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Organization:
Title:
Comments:

I write to formally oppose the proposed sale of the Regional Field Service Facility at 14th & Catlin, and to request that the Forest Service either retain the property or, at minimum, decline to initiate a conveyance until it has completed the analysis, consultation, and public process that federal law and the agency's own direction require.

I am a Missoula resident. I am not opposed to the Forest Service disposing of genuinely surplus real property. I am opposed to this disposal, of this property, on this record - which is, as of the July 28 notification, essentially no record at all.

My objections fall into five categories: (I) the notification and the proposed schedule do not satisfy the procedural requirements that attach to this authority; (II) the proposal is inconsistent with the agency's mission, its historic preservation obligations, and its own current operational direction; (III) the sale will increase, not reduce, long-term federal cost; (IV) the assets being disposed of cannot be reacquired at any price; and (V) the agency has statutory alternatives available to it right now that it has not evaluated or disclosed.

I. The notification and schedule do not satisfy the requirements attached to this authority

1. The letter is not a public process. The July 28, 2026 notification identifies no comment period, no comment deadline, no docket or comment address, no decision document, and no administrative review avenue. It invites "questions or concerns" directed to a project manager. That is correspondence, not public involvement. Section 504(f) of the Forest Service Facility Realignment and Enhancement Act of 2005 ("FSFREA," Title V of P.L. 109-54, 16 U.S.C. § 580d note) requires that, before making an administrative site available for conveyance, the Secretary shall consult with local governmental officials and shall provide public notice of the proposed conveyance. Please state on the record what process the agency contends satisfies § 504(f), when the § 504(f) consultation with the City of Missoula and Missoula County occurred, what was discussed, and how the agency responded to what it heard.

2. No NEPA analysis has been disclosed, and NEPA plainly applies. FSFREA § 504(d)(4) expressly provides that NEPA applies to administrative site conveyances under Title V. It then narrows - but does not eliminate - the required analysis, obligating the Secretary to (A) analyze the most reasonably foreseeable use of the site as determined through a market analysis; (B) determine whether to include terms, conditions, and reservations under § 504(a)(3); and (C) evaluate the alternative of not conveying the administrative site, consistent with NEPA.

The notification letter references none of this. It identifies no environmental assessment, no categorical exclusion category, no scoping notice, no market analysis, and no no-action alternative. The 2019 Missoula Area Facility Master Plan cited in the letter is not a NEPA decision, was not subject to public comment, and cannot substitute for the site-specific analysis § 504(d)(4) requires. Please identify the NEPA pathway the agency intends to use, publish the market analysis on which the "reasonably foreseeable use" determination will rest, and provide a genuine opportunity to comment on that analysis before any conveyance is initiated.

3. No Section 106 process has been disclosed for a property that is manifestly historic. The property was assembled between 1940 and 1945 and carries nineteen structures, several of which are almost certainly eligible for the National Register. The Engineering Shop identified in your letter as the "trolly barn" is the original

Missoula street railway car barn; streetcar rails remain visible in it. That building alone is a candidate for listing under Criterion A for its association with the development of Missoula's transportation system and the city's early-twentieth-century growth. The site also carries a Forest Service Museum Building and, until recently, has housed the Region 1 historic preservation program.

Under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (54 U.S.C. § 306108) and its implementing regulations at 36 C.F.R. Part 800, the agency must identify historic properties within the area of potential effects, assess effects, and consult with the Montana SHPO, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes and other interested Tribes, the ACHP where appropriate, and the public - before the agency makes an irreversible commitment. Transfer of property out of federal ownership without adequate and legally enforceable preservation restrictions is an adverse effect as a matter of regulation, 36 C.F.R. § 800.5(a)(2)(vii). Please confirm whether Section 106 consultation has been initiated, provide the identification and evaluation record, and disclose whether the agency intends to impose preservation covenants as a condition of conveyance under FSFREA § 504(a)(3).

4. NHPA Section 110 and Section 111 duties have not been addressed. Section 110(a) (54 U.S.C. § 306101) requires the agency to assume responsibility for the preservation of historic property it owns and, before acquiring, constructing, or leasing buildings, to use historic properties available to the agency to the maximum extent feasible. The agency is currently constructing replacement facilities at Fort Missoula while proposing to dispose of serviceable historic buildings here. That sequence needs to be reconciled with § 306101 on the record.

