

Community Coming Together to Maintain Forests, Ecosystems, and Rural Lifestyles: A Bright Spot Amidst a National Crisis

By Scott Tomson

The politicians in Washington D.C. are grappling with how to address our current economic crisis. Seeley Lake is a long way away from Washington, D.C., but even here we are feeling the effects of the economic downturn. Unemployment is up, consumer spending is down, and many of us are struggling just to put food on the table and stay afloat. In Seeley Lake, we see a slower real estate market, and reduced construction of new homes.

This scenario has serious implications for western Montana communities and families, many of which rely heavily on timber and, more recently, housing construction for their livelihood. A front page article in the Jan. 13th Missoulian titled *Loggers, Haulers Hit Hard by Slump* sheds light on the situation and shows that the demand for lumber has “sunk to record lows”. When demand for lumber goes down, the trickle down effects are far reaching. Mills struggle and some are forced to shut down - as we have seen with Stimson and others in western Montana. This results in fewer jobs for mill workers, loggers, haulers, and those doing associated work, such as building, maintaining, and decommissioning logging roads. For the survivors, it gets harder to make a buck as haul distances increase and the prices paid for logs go down.

Again, much of the problem is related to demand-side economics, not supply. Basically, low demand results in low prices. For example, Douglas fir 2x4s are currently selling for around \$150 per thousand board feet (mbf) – down from \$362 per mbf in January 2006. Sawlogs and peeler logs have fared no better. In 2006, Douglas fir sawlogs were selling for \$475 per mbf. Today they go for \$300 per mbf. Finally, Douglas fir peeler logs were selling at \$540 per mbf, and today they sell for only \$350 per mbf. For a logger trying to bring wood out of the forest and make it pay, this is not good news. Costs for logging have been increasing with higher fuel prices, but the ability of a mill to pay higher costs is not there if the end products are selling for very low prices.

Remarkably, there is some good news, and better yet, much of it is local. In Seeley Lake, unlike many places, we still have in place many of the tools needed to help fix some of the problems. Unlike many mills in the west, Pyramid is still in operation and subsequently, is still a major employer in our community. As a result, we have a local means to convert logs generated from fuels reduction and vegetation restoration projects into commercial products, and that helps sustain local jobs and incomes.

Many places, like states in the southwest, no longer have the capacity to mill logs. There is no infrastructure left to deal with the timber byproduct of much needed vegetation management projects such as hazardous fuels reduction. One negative result of this situation is the exponential increase in fire suppression costs and the associated budgetary consequences for state and federal land management agencies. Another is much higher costs to private landowners who are working to thin their lands and create defensible space for fire protection.

Again, here at home the picture is not so bleak. Things are still getting done, and our community is generally united and positive. Pyramid has recently begun work on the Jocko Fire

Salvage and is nearing completion of the Seeley Fuels Project, which treats hazardous fuels on approximately 1,600 acres adjacent to the town of Seeley Lake. In addition, the Seeley-Swan Fuels Mitigation Task Force continues to work on reducing fuels on private lands here in the valley. Much of this work employs local loggers and serves as a model for other efforts just beginning across western Montana and beyond.

In fact, here in Seeley Lake, citizens, businesses, public agencies, and private organizations are working together to create many forward looking, positive projects to strengthen our community. The Blackfoot Clearwater Stewardship Project would create a market for hog fuel while simultaneously allowing the Seeley Lake Ranger District to carry out stewardship projects for 10 consecutive years and designating 87,000 acres of wilderness in the Bob Marshall country. This would provide local jobs and strengthen our local economy in a variety of ways. You can learn more about the Project by visiting www.blackfootclearwater.org.

The spirit of collaboration in Seeley Lake is a large part of the reason we can look positively to the future. Strong partnerships among diverse groups such as the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Seeley Lake Driftriders, Big Blackfoot Chapter of Trout Unlimited, Pyramid Mountain Lumber, Clearwater Resource Council, Blackfoot Challenge, The Wilderness Society, and others have opened up the lines of communication and have allowed us to develop ideas and projects that benefit the entire community. These recent events and partnerships have received state and national attention and continue to serve as a model for how local, grassroots efforts can and do make a difference.

The constant drumming of national news about our depressed condition can frankly be pretty depressing. But, at least here we can turn the TV off and work together to control a significant measure of our own destiny. Part of this is having an understanding of what it will take to keep forest industry in Seeley Lake economically and sustainably viable.

The Clearwater Resource Council recently held a community meeting to discuss coordinated forest management throughout the Clearwater Watershed. The meeting was well attended, and the enthusiasm for working together across ownership boundaries to manage our forest lands was palpable.

You are invited to attend the next meeting of the Clearwater Resource Council where the Economics of Forestry in Seeley Lake will be the topic of discussion. The meeting will be February 24 at 7 PM at the Community Hall. To learn more, visit www.crcmt.org.

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