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Comments: [attachment pasted in]

RE: Lolo National Forest Land Management Plan

Amanda,

Big Sky Forest Products in St Regis, Montana is the largest forest products producer remaining in Mineral County, Montana. Mineral County is 85% timbered with 90% of the timberland owned and managed by the United States Forest Service as part of the Lolo National Forest. Big Sky employees 15 at the mill and supports many more jobs in the woods, with vendors, and transportation services. Big Sky is a post and pole mill utilizing undersize and unmerchantable logs harvested from National Forest Lands. Removing these small logs reduces forest fuels, restores ecosystems, protects rural communities, and prevents forest fires. Most of the small diameter logs utilized by Big Sky are harvested as a byproduct of sawlog timber sales. Modern logging methods like the tethered feller bunchers, forwarders, and processors can economically harvest and utilize small unmerchantable logs that would otherwise be left as forest fuels adding to wildfire risks. The fiber utilized by Big Sky allows the Forest Service to economically treat 2500 acres per year for forest fuels reduction preserving resources, protecting rural communities, and reducing National Forest management costs.

Wildfires have been growing in size, duration, and destructivity over the last 25 years. The Lolo National Forest has suffered a series of catastrophic wildfires. The risk has reached crisis proportions. Decisive immediate action to protect people, communities and forest health is essential. Big Sky Forest is a valuable partner of the Forest Service in the efforts to utilize forest fuels to prevent forest fires. Big Sky utilizes small logs, and has been supported by a series of Forest Services grants since 2002 to become more efficient and productive in utilizing small logs. Our latest grant was in 2023 and we have a grant application pending in 2024 for another expansion to further grow our ability to process small logs into merchantable products. The Forest Services has supported us with letters of support and grant monies for every project.

Working together with Forest Service land managers, mills such as mine create fire residency in our forests and maintain our logging and milling infrastructure. Big Sky supports Chief Randy Moore's effort to increase the pace and scale of active management to attack the wildfire crisis threatening our forest and communities. Congress has supported Chief Moore with the bipartisan Inflation Reduction Act, and Health, Forest Restoration Act of 2023. The Forest Service has launched a strategy called [Idquo]Confronting the Wildfire Crisis: A Strategy for Protecting Communities and Improving Resilience in America Forests[rddquo]. Chief Moore has identified over 20 priority landscapes to address including sections of the Lolo National Forest. It is time for local Forest Service land managers to confront the forest fuels crisis by implementing a forest plan consistent with national policy, utilizing funds appropriated by Congress and engage in active aggressive management to reduce forest fuels by harvesting fiber, and treating acres for fuels reduction.

The Forest plan should include aggressive but obtainable goals through active Forest management:

1. Reduce hazardous fuels, mitigate risk of catastrophic wildfire, improve forest health, fire resiliency.
2. Bring all 1.8 million acres of the Lolo National Forest not off limits to timber harvest under active management. Under active scientific management the forest will produce over 400 MMBF/ year of sawlogs plus unmerchantable fiber for post and pole, pulp, and firewood. Active managed healthy forests will also support more wildlife, cleaner water, better fisheries, and more recreational opportunities.
3. Accelerate timber harvest to 250 MBF/year for a least 10 years to address the backlog of fuels accumulation

4. Sustain a harvest of 200 MBF/ year
5. Treat 30,000 acres mechanically, an essential tool for managing forests, per year for forest fuels reduction to preserve forest resources, protect rural communities, provide jobs and fiber to local infrastructure, and reduce National Forest Management costs.
6. Treat 20,000 acres per year with prescribed burns to reduce forest fuel accumulations.
7. Strategically create fuel breaks to prevent the spread of large fires.
8. Protect people, structures, farm animals, and farm land by concentrating hazardous fuel reduction in the wildland urban interface.
9. Increase cooperation and input from stakeholders with public engagement, resource groups, and citizen collaboration.