

Successful Collaborative Proposal will bring jobs to the Seeley-Swan-Blackfoot

By Megan Birzell

On August 13th, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack and Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell announced the selection of ten landscape-level restoration projects across the country for the Department of Agriculture's Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP). At the top of the list was a proposal submitted by the Southwestern Crown Collaborative that encompasses the Blackfoot, Seeley, and Swan valleys, collectively known as the Southwestern Crown of the Continent (SW Crown).

The CFLRP will provide significant funding for restoration implementation and monitoring on National Forest System lands for ten consecutive years. This year, the SW Crown is receiving just over \$1 million, and there is the potential to receive up to \$4 million per year in the coming years. CFLRP money must be matched by existing Forest Service budgets and partner contributions, and the upshot is that \$4 million from CFLRP means \$8 million invested annually in restoration projects in the SW Crown.

While the SW Crown is characterized by a strong culture of collaboration and has benefited from public and private investments aimed at preserving working lands and enhancing local economies, much of its forests remain in need of restoration due to a century of fire suppression and past management practices. The SW Crown Collaborative, which includes conservation groups, timber companies, and rural community organizations (visit www.swcrown.com/about for a full list of participants), has developed a vision for the landscape and a strategy to achieve that vision on the ground.

Major impacts of the SW Crown work will include the creation of new full and part-time jobs in the woods, enhancement of recreational experiences, restoration of one thousand miles of impaired streams, improvement of tens of thousands of acres of wildlife habitat, and a reduction of wildfire threats to neighboring communities on thousands of acres of high-risk lands. The Collaborative expects to achieve the following ecosystem benefits in the first year of the program:

- Restore 1,368 acres of forest land
- Reduce fire risk on 1,535 acres of high-risk lands within the wildland-urban interface
- Improve fisheries habitat and water quality for 181 miles of streams
- Mitigate noxious weeds on 14,655 acres
- Upgrade 5 stream crossing structures
- Improve 70 miles of trails and roads benefitting water quality and fisheries habitat
- Improve wildlife security on 4,200 acres
- Monitor effectiveness of restoration work on 3,160 acres

This investment is good news for our local mill and contractors who stand to benefit substantially from jobs created through this program. Most of the work will be accomplished through stewardship contracts that use "best value" criteria to award contracts. Best value criteria include a contractor's experience, work quality, and past performance. It also considers the benefits the contractor can provide to the local community, such as employing local workers. An economic analysis suggests that 52 full and part-time jobs will be created locally as a direct result of this program. An estimated 80% of this year's funds will be used to attain workers, engineers, contractors, equipment, and supplies directly from the private sector.

As work on multiple projects is being completed, a crucial component of successful forest restoration will involve follow-up monitoring to assess whether goals are being met. To that end, some funds will be used by the University of Montana to ensure monitoring is scientifically valid and engages the next generation of forest managers.

The SW Crown Collaborative was developed in response to a new national forest restoration program created in early 2009, when President Obama signed the Forest Landscape Restoration Act into law. The purpose of CFLRP is to encourage collaborative, science-based ecosystem restoration of priority forest landscapes.

The project is supported by Senators Max Baucus and Jon Tester, the Governor's office, local county commissioners and many others. See the full list here: <http://swcrown.com/supporters/>

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