

## **The Blackfoot Clearwater Stewardship Project Has Come A Long Way**

by Megan Birzell

Several years ago, the Montana Wilderness Association (MWA) and the Seeley Lake Driftriders snowmobile club were poised to enter a head-to-head battle over management distinctions in the Lolo National Forest Plan revision. Instead, they reached a mutually beneficial agreement that paved the way for the Blackfoot Clearwater Stewardship Project, which was recently introduced as part of Senator Tester's Forest Jobs and Recreation Act.

The debate between MWA and the Driftriders centered on the Elsiná Bowls and the West Fork Clearwater drainage. At the time, the Forest Service was managing the Elsiná Bowls as "recommended wilderness," which meant that no motorized use was permitted. The West Fork Clearwater, just one drainage to the north, allowed winter motorized use. But the Elsiná Bowls was a more appealing place to ride for the Driftriders, and the West Fork Clearwater drainage had features that made it appealing for wilderness preservation. So instead of drawing a line in the sand and duking it out, MWA and the Driftriders did something that was pretty unheard of at the time – they sat down and talked through their differences. The result? They came to an agreement that the Elsiná Bowls should be opened up to winter motorized recreation and the West Fork Clearwater drainage should be managed as "recommended wilderness."

Upon seeing this unfold, diverse local community members said to themselves, "If they can do it, we can do it." And they started talking to each other – loggers and sportsmen, millworkers and conservation advocates, hikers and motorized users – about how they could work together to maintain the ecosystem integrity of the valley and the larger Seeley Lake Ranger District while simultaneously stimulating the local economy.

Through these conversations, they recognized that much of what they wanted to see in the valley was compatible. Everyone wanted to see our forests managed responsibly. Everyone agreed that there are some areas in the valley that should be kept roadless for wildlife and for backcountry hunting and fishing. And so they pulled out maps to see if they agreed about what should be done where in the valley. After looking at the maps, they realized that the Lolo Forest Plan for the Seeley Lake Ranger District encompassed what they all wanted to see in the valley. The Monture Creek and North Fork Blackfoot drainages were already "recommended wilderness." So was Grizzly Basin and the Swan Front, as well as the West Fork Clearwater drainage. The areas of the forest that everyone agreed were appropriate for active management were already slated for different intensities of active management.

At that point, the issue became one of implementing the Lolo National Forest Plan for the Seeley Lake Ranger District. Land on the District was already slated for uses that diverse community members agreed on, but the Forest Service didn't have the resources to fully implement the forest plan. Active management of forest lands requires money, and the designation of wilderness requires an act of Congress.

Thus was born the Blackfoot Clearwater Stewardship Project, a legislative proposal that would provide the Seeley Lake Ranger District with the resources it needs to carry out stewardship contracts for ten consecutive years, build a biomass facility in Seeley Lake to make use of the excess slash from stewardship activities, and designate 87,000 acres of wilderness.

Since its inception in 2005, the Blackfoot Clearwater Stewardship Project has received overwhelming, broad support locally and state-wide. This is largely due to the broad benefits the Project will provide: thinning overly dense forest stands, restoring streams and stream banks, replacing culverts, improving wildlife habitat, creating a local market for wood waste, creating up to 50 jobs, increasing local small business income, and designating wilderness.

The broad support the Blackfoot Clearwater Stewardship Project has received has also been due to the spirit of collaboration that has surrounded it. People are tired of fighting and getting nowhere. The partners in the Blackfoot Clearwater Stewardship Project put aside their differences, found a zone of agreement, and are working together to make our valley a better place.

Last month, the efforts of the Project's partners and supporters paid off when Senator Jon Tester introduced it as part of the Forest Jobs and Recreation Act. The Act is made up of three proposals: the Beaverhead-Deerlodge Partnership, the Blackfoot Clearwater Stewardship Project, and the Three Rivers Challenge. The Beaverhead-Deerlodge Partnership and the Three Rivers Challenge both grew out of local, collaborative processes just like the Blackfoot Clearwater Project. They, too, are the result of local, diverse interests finding a zone of agreement and moving forward to advance the best interests of their forests.

While seeing a bill introduced is a giant step forward, there is still much work to do to make sure that the Forest Jobs and Recreation Act is passed and that Seeley Lake reaps the benefits it will provide. To learn more about the Act and to find out how you can get involved, call Megan Birzell at 677-0069 or email her at [megan@crcmt.org](mailto:megan@crcmt.org).

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