Section 111 (54 U.S.C. § 306121(a)(1)) goes further: each federal agency, after consultation with the ACHP, shall, to the extent practicable, establish and implement alternatives - including adaptive use - for historic property that is not needed for current or projected agency purposes. That is a mandatory duty, and it is triggered by precisely the determination the agency says it has made. Section 306121(b) additionally permits the agency to retain lease proceeds and apply them to administration, maintenance, and repair of that or other National Register property under its jurisdiction. The agency has not disclosed any Section 111 alternatives analysis. It should not initiate a sale before completing one.

5. No environmental condition of property disclosure. The site includes two hazardous materials storage sheds, an oil shed, a propane shed, and eighty years of equipment and vehicle maintenance activity. FSFREA § 504(d)(3) relieves the Secretary of any obligation to mitigate or abate lead-based paint or asbestos before conveyance - it shifts that burden to the buyer, in a location bounded by residential blocks, a city park, a public shelter, and the Bitterroot Trail. That waiver does not extend to CERCLA § 120(h) (42 U.S.C. § 9620(h)), which requires notice of hazardous substance storage and release and the associated covenant on transfer. Please produce the environmental site assessment and the § 120(h) documentation before proceeding.

6. The schedule raises a legitimate question about what is driving this. FSFREA § 503(f), as amended by § 418 of Division C of P.L. 119-74 (Jan. 23, 2026), provides that the Secretary's authority to initiate a conveyance under Title V expires September 30, 2026. The notification is dated July 28, 2026. The sale itself is projected for the fourth quarter of 2028.

This sequencing invites an obvious inference: that the agency is moving to lock in "initiation" before the authority lapses, and intends to do the analysis afterward. If that is not what is happening, the agency should say so plainly. Specifically, please state (a) what act the agency contends constitutes "initiation" under § 503(f), (b) on what date it occurred or will occur, and (c) whether the agency takes the position that a notification letter constitutes initiation in the absence of completed NEPA and Section 106 review. A statutory deadline is not a substitute for a completed record, and the public should not bear the cost of a decision made on a calendar rather than on analysis.

7. Congressional notification. FSFREA § 503(e) requires that anticipated conveyances be listed in the annual budget justification, and that written notice be provided to the named committees for any conveyance not on that list. Please confirm whether 14th & Catlin appeared on the FY2026 or FY2027 list, and if not, when committee notice was given.

II. The proposal is inconsistent with the agency's mission and its own current direction

The Forest Service's stated justification - balancing the property portfolio and addressing deferred maintenance - does not survive contact with the agency's own numbers. The agency reported an infrastructure maintenance backlog of more than $8.6 billion as of FY2023. The Montana Department of Revenue values this property at roughly $5 million. Even assuming every dollar of proceeds reached a maintenance account and none was consumed by transaction, relocation, brokerage, or environmental costs, this sale would retire less than one-sixteenth of one percent of the backlog. FSFREA has been in force since 2005; over that period the agency's backlog has grown, not shrunk. Disposal has not been an effective backlog strategy at the program level, and it is a particularly poor one here, where the asset being liquidated is functioning infrastructure rather than a stranded liability.

The proposal is also out of step with the agency's operational posture:

This is a fire-support facility in the national center of gravity for wildland fire. The site houses Northern Region firefighting operations, including the Lolo Hotshots shop, dispatch, and warehouse and cache capacity. Missoula is home to the Fire Sciences Laboratory, the Aerial Fire Depot and smokejumper base, and the National Technology and Development Program. Reducing physical capacity - shops, laydown yards, covered storage, surge staging - in this city, during a period in which the agency has been directed to scale up fuels treatment and wildfire response, is difficult to reconcile with stated national priorities.

The governing plan is stale. The 2019 Missoula Area Facility Master Plan predates the 2020-2025 fire seasons, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and Inflation Reduction Act investments, the wildland firefighter pay and workforce reforms, the documented federal firefighter housing crisis, and the 2026 agency reorganization. A seven-year-old internal facility plan, developed without public comment, is not an adequate basis for a permanent, irreversible disposal of this magnitude.

