

STATEMENT OF
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BEFORE THE
UNITED STATES SENATE
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LANDS, FORESTS, AND MINING
JULY 30, 2013

CONCERNING
S. 37, THE 'FOREST JOBS AND RECREATION ACT OF 2013'

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee, I am Leslie Weldon, Deputy Chief, National Forest System, U.S. Forest Service, United States Department Of Agriculture. Thank you for the opportunity to share the Department of Agriculture's views on S. 37, the 'Forest Jobs and Recreation Act of 2013.'

S. 37 directs the Secretary of Agriculture to develop and implement forest and watershed restoration projects on 70,000 acres of the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest and 30,000 acres of the Kootenai National Forest within 15 years of enactment. The bill prescribes treatment

methods, annual acreage targets, and standardized criteria to prioritize areas for restoration and hazardous fuel reduction projects. It also requires consultation with an advisory committee or collaborative group for each restoration project implemented by the Secretary, and calls for a monitoring report every five years. The bill designates twenty-four wilderness areas totaling approximately 666,260 acres, six recreation areas totaling approximately 288,780 acres, and three special management areas totaling approximately 80,720 acres. Some of the designations apply to lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management and we defer to the Department of the Interior on those provisions.

The Department (USDA) supports S. 37 and looks forward to continuing to work with the Committee and Sponsor to develop modifications to the bill that could provide greater opportunities to accomplish the shared goals of restoration, recreation and economic development.

The concepts embodied in this legislation, collaboratively developed landscape scale projects, increased use of stewardship contracting, and the importance of a viable forest products industry in restoring ecosystems and economies are fundamentally sound. USDA does have reservations about legislating forest management decisions and would hope that the work the Forest Service is doing to increase the pace and scale of forest restoration and management of the National Forests will make this type of legislation unnecessary in the future. In fact, the Forest Service is currently engaged in numerous programs and activities on the National Forests of Montana and around the nation that embrace the concepts in this bill.

Examples of the work we are carrying out in the spirit of this legislation are underway as large-scale restoration projects on the national forests of Montana include: the Larry Bass Stewardship Project on the Bitterroot National Forest where we are completing hazardous fuel reduction work and are re-investing stewardship receipts to accomplish hazardous fuel/bark beetle work within and around a popular ski area on the forest; Sparring Bulls and Young Dodge, two large landscape projects on the Kootenai National Forest developed with a local collaborative group; and the Southwestern Crown of the Continent project, which will treat close to 200,000 acres on the Lolo, Flathead and Helena National Forests with funding provided under the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program.

Planned projects are increasingly focused on large landscape ecosystems to address shared issues across forest boundaries. For example, the Boulder Vegetation Project and a complex of projects planned on the Helena National Forest that focus on bark beetle infestations occurring on the two forests.

Efforts such as these have helped the agency and stakeholders gain experience in identifying the factors necessary for the success of large-scale restoration projects, and I acknowledge the Senator's incorporation of their input into this legislation. I offer our continued support for further collaboration on addressing remaining concerns to ensure that it can serve as a model for similar efforts elsewhere.

We recognize that the proposed bill is the product of a collaborative effort. Such efforts are critically important to increasing public support for needed forest management activities,

particularly in light of the bark beetle crisis facing Montana and other western states. We believe these efforts can significantly advance forest restoration, reduce litigation surrounding restoration where parties are willing to collaborate, and make it easier to provide jobs and opportunities in the forest industry for rural communities. While we have seen significant successes from collaboration in some parts of the country, there are areas where groups are not interested in collaboration and continue to use appeals and litigation as methods to delay or stop forest treatments that restore resilient forests, reduce severe wildfire potential and other objectives. Montana in particular continues to see substantial litigation activity.

As noted above, USDA is concerned about legislating forest management direction or specific treatment levels on a site-specific basis. USDA wants to work with the Committee to ensure that this does not negatively impact other Forest Service priorities in Region 1 or draw important resources from priority work on other units of the National Forest System. We also would like to work with the Committee and sponsor on other aspects of the bill such as defining mechanical treatments, establishing reporting requirements, and provisions effecting other funds and road-density standards found in Title I.

Regarding the land designations in Title II that pertain to lands under the jurisdiction of the Forest Service, we support the wilderness recommendations made in each Forest's land and resource management plan given the depth of analysis and public collaboration that goes into them. Regarding the input from the Department that the Senator has incorporated, there are two items in S. 37 for which I would like to express the Department's appreciation in particular: (1) the adjustments to wilderness area designations in Title II, which more closely reflect the

extensive collaboration, analysis and resulting recommendations of the Beaverhead-Deerlodge 2009 Forest Plan and other forest plans; and (2) the incorporation of the CFR 212.1 definitions of “designated road, trail or area” in the bill provides for consistency of implementation.

In closing, I want to thank Senator Tester once again for his strong commitment to Montana’s communities and natural resources. We appreciate the close work of the Senator’s staff with the Forest Service to refine legislation that would provide a full suite of significant benefits for the people, economy, and forests of Montana and the nation. The continuing commitment to bring diverse interests together to find solutions that provide a context for restoration, renewal, and sustainability of public landscapes and to foster healthy rural economies is evident in the legislation being considered by this Committee today.

We want to underscore our commitment to the continuing collaboration with the Senator and his staff, the Committee, and all interested stakeholders in an open, inclusive and transparent manner to provide the best land stewardship for our National Forest System Lands.

This concludes my prepared statement, and I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.