

## Concerns aired over logging project near city water supply

Conservationists say work will disrupt wildlife habitat



8 HOURS AGO • BY EVE BYRON INDEPENDENT RECORD

Two people who formally objected in October to the plan to log along the city of Helena's Red Mountain Flume explained their concerns to U.S. Forest Service hearing officials on Wednesday and outlined possible ways to alleviate them — which basically involved either scrapping the project or doing a full-blown Environmental Impact Statement and developing additional alternatives.

Steve Kelly with the Montana Ecosystems Defense Council and Sara Johnson with the Native Ecosystems Council say the project is unnecessary and amounts to clearcutting a portion of the Upper Ten Mile Watershed west of Helena, which is where the flume is located on Forest Service property. They fear the project will disrupt wildlife habitat and travel corridors, and say that when it's looked at in conjunction with previous logging in the nearby Clancy/Unionville area, and future logging anticipated in the Upper Ten Mile Watershed,

that the cumulative effects will be overwhelming.

They also noted Wednesday that to do the project, the Forest Service has to change its elk hiding cover standard, which it already doesn't meet in the watershed. Kelly added that the heavy equipment that will be used and the short road that would be constructed will negatively impact water quality in Ten Mile Creek.

He and Johnson believe that the dead and dying trees in the watershed — many having fallen victim to the mountain pine beetle epidemic — are a natural part of forest succession.

"I disagree with the purpose and need," Kelly said. "I just don't think you have a problem up there. I haven't seen any evidence of a situation that's outside the range of normal forest succession."

They also objected to two alternatives that were proposed — either to log about 490 acres on either side of the flume or to not do anything. Kelly proposed a compromise.

"If you commit to doing a draft EIS (Environmental Impact Statement) then I will submit an alternative for you to consider," he said.

Johnson added that their two alternatives didn't look at the larger landscape scale, as well as potential impacts to endangered species such as lynx and grizzly bears.

"You need to actually develop alternatives that meet current standards in the Forest plan, and analyze the cumulative affects across those resources, especially water quality, hiding cover and be focused on wildlife and recreation," Johnson said. "What you're proposing violates the Endangered Species Act and if you're doing that you're required to do an Environmental Impact Statement to fully address the impacts ...

"I don't believe there's any problem with the way the forest is now. My remedy is the no action alternative."

### City officials respond

Helena city officials couldn't disagree more with that statement. The flume, which is merely a dirt ditch in some places and a metal half-pipe elevated on wooden trestles elsewhere, is a conduit for about 80 percent of the water used by city residents. Water in the flume flows into Chessman Reservoir and eventually to the Ten Mile Water Treatment Plant.

But it's not just a burned flume that worries them. They fear that the dead and dying trees, as well as a forest that has had fire actively suppressed for decades, is ripe for a catastrophic wildfire. That could lead to heavy sedimentation — ash and soil no longer held back by plants — clogging the ditch and filling Chessman Reservoir, rendering the system unusable. While the city can draw water out of the Missouri River, it would have to be pumped up-gradient to Helena and isn't considered a feasible long-term option at this point.

"I can't overstate or over-emphasize the importance of the Ten Mile watershed," said City Manager Ron Alles, adding that the health of the ecosystem and wildlife is just as important to the public at large as it is to the environmental groups.

"It's time to move forward. I think we are talking about a small piece of the overall project and yet that small piece does a lot to protect the infrastructure. Fire will happen, and eventually we want fire to happen there. But not now. We can't control the impacts of what that fire would be. The watershed would be destroyed as would what they're trying to protect."

He noted that the work on 490 acres is only a small portion of the 28,000-acre watershed. Once additional work is proposed for the rest of the watershed, an EIS is anticipated.

Johnson and Kelly want that EIS done now, however, as part of a look at the cumulative impacts on the landscape.

Randall Camp, Helena's new public works director, knows first-hand the impacts of a wildfire in a city's watershed. He came here from New Mexico, and told how numerous wildfires have wiped out a few municipal water supplies. One community is drilling wells to try to replace surface water with groundwater.

"On June 9, I got to live the nightmare that this group is trying to protect," Camp said, recalling the 2012 Little Bear Fire in Ruidoso, N.M., which burned 44,300 acres and 254 homes. "We lost three critical watersheds for municipalities. We lost the wildlife during the high-severity burn ... and the aquatic life. The water quality was so bad the trout died and the crawfish crawled away to get away from the water. Every time it rained we lost top soil and the sterilized soils didn't allow for regrowth."

"All it takes is one lightning strike, one tourist in your overgrown timber and we will lose the main water supply for the city of Helena."

After hearing the various concerns, Jane Cottrell, the U.S. Forest Service's deputy regional officer in Missoula said she's still waiting to hear from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service about their ideas on the proposed project and will issue a letter by Nov. 22 on what she believes needs to be considered. Bill Avey, who also was at Wednesday's meeting and is sharing supervisor duties on the Helena Forest with Kevin Riordan, will make the final decision on how to proceed.

"We have quite a bit of compelling information to determine what direction I will give to Bill on this project," Cottrell said.