The agency is reorganizing right now. The 2026 reorganization consolidating headquarters functions and restructuring regional offices is in progress and its final footprint is not settled. Liquidating regional field service capacity in the middle of a reorganization, on the strength of a pre-reorganization plan, is the definition of acting before the facts are in. If Region 1 functions are being consolidated toward Fort Missoula, the binding question is whether Fort Missoula has the capacity - and that analysis has not been shared with the public.

III. The sale will increase long-term federal cost

Proceeds are small, fungible, and non-local. FSFREA § 505(a) directs proceeds into the Sisk Act fund (16 U.S.C. § 484a), available agency-wide without further appropriation. Nothing guarantees that a dollar realized here returns to Missoula, to the Lolo, or to Region 1. Meanwhile the costs of this decision - relocation, replacement construction, and the permanent loss of owned capacity - land entirely here.

Replacement costs will exceed proceeds. The property carries nineteen structures on 12.37 acres: shops, warehouses, sheds, loading docks. At current Missoula construction costs, replicating even the covered shop and warehouse square footage on this site would cost a substantial multiple of the $5 million land value, before land acquisition. The agency is already demolishing and rebuilding at Fort Missoula. Selling this site converts a one-time relocation into a permanent structural cost.

Leasing is forever. Once out of federal ownership, any future need for shop, warehouse, cache, laydown, or staging capacity in Missoula is met by leasing, at escalating market rates, in perpetuity, with no equity accrual and with the government exposed to a landlord's terms. Missoula's industrial land market has tightened substantially; the agency will be a price-taker.

Disposal does not extinguish environmental liability. Under CERCLA § 107(a)(2), the United States remains a potentially responsible party as an owner or operator at the time of disposal of hazardous substances. Selling this property does not shed that liability. It adds a private party with an incentive to pursue the government for it. The agency should quantify that exposure before it treats sale proceeds as a net gain.

Loss of surge capacity is a real cost that will not appear on any balance sheet. In a bad fire year, the Northern Region needs staging ground, equipment marshalling, and cache throughput. That capacity has value precisely when it is scarce and unpurchasable.

IV. This property cannot be reacquired

This is the point I would most like the decision-maker to sit with.

Your own letter documents that the property comprises 78 platted lots plus two triangle tracts, assembled through 20 separate transactions between 1940 and 1945. The Forest Service could not reassemble this parcel today. It would require negotiating with dozens of separate private owners, at prices bearing no relation to the appraised value of the whole, with no condemnation authority available for this purpose, over a horizon of decades. Practically speaking, the assembly is a one-time historical event that will not recur.

The specific attributes that make the site valuable are equally non-replicable:

Contiguity and scale. Twelve-plus contiguous acres inside the city, served by municipal infrastructure, is not a category of land that Missoula is producing more of.

Rail adjacency. The site fronts the former Bitterroot Spur corridor. Rail-adjacent, industrially-configured urban land is a shrinking and finite class of property nationally, and once converted to another use it does not convert back.

Location. Central to Missoula, minutes from Reserve, Russell, and I-90, in the city that functions as the operational hub for the Northern Region's twenty-five million acres.

Entitlement. The industrial character of this site is a legacy condition surrounded by residential neighborhoods. If the Forest Service ever wished to re-establish shops, a dispatch function, and heavy warehouse operations at this location, current zoning and the surrounding neighborhood would make it impossible. The agency is not just selling land; it is surrendering an entitlement it could never obtain again.

The buildings. There is exactly one original Missoula street railway car barn. Once it is gone - or once it is in private hands without enforceable covenants - it is gone.

A decision that is reversible in principle but not in practice should be held to the standard of an irreversible one.

V. The agency has alternatives it has not evaluated

FSFREA § 504(d)(4)(C) obligates the agency to evaluate the no-conveyance alternative. Several concrete alternatives exist, and none has been disclosed:

1. Lease rather than sell. Section 8623 of the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (P.L. 115-334), as amended by § 151 of P.L. 118-234 (Jan. 4, 2025), authorizes the Secretary to lease administrative sites for terms up to 100 years, with consideration in cash or in kind. That authority runs through October 1, 2028 - two years longer than the sale authority. In-kind consideration expressly includes the construction of new facilities, including housing,

with title transferred to the Secretary, as well as the maintenance, repair, improvement, or restoration of existing facilities. Section 8623 also grants the municipality or county in which the site is located a right of first refusal - a public-interest protection that the competitive-bid sale route does not provide.

