

On the Path

Tea Parties and Woods Work

By Keith Hammer

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As the economy recovers, many new jobs in environmental restoration could emerge if we make wise choices and are willing to change old habits.

I attended an April 15 meeting at the Kalispell Chamber of Commerce where the Flathead National Forest was to tell a packed room full of hungry contractors what “shovel-ready” projects it was going to fund with newly allocated American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (stimulus) money. This meeting stood in stark contrast to the “tea parties” being held in Kalispell and across the country to protest such government spending.

On May 5, I watched a congressional hearing on the Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act (H.R. 980), which would designate 24 million acres of roadless public land as Wilderness in Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Washington, and Oregon, while creating over 2,300 jobs restoring damaged watersheds in the five-state area. It made me wonder if tea party demonstrators would support this effort, given that NREPA would save taxpayers \$245 million in ten years by not building new roads in America’s roadless wildlands, even after paying for the watershed restoration jobs!

Fortunately, many of the logging and road-building contractors looking for work because lumber markets have tanked have the heavy equipment needed to restore select watersheds by removing the old roads that are bleeding sediment into streams. Over the past decade, I’ve attended workshops in Eureka, Missoula and Billings that have urged and trained contractors to take advantage of the emerging restoration economy.

Unfortunately, the Forest Service hasn’t held up its end of the bargain. On the Flathead National Forest, for instance, the taxpayer has subsidized many a logging project while the companion watershed restoration and road removal projects have remained unfunded. If these timber sales had indeed made money, it stands to reason that the restoration work would have been paid for and completed as well. Instead, the Flathead has a backlog of dozens of “shovel-ready” projects to remove damaging roads and restore watersheds.

Which brings us back to the April 15 meeting at the Kalispell Chamber of Commerce. The Flathead National Forest was unable to report how much it would receive of the \$650 million in stimulus funds Congress appropriated the Forest Service for “priority road, bridge and trail maintenance and decommissioning, including related watershed restoration and ecosystem enhancement projects.” As I write this, the Forest Service has announced it will spend \$506,000 in Flathead County from other stimulus funds for forest thinning, but still has not announced how and where it will spend the \$650 million intended to include watershed restoration work.

While we wait for an answer, the good news is that Congress included \$39.4 million for the Legacy Roads and Trails Remediation initiative in the 2008 Omnibus

Appropriations Act. The \$4.7 million of this that went to Region 1 of the Forest Service, which includes Montana, North Dakota and Idaho's panhandle, spurred Flathead Valley Community College to reinstate its natural resources associate degree program in order to better prepare students for jobs in forest and watershed restoration.

At the May 5 NREPA hearing, Joel Hotrop, a former Flathead Forest Supervisor and now Deputy Chief of the Forest Service, testified the Forest Service would prefer to restore damaged public lands under its own volition, rather than have it mandated by Congress. Meanwhile, the local program that Mr. Holtrop issued as Flathead Forest Supervisor in 1995 for restoring wildlife habitat and watersheds through road removal is short some \$2 million to implement projects already "shovel-ready" and otherwise waiting to go to hungry contractors.

With the housing and lumber markets tanked and mill yards full of logs, restoration work now more than ever cannot simply be thinly disguised logging if it is to put people back to work. It seems everyone is gearing up for the emerging restoration economy, including Montana's Governor Schweitzer, and it would behoove the Forest Service to get on board.

While NREPA works its way through Congress, the Forest Service can indeed take it upon itself to change its "break it, then don't fix it" habit into one of doing no harm to America's remaining roadless watersheds while putting people to work fixing some of those already damaged. A number of those watersheds with "shovel-ready" restoration projects are right here on the Flathead - in the Swan Range, Whitefish Range, Mission Mountains, and Salish Mountains that feed our precious Swan and Flathead River systems.

We are poised to emerge from this economic recession with new jobs, cleaner water and better big game habitat if we all work together!

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.

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A culvert is carefully removed in the Quintonkin watershed of the Swan Range. Photo by Paul Harvey.