

## Tester bill creates jobs, protects forest

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Montana has waited for nearly 30 years for new wilderness with nothing yet to show for it. When the Omnibus Public Lands Management Act passed in March, not a single acre of the 2 million acres newly designated as wilderness was located in Montana.

Meanwhile, Montanans have watched as our timber industry has dwindled to a bare skeleton of what it used to be, and in recent years, the nationwide decline in housing construction that hastened the shuttering of several western Montana mills.

Yet we haven't spent the last three decades sitting on our hands. Many individuals and groups too numerous to name here have worked hard to make sure Montana's interest in our most treasured public lands and in the forest products industry that still provides good-paying jobs has not gone ignored.

The folks behind the Beaverhead-Deerlodge Partnership, the Blackfoot-Clearwater Stewardship Project and the Three Rivers Challenge, in particular, helped further a relatively new approach to overcoming Montana's unique forest management challenges: collaboration. Conservation groups, timber interests, government officials, landowners and many, many more had a hand in shaping the drafts of federal legislation ultimately offered to Montana's congressional delegation.

On July 20, one of those delegates - Sen. Jon Tester - officially introduced S1470, the Forest Jobs and Recreation Act of 2009, which has been referred to the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources. The bill still has a long way to go, and some significant obstacles to overcome, before it reaches the president's desk. Remember, most bills meet their deaths in committee.

But with enough support from Montanans, Tester's bill could survive to become a living example of how the spirit of collaboration can result in meaningful, lasting solutions.

In the three months since he introduced the bill, Tester has held multiple meetings open to the public to exchange information and ideas about the bill. He's opted to give a presentation and then set aside time for one-on-one questions. He's doing it this way, he says, because it allows more people to be heard, including people who don't necessarily want to speak in front of a crowd. And it prevents the kind of grandstanding that some have come to count on in order to disrupt these sorts of meetings.

"A lot of folks who are complaining don't want to talk to me, they want to talk to the crowd," Tester told the Missoulian's editorial board last week.

Tester was in Missoula last week, shortly before flying back to Washington, D.C., to hold just such a discussion. About 150 people came to the Doubletree Hotel last Monday. And he announced that the act has earned the official support of Montana's other senator, Max Baucus, who has signed on as a co-sponsor. Rep. Denny Rehberg has yet to announce his official position.

Because any future public hearings are not likely to take place in Montana, this was many Montanans' one shot to give their in-person input on the bill - but it's not necessarily the final chance at having a say. Tester says he

remains open to feedback from Montanans, and in fact, the feedback he's already gathered during his meetings around the state has led to several slight adjustments to

the legislation.

We would like to offer one more: Any bill that is passed should include a preference for Montana-based companies and workers, to ensure that any logging or forest work performed goes to benefit the businesses the bill's logging requirement is intended to help.

For instance, the bill outlines more than 500,000 acres of the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest to be designated as wilderness, while also making sure the U.S. Forest Service logs a minimum of 7,000 acres a year for 10 years. The bill also includes parts of the Blackfoot-Clearwater area around the Bob Marshall/Scapegoat Wilderness, and the Kootenai National Forest in northwestern Montana.

This groundbreaking legislation, while not perfect, can only improve with more input from Montanans. As it is, it meets the immediate needs of every Montanan who cares about protecting our public lands for future generations while also making sure our remaining mills stay in business in the years to come.

And that's why we fully support the Forest Jobs and Recreation Act, and urge Congress to consider and approve this bill as soon as possible. Montana should not have to wait another 30 years for more wilderness.