A long-term ground lease would capture the site's development value, fund facility improvements, deliver housing, retain the federal fee interest, and preserve the option to reoccupy. It answers every stated agency objective without permanent alienation. The agency should explain, in writing, why it rejected this alternative - or acknowledge that it did not consider it.

2. Federal workforce housing on federal land. The agency has publicly identified wildland firefighter and employee housing as a critical unmet need. This site is walkable to Midtown, adjacent to the Bitterroot Trail, on transit, and minutes from the Fire Sciences Lab and the Aerial Fire Depot. Twelve acres of city-served federal land is an extraordinary and unrepeatable opportunity to solve an agency problem with an agency asset. Under § 8623(e)(3)(B)(ii)(I) that housing could be built by a lessee and conveyed to the Secretary as in-kind consideration.

3. NHPA Section 111 adaptive use. As described above, § 306121 makes adaptive use of historic property a duty, not an option, and § 306121(b) allows the agency to retain and reinvest the proceeds.

4. Partial retention and reconfiguration. FSFREA § 504(a)(1) authorizes the Secretary to configure an administrative site both to maximize marketability and to achieve management objectives, and § 504(a)(2) permits severing facilities from land. Section 503(d)(3) further provides that land may not be conveyed where the Secretary determines it is needed for resource management purposes or that retention would be in the public interest. The agency is not confronted with an all-or-nothing choice. Retaining the trolley barn block and the core warehouse and shop capacity while conveying the balance is squarely authorized and would preserve the irreplaceable while realizing value from the rest.

5. Partnership with the City of Missoula. City officials and the Missoula Economic Partnership have publicly asked the Forest Service to reconsider a straight competitive-bid disposal in favor of a partnership structure aligned with the Midtown Master Plan, and have stated that the agency's approach would delay housing delivery rather than accelerate it. FSFREA § 504(a)(3) authorizes terms, conditions, and reservations necessary to protect the public interest, and § 504(e)(2) requires the Secretary to reject any offer not in the public interest. A competitive bid that maximizes short-term proceeds while producing an outcome the community has expressly asked the agency not to pursue is not obviously in the public interest, and the agency should say why it believes otherwise.

VI. Requests

I ask that the Forest Service:

Do not initiate a conveyance under FSFREA § 503(f) before completing the NEPA analysis required by § 504(d)(4), including the market analysis and a fully developed no-conveyance alternative, and before completing Section 106 consultation under 36 C.F.R. Part 800.

Publish a written determination under § 503(d)(3) addressing whether retention of this property, in whole or in part, is in the public interest, with the supporting analysis.

Complete and disclose an NHPA Section 111 adaptive-use alternatives analysis, in consultation with the ACHP, before any disposal decision.

Initiate and disclose Section 106 consultation with the Montana SHPO, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes and other interested Tribes, and the public, including a formal eligibility determination for the Engineering Shop / streetcar barn and the other pre-1946 structures on site.

Evaluate and publish a comparison of the § 8623 long-term lease alternative against outright sale, including net present value over a 50-year horizon, with explicit accounting for relocation cost, replacement construction cost,

future lease cost to the government, retained CERCLA exposure, and forgone option value.
Produce the environmental site assessment and CERCLA § 120(h) documentation, and commit to abating known lead-based paint and asbestos hazards notwithstanding the § 504(d)(3) waiver, given the residential, park, shelter, and trail uses immediately adjacent.
Open a formal public comment period of not less than 45 days, with a published comment address, a defined decision document, and an identified administrative review pathway.
Document the § 504(f) consultation with the City of Missoula and Missoula County, including how the agency responded to the City's request for a partnership approach.
At minimum, retain and reconfigure rather than convey in whole: retain the streetcar barn and the core shop and warehouse capacity, and reserve a permanent trail easement and setback along the Bitterroot Trail corridor as a condition under § 504(a)(3).

The Forest Service has been in Missoula for well over a century, and it accumulated this property when land here was cheap and the agency was building for the long term. The people who assembled these 78 lots were doing something for their successors. Selling it in eight weeks under an expiring authority, on the strength of a 2019 plan, in the middle of a reorganization, without a NEPA document or a Section 106 record, does not honor that. It forecloses options the agency will want back and cannot buy.

Please confirm receipt of this comment and add me to the interested party list for all future notices regarding this property.