



## Forest parties reach consensus on restoration principles

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By *MICHAEL MOORE* of the *Missoulian*

For months, a diverse group of conservationists, timber industry officials, forest users and government leaders met in an effort designed to stem the tide of lawsuits filed against forest restoration projects.

Finally, on Thursday, the group announced a set of 13 principles that might guide future restoration work on the Bitterroot and Lolo national forests.

And because those principles are the result of a time-consuming consensus process, the hope is that restoration projects will move ahead more quickly, be less likely to spawn litigation and, most important, be good for the ecosystems they're designed to restore.

"We're excited that this could help the Forest Service and us come together on issues ... that have been very controversial," said Bob Ekey of the Wilderness Society.

Ekey, along with Gordy Sanders of Seeley Lake's Pyramid Mountain Lumber Co. and several federal foresters, were part of a conference call Thursday that publicly introduced the principles.

"This type of collaborative work is not easy," said Tom Tidwell, regional forester for the Forest Service's Northern Region, headquartered in Missoula.

The effort started in the frustrating wake of a post-fire restoration project in the southern Bitterroot Valley. The project became embroiled in litigation, and prompted many on both sides of the debate to wonder if there wasn't a better way to approach such projects.

"How can we move beyond that?" Ekey said.

Not long after that, a group of about 35 gathered at the Lubrecht Experimental Forest for a meeting that eventually evolved into the Montana Forest Restoration Working Group.

The group drew representatives from industry and the conservation community, but also from forest user groups like snowmobilers, horsemen and outfitters.

Over the next months, they worked to find what they characterized as a "zone of agreement," a place where everyone could accept what a successful restoration project ought to look like.

The zone eventually grew into a preamble and set of principles. That preamble notes the importance of scientifically sound, ecologically appropriate restoration work, but it also factors in the importance such work can have on surrounding rural communities.

The principles include:

- Restore functioning ecosystems by enhancing ecological processes.
- Re-establish fire as a natural process on the landscape.
- Consider social constraints and seek public support for reintroducing fire.

- Engage community members and interested parties in the restoration process.
- Improve terrestrial and aquatic habitat and connectivity.
- Establish and maintain a safe road and trail system that is ecologically sustainable.
- Integrate restoration with socioeconomic well-being.

Using those principles, early in the process, should be a way to short-circuit some of the problems that sometimes arise late in a project and lead to litigation, forester Tidwell said.

“It's ... essential that we involve people on the front end of designing our projects,” he said.

Tidwell said that by getting groups involved early, the agency “should be able to address those issues and concerns” before the project moves ahead.

“We'll have to play this out and see how it works,” he said.

Now that the principles are in place, the committee will begin work on two pilot projects on the Lolo National Forest and one on the Bitterroot. Those projects are still under consideration and were not announced on Thursday.

On a project-to-project basis, committee membership will vary depending on where the project is, with an eye toward bringing stakeholders and those with the most knowledge of the area to the table, Ekey said.

Pyramid's Gordy Sanders said the end result should be a restoration process that works for both the land and communities.

Both Sanders and Ekey said the entire process has brought together groups that often don't see eye to eye, allowing them to forge relationships they might otherwise never have made.

Sanders described it as “building a bigger middle,” and Ekey said “it was a collaboration at its finest.”

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### **On the Net**

To learn more about the restoration principles released Thursday by a working group of conservationists, timber industry officials and government forest managers, go to [www.montanarestoration.org](http://www.montanarestoration.org).

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