Coordinated Forest Management for the Clearwater Valley
A Proposed Initiative
Project Brief prepared by the Clearwater Resource Council

Statement of Need

The community of Seeley Lake is heavily dependent on the ecosystem services and associated economic benefits produced from its surrounding forests and forest management activities. Ecosystem services refer to all of the types of benefits that our forests provide including wood and fiber supply, wildlife habitat, clean water, recreational opportunities, clean air, aesthetics, and even newly emerging benefits such as carbon sequestration. The sum of these benefits is what makes Seeley Lake the quality living environment that it is, and that provides the foundation for our local economy.

Our forests are owned or managed by a variety of entities. About 44% of the lands in the Valley are privately owned with 9% owned by individuals and approximately 35% owned by Plum Creek Timber Company. Approximately 42% of the lands are managed by the U.S. Forest Service, 8% by Montana DNRC, 5% by MT FW&P, and 2% is covered by lakes. This ownership pattern has been and will continue to change, as programs such as the Montana Legacy Project shift ownership within the Valley. Each landowner/agency has different objectives and/or requirements for how they manage their lands. However, management of all lands within a watershed is interrelated. What occurs on one parcel will influence other parcels. Forest fuels occurring on one property will influence the type of fire that might approach neighboring properties. Many species of wildlife regularly move across property boundaries, with their habitat determined by all of the forest conditions in the area. Weeds occurring on one parcel will spread across property lines to other parcels. Water and whatever it carries with it runs down drainages and enters streams, rivers, and lakes influencing water quality and habitat for aquatic species. Understanding the cumulative effects of activities in the Valley is important to determining the total influences on ecosystem services, and would simplify and speed up the environmental reviews required by some agencies for their implementation of various management practices.

At the present, most management in the Valley is done independently, with each landowner/agency deciding what to do on lands under their ownership/management. The rights and responsibilities of each landowner/agency to manage their lands must be maintained, and no intent to alter any such rights is suggested by this initiative. However, there are many benefits from voluntary coordination of efforts. The Seeley Lake Fuels Mitigation Task Force is one example, where the overall needs of the community for fire response and fuels mitigation are best addressed through coordinated and complimentary efforts. Control of weeds is most effective and efficient if conducted in a coordinated manner. Similar benefits can be produced by coordinating forest management activities that maintain a continuing supply of wood and fiber while also providing for forest stewardship and restoration objectives including wildlife habitat, water quality, and ecosystem diversity.

Through coordinated forest management, Seeley Lake would benefit in a number of ways. First, coordinated assessments are needed to understand the wood and fiber potential of the Valley. This information is critical to maintaining existing forest industry as well as to attracting new industries to the area. Landowners and agencies are the suppliers of wood and fiber for manufacturers, which in turn support the harvesting, transportation, and related forest management service sector. Existing mills or producers of forest products could assist agencies in their selection and design of forest management by identifying the wood and fiber that is in greatest need. New industries must have some idea of the

potential supply of wood or fiber if they are to invest in new development in this area. As mentioned, fuel mitigation and weed management will be the most efficient and effective if conducted in a coordinated manner. Recreational opportunities will best be provided by assessing desired uses and coordinating for these across ownerships, where appropriate. Stewardship objectives including water quality, fish and wildlife habitat, and forest ecosystem diversity are best addressed through coordinated efforts.

Goal and Objectives

The goal of this initiative is to encourage voluntary coordinated forest management activities in the Clearwater Valley. Such an initiative could become a pilot demonstration of how such coordination could be conducted. Specifically, this initiative could address the following objectives:

