

A Tale of Two Subsidies

**The Bent Flat
and
Sunset Beaver Roads
on the
Flathead National Forest**

A Sad but True Story

by

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Introduction

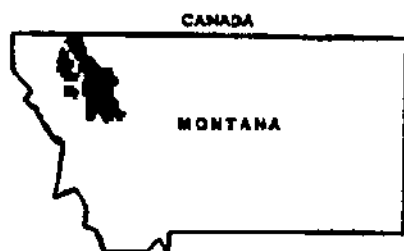
It is destructive enough when the U.S. Forest Service builds roads into critical wildlife habitat in order to cut down the forest and haul away the logs. It adds insult to injury when the logging roads are built even though timber companies refused to bid on the trees the Forest Service wished to sell!

This booklet will look at two environmentally destructive road projects on the Flathead National Forest of Northwest Montana. In the cases of Bent Flat and Sunset Beaver, the Forest Service did not receive a single bid on either timber sale in the 1980's, but went ahead and spent \$840,000 of "hard money" (your tax dollars appropriated by Congress) to build 27 miles of new road and reconstruct 14 miles of existing road in the timber sale areas. Now the Forest Service acknowledges that the timber sale environmental documents on which the road construction was based are insufficient for the timber sales to proceed!

This scenario is common. When timber buyers balk at paying the price for federal timber and road construction, the Forest Service simply uses your "hard money" tax dollars to build the roads for them. It provides this subsidy in an attempt to lure the timber industry into remote and steep roadless lands where the costs of building the roads and conducting the timber sale often exceed the market value of the trees. This is an environmentally destructive and economically foolish practice which you can help stop!

The Flathead National Forest

The Flathead National Forest is located in Northwest Montana, adjacent to Glacier National Park and Canada. It includes portions of the Bob Marshall, Great Bear, and Mission Mountains wilderness areas and provides habitat for a wide array of wildlife species, including four threatened and endangered species.



Flathead National Forest

The Flathead is key to management of the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem. It contains some 2 million acres of habitat currently occupied by the threatened grizzly bear and a similar acreage zoned for current and future occupation by the endangered gray wolf as natural reintroduction from Canada occurs. The Flathead's 2 million acres of habitat is more than twice that provided by Glacier National Park, and more than the sum of that provided by the other four National Forests involved in management of the 5.5 million acre ecosystem.

Bent Flat

The Bent Flat timber sale area is located in a roadless area adjacent to the Great Bear Wilderness. According to the Forest Service, the area contains habitat "essential" to the survival and recovery of the threatened grizzly bear and the endangered gray wolf, and functions as an elk migration corridor.

Various Bent Flat timber sale "packages" failed to receive a single bid on three occasions in 1982, 1984, and 1986. But a lack of bidders on this timber, located far, far away from the nearest sawmill, did not discourage the Forest Service! In 1987, a \$419,000 "hard money" contract was awarded and in 1989 the construction of 11 miles of new road and reconstruction of 13 miles of existing road was completed.

In contrast, the 1986 proposal and its Environmental Assessment proposed the cutting of 6.2 million board feet (MMBF) of timber, the construction of only 7 miles of new road, and the reconstruction of 12 miles of existing road. Finally, the Forest Service has decided an Environmental Impact Statement is needed and is preparing one for a new Bent Flat proposal which would cut only 3.6 MMBF of timber, but construct *yet another* 4.3 miles of new road, and reconstruct another mile of existing road.

Since 1986, the amount of timber proposed for cutting has been nearly halved while the amount of new road constructed and planned has more than doubled! The new roads constructed under

the 1987-1989 contract were concentrated in remnants of ancient forest adjacent to the Great Bear Wilderness in what was then a roadless area. These ancient forests remain targeted for cutting and adjacent roadless areas remain targeted for road building.

Sunset Beaver

The Sunset Beaver timber sale area is located on the Swan-Clearwater divide, adjacent to the Mission Mountains Wilderness. According to the Forest Service, the area contains habitat "essential" to the survival and recovery of the threatened grizzly bear and endangered gray wolf, and important to whitetail deer as summer range.

Specifically, the Swan-Clearwater divide area is to be managed under the Flathead Forest Plan "as an area that provides a secure grizzly bear travel route between the Mission and Swan Mountain Ranges." State and federal wildlife biologists have documented that the grizzly bear population in the Mission Mountains is declining. They speculate that this is occurring as the Mission Mountains become isolated from the Bob Marshall Wilderness and other core areas of the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem due to fragmentation of grizzly bear habitat. (Dood *et al* 1986).

The Sunset Beaver timber sale failed to receive a single bid when offered in 1984. As with Bent Flat, the Forest Service was not discouraged and awarded a "hard money" road contract for \$421,000 in 1985. The construction of 16 miles of new road and

the reconstruction of one mile of existing road was completed in 1986, essentially trashing this critical grizzly bear travel corridor.

But, the story doesn't end here. In 1987, it was discovered that one of the Sunset Beaver roads had been built into the Mission Mountains Wilderness! The Forest Service had to "reclaim" this portion of road, returning it to a natural condition.

Recently, the Forest Service wrote "the Environmental Assessment completed for the Sunset Beaver Timber Sale is now considered insufficient...and will not be implemented. The Swan Lake Ranger District has no plans to harvest timber in the Sunset Beaver area within the next two years."

