September 18, 2019

The Honorable Senators Steve Daines and Jon Tester, and Congressman Greg Gianforte

SUBJECT: National Association of Forest Service Retirees report: Increasing Workforce Capacity

I am writing you today on behalf of the Custer Gallatin Working Group (CGWG) to ask that you work with your colleagues to increase funding for the Forest Service so that the Agency can address its workplace capacity needs. This is the only way the Forest Service will be able to meet the demands placed upon it, including increasing the pace and scale of forest restoration.

The National Association of Forest Service Retirees (NAFSR) recently released a report detailing Forest Service workforce capacity needs. The report is titled Sustaining the Forest Service, Increasing Workforce Capacity. [https://www.nafsr.org/advocacy/2019/072619%20Workforce%20Capacity%20Study.pdf]

In writing this report NAFSR interviewed agency employees across the country. The key finding: the Forest Service is struggling to meet its management responsibilities because it simply does not have the staff, especially resource specialists like foresters and biologists, required to do the work that needs to be done.

NAFSR has presented their findings to the very highest ranks of the Forest Service, Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue, and the President. As a collaborative that works closely with the Custer Gallatin National Forest, the CGWG has a front-row seat to how the Forest Service operates. We’ve had many discussions with Custer Gallatin staff about how a lack of capacity hobbles the agency and prevents them from achieving their management goals. For example, the Custer Gallatin National Forest only has the capacity to take on one vegetation management project per year, despite the pressing need to address insect and disease outbreaks and hazardous fuels across the 3.2 million-acre forest. This is not unique to the Custer Gallatin.

The members of the CGWG reviewed and unanimously accepted the NAFSR report at our September 11, 2019 meeting. We strongly support the conclusions of this report. We believe that if the Forest Service is to successfully fulfill their mission to increase the pace and scale of restoration on National Forest lands, and address the multitude of other needs that fall under multiple use management, it is essential that Congress appropriate more funds to the Agency.

The CGWG was originated and organized by the Carbon, Stillwater, Sweet Grass, Park, Gallatin, Big Horn, Powder River, Rosebud and Madison County Commissioners in southern Montana, whose charge and over-riding priority is...
the public safety, health and general welfare within their counties. Each of these counties provides access to the Custer Gallatin National Forest and other public lands within their boundaries. The CGWG represents a wide range of stakeholder interests in the management of the Custer Gallatin National Forest. The twenty-four designated seats on the collaborative include County Commissioners, representatives from multiple use and conservation organizations, the ski industry, agriculture and ranching, quiet and motorized recreation, hunting and angling, outfitters, mining, economic development, and the timber industry.

We ask that you take the time to review this report and consider its recommendations. Furthermore, we ask that you work with your colleagues on the Hill to increase Interior Appropriations, specifically for the Forest Service so that they may reach their forest restoration goals and provide the services the public asks of them. The current lack of workforce capacity within the Forest Service has led to a decrease in the quality and quantity of recreation facilities, a significant backlog in special use permitting, and significant delays in everything from special user permitting to environmental analysis and decision making.

National Forest lands support our Montana way of life in many ways – from lifestyles to livelihoods. These lands are the backbone of Montana’s economy, including timber, mining, grazing, and outdoor recreation. We need to invest in the Forest Service so these lands are properly cared for today and into the future.

Sincerely,

John E. Prinkki, Chair
Custer Gallatin Working Group