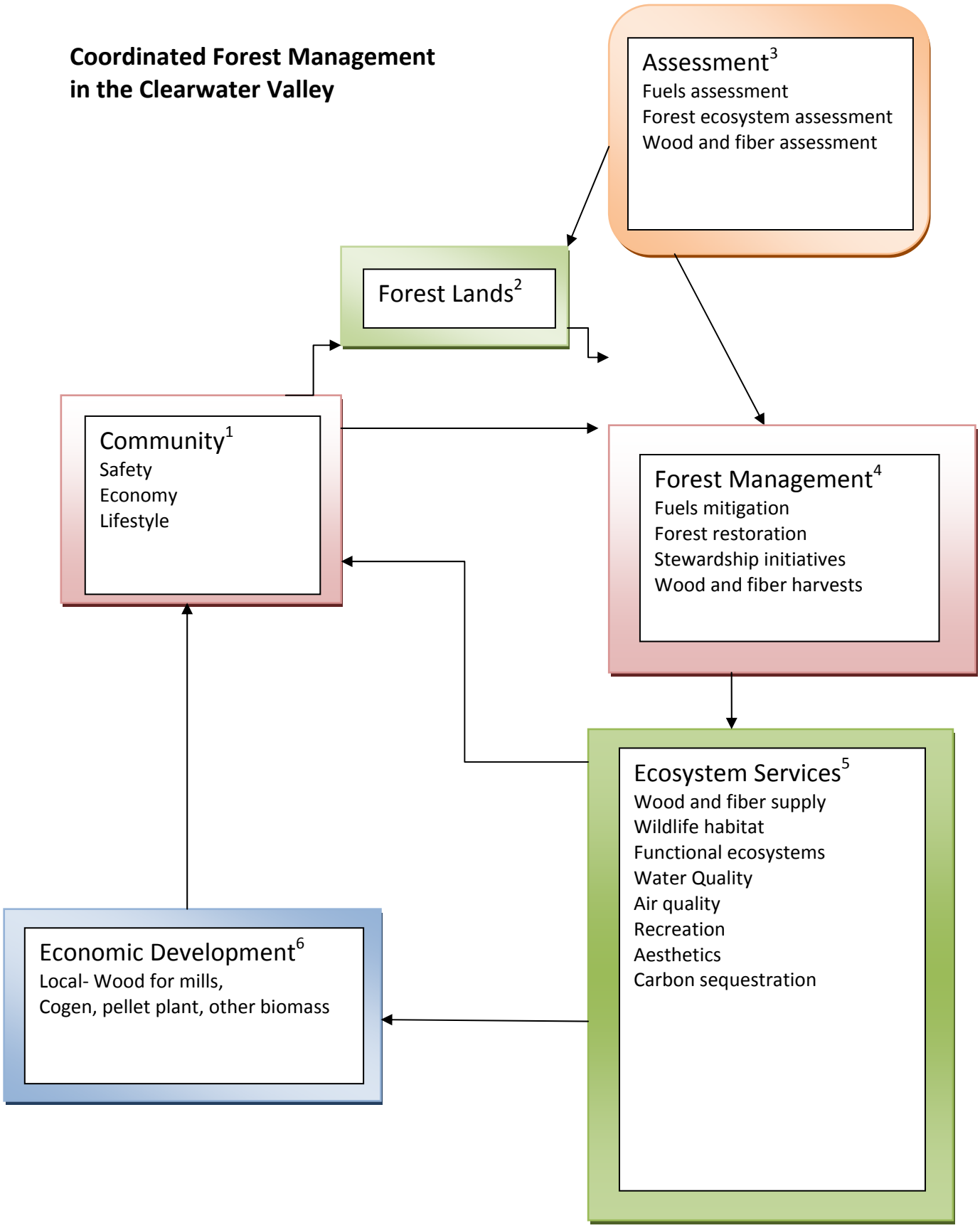
- Facilitate a process to enable voluntary coordination of forest management activities in the Clearwater Valley,
- Conduct watershed-wide assessments and evaluations to assist coordinated forest management and identify stewardship needs at a watershed scale,
- Develop voluntary coordinated forest management and stewardship plans, to the extent practicable,
- Provide relevant information on forest ecosystem services for the entire Valley including potential wood and fiber supply,
- Coordinate and help fund voluntary management activities including stewardship projects, fuel mitigation treatments, weed management projects, and forest restoration projects, and
- Involve and provide communications to the community about this coordinated effort.

Project Approach

The attached figure displays the types of interrelationships that could be enhanced by coordinated efforts. This project proposes to engage landowners and agencies in coordinated efforts for forest management through an open process that encourages input and cooperation from the community.

This initiative would establish a coordinated forest management group that would include all interested agencies and landowners as well as any interested organizations such as the Clearwater Resource Council, The Nature Conservancy, Trust for Public Lands, Blackfoot Clearwater Chapter of Trout Unlimited, Ecosystem Management Research Institute, Blackfoot Challenge, Swan Ecosystem Center, Northwest Connections, and others. Together, these landowners, agencies, and organizations would conduct coordinated planning, mapping, monitoring, and reporting on forest management/stewardship/restoration activities. The Clearwater Resource Council is willing to help organize, facilitate, and administer this coordinated effort, as needed.

Coordinated Forest Management in the Clearwater Valley



[1] Community

Benefits of coordinated forest management include;

- increased safety of human lives and property through coordinated fuel mitigation efforts,
- Increased economic vitality produced through maintenance of existing forest industries and development of new forest-related economic benefits and ecosystem services, and
- Increased quality of life produced by maintaining and improving environmental quality (fish and wildlife habitat, water quality, invasive weeds, air quality), recreational opportunities, and other related community benefits.

