



Matt Anderson, Forest Supervisor
Bitterroot National Forest
1801 N 1st Street
Hamilton, MT 59840

Re: Comment for Soda Baker Fuels Break Comment

Dear Supervisor Anderson,

This letter is on behalf of Sun Mountain Lumber in Deer Lodge, MT. We would like to thank you for the opportunity to provide comments for the Soda Baker Fuels Break Project. We are invested and supportive in the development of this project.

Sun Mountain Lumber is a family-owned sawmill that provides direct employment for approximately 200 mill and logging jobs in Deer Lodge, MT. In addition to the potential of this Soda Baker Fuels Break Project providing raw material for our operations, we view these types of projects as creating a relationship in which our operations can assist the Bitterroot National Forest in achieving their goals and objectives on NFS lands.

We support the 2,378 acre Soda Baker Fuels Break Project and commend the Bitterroot National Forest for taking proactive steps to protect roads in the West Fork Bitterroot River and Nez Perce Fork Bitterroot River areas and the nearby communities of Conner and Darby. We are particularly supportive of the proposed use of the Fuel Break Categorical Exclusion under the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) Section 40806. As forestry professionals and concerned members of the public, we believe that this project is a crucial component of a broader strategy needed to protect our communities and enhance the resilience of our forests.

The alarming increase in the size, duration, and destructiveness of wildfires over the past two decades is a stark reminder of the urgency of the situation we face. The convergence of factors such as accumulating fuels, a warming climate, and expanding development in the wildland-urban interface has created a wildfire risk that has reached crisis proportions. It is evident that a paradigm shift in land management, transcending jurisdictional boundaries, is necessary to mitigate this risk and restore fire-adapted landscapes.

The Forest Service's strategy to dramatically increase fuels and forest health treatments by up to four times current levels in the West, as outlined in "*Confronting the Wildfire Crisis: A New Strategy for Protecting Communities and Improving Resilience to America's Forest*," is a bold and commendable step in the right direction. It signifies a

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commitment to the safety and well-being of our communities and the preservation of our precious natural resources.

Part of this strategy involves the responsible reduction of vegetative fuels in strategic areas through the establishment of fuel breaks. We support this approach, as it aligns with the goals of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, the Healthy Forests Restoration Act, and the urgent calls from Congress to use these authorities to address the wildfire crisis. Fuel breaks, by slowing fire spread and providing a safer zone for firefighters to respond to wildfires, are an indispensable tool in our efforts to protect communities, private lands, and other values at risk.

We are particularly pleased to see that the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law has established a Categorical Exclusion for fuel breaks, allowing for their creation in areas where the need is most pressing, such as the wildland-urban interface or public drinking water source areas. **Protection of these resources in anticipation of fire is more environmentally sound and vastly more economical than trying to create the same fuel breaks during an actual incident.** Additionally, there can be some value from products recovered.

In conclusion, we urge you to proceed with the Soda Baker Fuels Break Project with all due diligence and haste. This project, in line with the broader strategy, represents a critical step forward in our collective efforts to confront the wildfire crisis. It is an investment in the safety and security of our communities, the protection of our natural resources, and the enhancement of forest health and resilience.

Respectfully yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sean Steinebach". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Sean Steinebach
Outreach Forester

Sun Mountain Lumber