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Collaboration Spurs Restoration Projects

By Anne Dahl

On behalf of the Southwestern Crown Collaborative

Spurred by collaboration, a flurry of restoration projects is underway this year on the Flathead National Forest in the Swan Valley, with more on the way.

Contractors and Forest Service crews are removing old bridge abutments, treating weeds, re-piling old slash piles in preparation for burning, restoring wetlands, repairing trails, assessing fire history in the Mission Mountains Wilderness, and preventing aquatic invasive species.

Additionally, the Flathead National Forest will soon open bids to replace the bridge over the Swan River at Piper Creek Road, which is at the end of its useable life.

The Swan Lake Ranger District is one of three Forest Service districts within the 1.5 million acre Southwestern Crown of the Continent landscape that also includes the Seeley Lake Ranger District of the Lolo National Forest and the Lincoln District of the Helena National Forest. Funding for the restoration projects has come through the federal Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP).

The Southwest Crown Collaborative—an eclectic group of citizens, nonprofits, and industry representatives—worked with the U.S. Forest Service in 2010 to develop a restoration proposal for the Swan, Clearwater and Blackfoot watersheds.

The proposal was selected for 10 years of funding in a national forest competition. The CFLRP allocation for the first two years is about \$4.5 million. The funding enables the three national forests to increase their restoration budgets.



*Bridge abutment removal at Cold Creek.
Courtesy Photo.*

In the Swan Valley, a 15-acre wetland restoration project north of Condon Loop Road engaged Columbia Falls contractor Mark Evert in late August. A monoculture of nonnative reed canary grass, of little value to wildlife, had taken over the former wetland, which was drained in the early 1900s to create a hayfield. Forest Service hydrologist Liz Rohde said re-flooding the wetland will recharge the groundwater and restore native vegetation beneficial to wildlife.

Evert also removed two bridge abutments that were no longer supporting bridges. The abutments on Cold and Kraft creeks were constraining the streams, which eventually would have caused the fill behind the abutments to wash out, adding sediment to the streams. Cold Creek is a native bull trout stream, while Kraft Creek provides habitat for

native cutthroat trout. "I've been waiting for years to find the funding for these projects," Rohde said. "The CFLRP dollars have made it possible."



Alan and Nathan Richardson, Euchre Mountain Logging are Swan Valley contractors for the Lion's Paw mountain pine beetle stewardship project. Courtesy Photo.

In 2011, two contractors, Brad Sturdevant, Philipsburg, and Bill Somers, Columbia Falls, treated noxious weeds on most of the open roads and many of the most heavily used gated roads included in a Forest Service weed management plan. Pre-treatment monitoring plots were established at six sites to measure the effectiveness of the herbicide treatments in the future.

To enable further weed spraying, in summer 2011 a botany crew conducted an extensive sensitive-plants survey on former Plum Creek Timber Co. lands in the Swan Valley. These lands were recently included in the Flathead National Forest as part of the Montana Legacy Project. In 2012, Luke Wright, Roberts, Mont., will spray difficult-to-reach weed infested areas by horseback, while Bill Somers will spray easily accessible roads from his pickup and ATV.

Aquatic invasive species are another focus of CFLRP funding, supporting boat inspections at Holland and Lindbergh lakes by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks employee Ky Zimmerman. He

watches out for zebra mussels and other invasive species, and he educates people on how to prevent more invasions.

Kalispell contractor Steve Barrett recently returned from Graywolf Lake in the Mission Mountains where he was investigating fire-scarred white-bark pine for a fire regimes analysis that will compare fire history with current fire conditions.

Barrett's 2011-12 site-specific survey of high elevation sites will provide "ground-truthing" to enhance satellite mapping. John Ingebretson, Swan Lake Ranger District assistant fire management officer, said: "The site-by-site data is essential for accurate development of a federally required Mission Mountains Wilderness fire management plan."



Dan and Pam Hamilton, Hamilton Enterprises, Swan Valley contractors, hauling Euchre Mountain Logging equipment. Courtesy Photo.

On the popular Holland-Gordon Trail, which provides access into the Bob Marshall Wilderness, Forest Service crews are restoring trail tread, repairing retaining walls and installing water bars, utilizing CFLRP funding. Crews are also reconstructing the three trails leading to Crystal Lake in the Mission Mountains Wilderness. Next year they will repair the tread on all nine miles of the Lion Creek Trail in the Swan Range. Matching dollars

for this project come from the Missoula County Resource Advisory Council (RAC).

To qualify for CFLRP dollars, the Forest Service must match the funding with an equal amount of project work expenditures. As an example, Swan Valley Contractors Alan and Nathan Richardson, Euchre Mountain Logging, have begun work on the Lion's Paw mountain pine beetle stewardship sale near the Lion Creek trailhead. Stately ponderosa pine in the Lion's Paw area are at risk of succumbing to the pine beetle. Thinning to open the stands may help these mature trees resist the beetles. The value from this project will meet some of the matching funds requirements.

Lion's Paw is one of several forest health and fuels reduction projects planned for the SW Crown region. District Ranger Rich Kehr said: "CFLRP funding with collaborative restoration is a valuable tool enabling the Forest Service to manage the landscape in compliance with forest plan direction."

Similar restoration projects are underway on the Seeley Lake and Lincoln Districts, providing opportunities for contractors that would not be available without the additional funding. For more information and to learn how to be involved, go to www.swcrown.com--and watch for upcoming stories from the Clearwater and Blackfoot watersheds.