Local community desires and needs will help drive the forest management process through collaborative input and responsive decision-making. This project proposes to facilitate collaborative stakeholder and community input with direct involvement from forest landowners and agencies. Agency management activities are enhanced by support from communities that are knowledgeable of desired forest conditions. Funding opportunities for fuel mitigation, forest stewardship, and other forest management are enhanced by community engaged support.

[2] Forest Lands

Forest lands dominate the Clearwater Valley and occur across a diverse ownership including USFS, MT DNRC, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Plum Creek Timber Company, and individual private landowners. The sizable on-going changes in land ownership mean that new management directions and opportunities exist on some of these lands that present new challenges and opportunities.

[3] Assessment

Forest management is built upon an understanding of existing conditions compared to desired conditions and outputs for future forests. An initial assessment will provide the necessary information to identify and guide implement of fuel treatments, restoration projects, stewardship projects, and wood and fiber production. Projected management activities will be evaluated to determine expected production of wood and fiber supply.

The Seeley/Swan Fire Plan identifies and prioritized fuel mitigation needs for all areas. Existing forest conditions need to be assessed using existing information and additional analysis to determine forest restoration priorities and locations, particularly in regard to changing land ownerships. A combination of these two assessments will identify potential forest management activities to address fuel mitigation, forest restoration, and forest management goals. These assessments will be linked to a needed wood and fiber assessment to produce an estimate of long-term wood and fiber supply. These initial assessments are critical to setting forest management goals and to understanding likely and sustainable production of wood and fiber from which to base economic development opportunities.

[4] Forest Management

Forest management will be based on a coordinated and collaborative approach that involves communities, agencies, organizations, companies, and landowners to build synergistic partnerships that maximize efficiencies, economies, and desired ecosystem services. Within the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI), management will be encouraged that focuses on reduction of fire risks across all ownerships while also addressing forest restoration where feasible. The approach will balance fuel mitigation as a priority with other ecological objectives in sensitive areas, while generating wood and fiber for use by existing industries and to support new economic developments. Outside the WUI, working forests will be managed to provide sustainable forest productivity, improved ecosystem integrity, and a number of

additional ecosystem services. Additional private and state forest lands will be encouraged to produce sustainable ecosystem services including enhanced stewardship opportunities. On Federal lands, forest ecosystem restoration will increase the integrity of the watershed while producing wood and fiber as an additional stewardship benefit. Unmanaged lands will be assessed for their contributions to ecosystem services such as various types of ecosystem diversity and wildlife habitat.

Forest management will be enhanced by linkage with a number of on-going initiatives including the work of the Seeley Lake Fuels Mitigation Task Force, Stewardship Authorities being led by RMEF in the watershed, the proposed Blackfoot/Clearwater Stewardship Project that would provide additional stewardship opportunities on Federal and other lands, and on-going coordination of weed management efforts. The forest management activities would be linked to planned watershed planning efforts directed at water quality and aquatic resources. The coordinated effort would also include the ITEEM initiative targeting restoration opportunities in the Clearwater Valley.

[5] **Ecosystem Services**

This effort will produce a wide array of ecosystem services. The watershed has some of the highest conservation values in the lower 48 states in terms of its overall integrity as it supports a nearly full complement of its biodiversity including grizzly bears, Canada lynx, bull trout and other species extirpated from most of their historical distributions. The water resources including rivers, lakes, and streams in the region is world class, and the maintenance and enhancement of these resources is of critical value. A coordinated water quality and aquatics assessment will help integrate aquatic management efforts in the watershed.

A goal is to produce sustainable, long-term supply of wood and fiber from the watershed to support existing and new forest product industries. Another goal is to maintain recreational access and activities. All of these will help support a diverse economy.

A new ecosystem service could be evaluated, that of carbon sequestration. Changing ownership of substantial lands should result in increasing amounts of larger trees, allowing for this service to be assessed and potentially marketed.

The quality of life for all residents in the region hinges upon the maintenance of the ecosystem services provided by forest ecosystems in the region. This region can provide a showcase for sustainable forest management that integrates production of forest products with a wide array of additional ecosystem services.

[6] **Economic Development**

Maintaining existing forest industry while developing and supporting new innovative products and processes is a goal of this initiative. Potential opportunities will be explored, including development of a biomass co-generation facility at the mill in Seeley Lake, as well as assessing the potential for a pellet plant or other biomass fuel initiatives.