

Opportunities abound for Coordinated Forest Management in the Clearwater Valley

By Megan Birzell

We've all tightened our belts considerably over the past couple of years due to the struggling economy. And at this point, we're all wondering how long it will last. The closure of Smurfit-Stone was a major blow to the local forest industry. Fortunately, there are some potential bright spots in the future for forestry industry in the local area.

A diverse group of people is currently working on a grant proposal that, if successful, would bring \$40 million over 10 years to the Clearwater and portions of the Swan and Blackfoot for forest restoration projects. The funding is available from the Department of Agriculture through the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP). This program was established as a result of the Forest Landscape Restoration Act, which was signed into law in March 2009 as part of the Omnibus Public Lands Bill.

The CFLRP will provide up to \$4 million a year for ten consecutive years to ten priority landscapes across the country to conduct forest restoration activities. All of the money will go directly to implementation and monitoring, which will create jobs in the woods in the areas in which projects are conducted.

Numerous interests have come together to develop a proposal covering just under 1.5 million acres, including the entire Clearwater Valley, the portion of the Blackfoot Valley north of the Blackfoot River, and the portion of the Swan Valley south of the Swan River State Forest. This landscape, known as the Southwestern Crown of the Continent, has ample opportunities for restoration activities that will create jobs, reduce the risk of wildfire, and enhance recreational activities.

The Southwestern Crown covers three different Forest Service ranger districts on three different national forests: the Swan Lake Ranger District on the Flathead National Forest, the Seeley Lake Ranger District on the Lolo National Forest, and the Lincoln Ranger District on the Helena National Forest. Representatives from each of these forests and districts are working with the other partners to develop this proposal. Other partners include representatives from the Clearwater Resource Council, Blackfoot Challenge, Swan Ecosystem Center, Northwest Connections, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Montana Community Development Corporation, Montana DNRC, Missoula County, Lake County, Powell County, Lewis & Clark County, The Nature Conservancy, The Wilderness Society, University of Montana, Montana Forest Restoration Committee, and the National Wildlife Federation. Participation in this Collaborative is open – anyone may participate.

The Clearwater Resource Council is providing a link between the Southwestern Crown Collaborative effort and the Seeley Lake community through our Coordinated Forest Management Initiative. The goal of this initiative is to create more opportunities to produce, utilize, and market forest products that benefit the local community and businesses while simultaneously maintaining and enhancing forest ecosystems and their diversity in the Clearwater Valley. CRC, with help from the Seeley Lake Community Foundation, is interested in providing a forum that brings landowners, land managers, the forest products industry, and community members together to discuss natural resource management issues and facilitate communication, problem solving, and collaborative planning with a broader stewardship perspective. The Coordinated Forest Management initiative will provide much needed local information

to the Southwestern Crown effort, which will in turn develop restoration projects in the Clearwater Valley that will accomplish the objectives of the initiative.

The bottom line is that a ten-year program of work will lead to more jobs in the woods, reduced risk of wildfire for our communities, improved recreational experiences, better fish and wildlife habitat, and enhanced ecosystem processes in this spectacular landscape. To learn more about the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program and the Coordinated Forest Management Initiative, call Megan at 677-0069.

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