Effects of Roads on Biodiversity

Roads pose one of the greatest threats to wildlife and other aspects of biodiversity. For numerous smaller species, roads are a formidable barrier to movement, and to others a raw gash inviting the infection of the forest interior by predators and brood parasites such as the Brown-headed Cowbird. (Noss 1991).

Roads also accelerate the spread of noxious weeds such as Spotted Knapweed, which not only competes with native vegetation for soil and water, but produces a toxin which *eliminates* the native competition! The spread of noxious weeds causes problems not only for native plant species, but for wildlife dependent on native forage.

Studies have shown that elk, black bear, and grizzly bear avoid areas near open roads, and in some cases, closed roads. An average of only one mile of open road per square mile of habitat can cause the effective use of roaded habitats by these species to drop 40-50%! (Aune *et al* 1986, Brody 1986, Lyon 1984, Mattson 1986, USFS 1990).

Roads also contribute to the ease and amount of both legal hunting and poaching. This can cause a decrease in antlered bull elk and shortened big game hunting seasons. For threatened and endangered species like the grizzly bear and wolf, roads can spell disaster. (Holland 1985).

Over a ten-year monitoring period, for example, five out of six illegal grizzly bear deaths in the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem occurred in roaded areas when the bears left the relatively secure roadless portions of their home range. Studies also show that wolves fail to survive in areas where the open road density exceeds one mile per square mile. (Dood *et al* 1986, Thiel 1985).

Sediment from open *and* closed roads damages water quality and fish. According to Forest Plans in Northwest Montana, for instance, 80-90% of the sediment produced by logging and road construction is attributable to the road. The Flathead estimates that on one of its most pervasive and sensitive land types, one mile of road produces 98 tons of sediment, 80% of which reaches the stream bed. Meanwhile, the Forest Service estimates that a 10% increase in fine sediment deposition in spawning gravel decreases the spawning success of bull trout by 50%. (USFS undated, 1985, and 1986).

In terms of maintaining biological diversity, roads can best and fairly be described as alien arteries by which poisons are pumped into the native forest ecosystem.

Conclusion

In the cases of Bent Flat and Sunset Beaver, the Forest Service has spent \$840,000 to build environmentally destructive roads into critical wildlife habitats and roadless lands adjacent to wilderness areas. It has done so with only the preparation of Environmental Assessments the agency now acknowledges are inadequate. And, as a simple matter of business, it has failed to realize the return of a single dollar to the taxpayer or the delivery of a single log to area sawmills.

This booklet is not written to imply that degrading critical wildlife habitats with roads is acceptable as long as trees get cut and stumpage payments are made to the federal government. This booklet is written to present examples of an agency out of control.

Congress and the Forest Service are appropriating funds and awarding road building contracts before adequate environmental reviews have been completed. The purpose of these environmental reviews is to help the public and the Forest Service determine whether the projects should be allowed to proceed in light of the great expense to the environment and the American taxpayer.

During fiscal years 1986-1989, the Flathead National Forest built 106 miles of new road and reconstructed 168 miles of

existing road, at a cost of \$4.3 million! Over half of this cost was not covered by timber sale receipts. It was covered instead by your tax dollars, appropriated by Congress. This amounts to a \$2.3 million, 4-year subsidy to timber purchasers on the Flathead National Forest alone!

On the Flathead, so many roads already exist that any new roads built must be closed to the public in order to meet Forest Plan standards for the protection of wildlife and other resources. Because of this overabundance of roads, new roads are virtually without exception to be single-purpose log hauling roads with no benefits to the general public in terms of recreation and other uses.

Nationwide, the Forest Service has already built some 358,000 miles of logging roads - over eight times the length of the entire Interstate Highway System! In 1985, the Forest Service estimated it would build yet *another* 580,000 miles of road on the National Forests over the next 50 years! For 1991, Congress appropriated nearly \$200 million for the Forest Service road-building budget, in spite of valiant attempts by Senator Wyche Fowler (D-GA) to reduce it by \$100 million.

There is certainly no shortage of roads to drive for sight-seeing on the National Forests. What is becoming increasingly in short supply are secure, unroaded lands essential to the continued health of forest ecosystems and our enjoyment of them. You can help put an end to this destructive road building binge by letting Congress know you are not willing to pay for it!

What You Can Do

Write to: 1) your Congresspersons, 2) to Senator Robert Byrd (Chairman of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior and Related Agencies), and 3) Representative Sidney Yates (Chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on the Interior). Also send a copy of your letter to Senator Wyche Fowler, who has consistently led the fight to reduce the Forest Service road-building budget.

Insist that Congress either eliminate the Forest Service road building budget or require that the Forest Service submit an adequate and final Environmental Impact Statement to Congress for each road construction project it wants Congress to fund. You may wish to suggest that, if loss of roadbuilding and logging jobs is at issue, Congress instead appropriate like sums of money to hire workers and bulldozers to rip out and reclaim environmentally damaging roads such as Bent Flat and Sunset Beaver.

Write to:

Senator _____
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Representative _____
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Give this booklet or a photocopy to your friends and co-workers. Encourage them to write as well!

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