



## Upper Blackfoot Working Group seeks community support for collaborative legislative proposal

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The view from the top of Stemple Pass takes in a broad swath of the National Forests surrounding Lincoln (under the low-lying cloud bank) and the Upper Blackfoot Valley.

The status quo just isn't working.

If there's one thing the members of the Upper Blackfoot Working Group agreed on about the management of the National Forests that surround Lincoln that, that is it.

In the last two weeks, the Working Group has been methodically unveiling a legislative proposal they've developed to the Lincoln community, starting with area organizations and groups ahead of a public meeting they have planned for the end of May.

Made up of locals with interests in logging, snowmobiling, motorized recreation, outfitting, fire management, as well as members of mountain bike, conservation, wildlife and wilderness

organizations, the Working Group developed the legislative proposal for forest management in the Lincoln area over the last four years.

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That point has been at the core of the group's efforts from its outset about seven years ago, when some members of the Lincoln Restoration Committee began considering ways to apply the collaborative model used to develop the Stonewall Vegetation project and apply it to the larger landscape to benefit the community economy.

In 2013, Paul Roos and the Wilderness Society's Meghan Birzelle began holding a series of discussions. By 2014 the group had a tentative name, Community Visions, and a draft document called the Upper Blackfoot Cooperative Agreement that summarized the themes and key points of agreement from the discussions.

Around the same time, the Rocky Mountain Front Heritage Act, a product of collaboration itself, was being discussed in Congress. Despite creating heartburn locally because it included land in the Alice Creek area that was subsequently removed, it provided the spark that got the group thinking about doing something similar here.

"We figured let's start seeing what we can do, so we can dictate how the future is for our grandkids and great grandkids ... something that could potentially be put into law," said Zach Muse, who was among the first members of the group.

The Lincoln Valley Proposal is a carefully constructed mosaic, developed through four years of compromise and debate, that includes a designated winter recreation area in the Copper Bowls to protect snowmobile access, new mountain bike trails and additional motorized trails that would create a looped ATV trail around the entire Lincoln Valley, creation of the Bartlett Creek and Sandbar Creek Recreation Areas that would protect motorized recreation east of Lincoln, including in the popular First, Second and Third Gulch areas. There are also Forest restoration areas in the Ogden Mountain and Lincoln Gulch areas that could open up more logging and fire mitigation opportunities and three conservation management areas that would allow existing permitted uses to continue but wouldn't allow new ones.

Finally, it would designate three additions to the Scapegoat Wilderness and establish a Nevada Mountain Wilderness area.

Group member Bill Cyr stressed that the only current permitted use the proposal changes is a section of the Helmville- Gould Trail that's currently open to mountain bikes but rarely used.

Members of the working group understand the proposal may meet with some resistance locally, due to its designation of new wilderness. Cyr admitted additional wilderness was nearly a non-starter for him as well.

"Ideologically... I think there is probably enough wilderness out there, so for me to be involved in something that creates a new one... it took some soul searching on my part," he said. "In that soul searching I had to look at the whole proposal."

As part of that soul searching he asked himself three questions: Is the whole proposal better than the status quo? Is it better than a plan someone with different values would come up with if they got to make the decision? And is the world going to let him have the final say in this proposal?

By answering those, he realized the proposal they've come up with is what's best in a world where everybody gets to have a say.

"I think people need to look at this and say, 'is there something in there for me?'" Cyr said. "I don't think anybody exists out there who says it's all good for me, or who can say it's all bad for me. Is there at least part of it that makes my use of national forest land better?"

Fellow group member, and long-time [Lincoln](#) logger, Brent Anderson put it a different way. "The nice part about what came out of this working group is, you might say, nobody's happy with what they got, but everybody got something," he said.

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Cyr admitted the proposal bears some similarities to the ongoing Helena-Lewis & Clark Forest Plan Revision, but said they have been developed independently of one another. He noted that although the proposal would establish designated wilderness, it would also free up some inventoried roadless areas for forest restoration in return. By contrast most of the Forest Plan Revisions alternatives retain the roadless areas and include larger areas of recommended wilderness, which are managed much like designated wilderness.

Working Group members hope community members will agree that the proposal is an improvement over current forest management by the U.S. Forest Service, which is often hamstrung by laws, regulations or litigation. They hope it will be picked up by a member of the Montana congressional delegation and be sponsored as a bill in Washington D.C., but that requires local support.

For those who may be hesitant because they haven't heard more about the Upper Blackfoot Working Group or the legislative proposal until now, Muse said the group hasn't been a secret, but has kept a low profile for several reasons.

"First of all, you have wilderness groups in there," Muse said. "Instantly a lot of the community is going to get really defensive and just say flatly, 'No.'"

He said the proposal was constantly in flux until recently, and that it changed from meeting to meeting. Until group members came to an agreement among themselves, they felt announcing the unfinished proposal would have done more harm than good.

Finally, they wanted to have face-to-face conversations with all the stakeholders it might affect. Publicizing it ahead of that would also have likely scuttled the whole thing by fueling rumors, misconceptions and resentment about the effort.

According to Karyn Good, who has served as the coordinator for the working group, they met with Lewis and Clark and Powell County commissioners and more than 200 stakeholders from [Lincoln](#) to the Helmville-Avon area to Canyon Creek to landowners just east of the divide for their input and opinions.

They had the benefit of looking at the Heritage Act and the Blackfoot/Clearwater Stewardship Act as they developed their proposal and believe it's both stronger and better balanced.

"Pretty overwhelmingly, it was positive on the reaction to it," Muse said.

The reaction from Rep. Greg Gianforte and both Senators Steve Daines and Jon Tester have been positive as well, Good Said. With community support behind it, odds of the proposal being sponsored should be good.

"The public needs to be involved because it's their National Forest," said Cyr. "We, the people, need to be involved and I think need to have a say. I don't think it is going to get any kind of congressional support if the community isn't behind it."

