



Forester says projects are nearly complete

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By **SHERRY DEVLIN** of the *Missoulian*

National forests in Montana and northern Idaho have accomplished 94 percent of their healthy forests projects for fiscal year 2004, Regional Forester Gail Kimbell said Monday.

And their 75,500-acre target is nearly double that of the previous year.

"I can assure you that ranger districts across Montana and into northern Idaho are moving as quickly as budgets allow to put together healthy forests projects," Kimbell said during a meeting with the Missoulian's editorial board.

Most of this year's projects involved prescribed burns - low-intensity, intentionally set fires that remove forest undergrowth and small thickets of trees.

Thinning also accomplishes the same goal but takes longer to make its way through the decision-making and approval process, Kimbell said.

But 75,000-acre years won't be enough to restore forests ailing after nearly a century of fire exclusion and more recent insect infestations, she added.

"That's not going to be sufficient," Kimbell said. "I want to see a continued emphasis on healthy forests, which is really healthy ecosystems that can withstand entirely natural events like wildfires."

Kimbell took over as the Northern Region's top forester earlier this year after spending two years in Washington, D.C., as associate deputy chief for the national forest system.

Key to the region's healthy forests work are regulatory changes that allow the use of so-called "categorical exclusions" when projects involve work for which the potential environmental impacts are well-known - and negligible, she said.

Over this past year, the Northern Region has used categorical exclusions to hasten 139 projects from proposal to implementation.

Kimbell said she has told the region's employees "to be smart" about how they use categorical exclusions, and to incorporate a wide range of ecological goals into all their work.

The region will, in fact, achieve healthy forests goals on another 45,000 acres this year where projects were primarily intended to benefit wildlife, timber-cutting or other resource goals, she said.

National forests in Montana and northern Idaho will approve about 207 million board feet of traditional timber sales this fiscal year, a fifth of what the yearly cut once was.

"I don't ever see us returning to the cut level of the 1980s," Kimbell said. "There are just many more pressures on the national forests these days."

Still, Montana is lucky to have 12 small sawmills, and Kimbell said she hopes they are able to remain in operation.

"Montana is one of the few states that still have a vibrant timber industry," she said. "We're lucky to have that. The Healthy Forests Initiative relies on having a viable timber industry."

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