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Eye on the Environment: Community Forestry Supports A Viable Local Mill

by ANNE DAHL for the Seeley-Swan
Pathfinder

Neil Meyer, who remembers when activists stalled his logging operation about 20 years ago near the Meadow-Bunyan trailhead, would agree we have come a long way since loggers wore black armbands and tree-sitters shut down local timber sales. In the Swan Valley and in many places around the West, a growing movement loosely referred to as “community forestry” has emerged to replace much of the dissonance of the 1980s. But we face new challenges.

Seeley Lake’s Pyramid Mountain Lumber is nimble on its feet, while other mills in the West are no longer on the dance floor. Many mills in the West have already closed, leaving their nearby communities with few places to market the products of forest thinning and other stewardship work. Towns in Idaho, Colorado and Arizona are transporting their logs hundreds of miles across state lines to reach the remaining viable mills in their regions.

Pyramid is helping to sustain a local infrastructure that is critical for reducing forest fuels around our homes, while adapting to a changing economy. The timber mill owes its resiliency in part to the partners it has carefully courted. The recent *Missoulian* article about Pyramid’s adaptability emphasized the company’s relationship with the Missoula Area Economic Development Corp., which has been a key partner in helping the mill provide jobs for local residents and an outlet for our forest products.

Beyond its partnership with MAEDC, Pyramid is community-focused, keeping its eyes

on the bigger picture, while watching the bottom line. The company’s leaders are astute partnership-builders, going well beyond typical industry alliances to resolve issues affecting timber economics. They bypass polarization and engage former foes.

Pyramid’s Gordy Sanders, “...is a good ambassador,” according to Tim Love, Seeley Lake District Ranger. Missoula’s Sierra Club is a recent cooperator, along with the Montana Wilderness Association, which has been collaborating with Pyramid for several years to protect both wilderness and timberlands. Thanks to Gordy’s legwork, Pyramid’s strange bedfellows have come to recognize the company’s role in maintaining a sustainable economy and a healthy environment. This kind of collaboration has led to a new dynamic.

The latest choreography is finding its own direction in rural communities all over the country. You can *Google* “community forestry” and find a full cast of sites dedicated to the topic and espousing the common principles of partnership-building, meaningful citizen involvement, and the conservation of timberlands and wildlife habitat. But what I find most fascinating is that each community has written its own score.

In the Swan Valley, community forestry plays out when residents get involved during the early stages of a timber sale design, taking field trips and making informed comments to the Forest Service or Montana DNRC about the strengths and weaknesses of their proposed projects. Its ramifications are felt when agency foresters listen to experienced local citizens and respond by modifying their plans—when it makes sense for the environment and the economy.

As an example of community involvement in timber sale design, you can view the recent Flathead National Forest fuels reduction project when you drive past the U.S. Forest Service Condon Work Center, where Swan Valley residents and Forest Service specialists collaborated last year. They collectively weighed the costs and benefits of forest thinning and ultimately agreed on ways to provide wildlife security while also reducing the threat of wildfire. (*See Tom Parker’s Feb. 7 column.*) Pyramid Lumber was the successful

bidder on this as well as other national forest projects in the Swan Valley.

The Elk Creek Conservation Area recently purchased from Plum Creek Timber Co. by Swan Ecosystem Center and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes is a community forestry project. Caring for this square-mile of young trees and vital fish and wildlife habitat along Elk Creek and the Swan River will involve students and citizens in forest and stream restoration for decades to come. People will have a place to learn hands-on about the practice of forest stewardship in a community setting.

In keeping with community forestry's partnership goal, Swan Ecosystem Center and the Tribes recently selected four volunteer managers to oversee activity of the Conservation Area. Foresters Mark Vander Meer (Condon and Missoula) and Roger Marshall (Seeley Lake) are representing the Swan Valley. They are joined by the Tribes' representatives, botanist Rusty Sydnor (Ronan) and hydrologist Barry Hansen (Polson). These four team members have selected a fifth person, Joel Tohtz, a biologist with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks. Community members can now be involved. If people have ideas about how the Elk Creek Conservation Area should be managed, they can make recommendations to the Team, who will analyze their suggestions in keeping with the management plan and, if appropriate, implement their ideas.

Community forestry has arisen in part as a response to the recent drought and related spate of forest fires region-wide. Property owners wishing to protect their forests—and make their home sites safer for the firefighters who may someday be defending them—are engaging in a form of community forestry. They are taking advantage of educational opportunities and financial resources to create Firewise plans that can provide a measure of safety, while also maintaining their forests' natural benefits.

Since 2002, State Service Forester Allen Branine and Swan Ecosystem Center's Kathy Koors have helped over 35 Swan Valley landowners, many of whom have received small grants, to reduce fuels around their homes. These landowners in turn have worked with

several local contractors who have sold their logs to Pyramid or to other nearby mills.

The upswing in conservation easements is another sign of community forestry taking shape in the Swan Valley. Property owners may have several different reasons for permanently giving up their rights to subdivide their property. But protecting timber resources and wildlife habitat is the goal of many.

Collaborative work to protect the Plum Creek land that has been coming up for sale is another community forestry effort. You can visit the SwanValleyConservation.org website for updates on how this partnership work is unfolding.

Nearby we find more examples of a community forestry network supporting the area's economy and ensuring the protection of our forest ecosystems. Members of the Blackfoot Challenge are working to protect a 6,000-acre community conservation area. At Seeley Lake's Clearwater Resources Council, people have collaborated on an ecological assessment with the goal of protecting timberlands and wildlife habitat in the face of development pressures.

Many groups and individuals are taking their places in the community forestry dance, but central to it all is a viable local timber mill.