus bill will be used to leave a little less unneeded road there for folks to trash with beer parties, bon fires and target shooting. These are all activities that contribute to human-caused forest fires during summer, like the human-caused Roberts Fire that in 2003 started at the site of a bon fire and beer party on a Forest Service road before jumping the North Fork Flathead River into Glacier National Park, burning over 50,000 acres.

The Flathead National Forest's backlog also includes promised road decommissioning in over-roaded Swan Range, Crane Mountain, North Fork and Tally Lake areas. We can't simply assume, however, that the Flathead will use its share of stimulus bill funds to fulfill its road decommissioning and watershed restoration promises. Senators Max Baucus and Jon Tester helped craft the stimulus bill. I urge folks to contact them and let them know they indeed want some of that money used to create jobs, restore watersheds and help clean up the woods on the Flathead National Forest.

Keith Hammer grew up hiking, skiing, camping, hunting, and fishing in the Swan Mountains. He has worked a number of jobs, from Forest Service trail worker to logger to backcountry guide, and currently works as an environmental consultant and head of the nonprofit Swan View Coalition. His column appears regularly in this paper and is archived at www.swanrange.org. Keith can be reached at 406-755-1379 or keith@swanview.org.



Workers hand-plant native vegetation to restore a stream crossing during road decommissioning on the Flathead National Forest. Keith Hammer photo.