

Group crafts vision for North Fork area

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After meeting regularly for 13 months, a group of people representing a highly diverse range of interests recently signed off on recommendations to the Flathead National Forest for long-term management in the North Fork Flathead drainage.

Considering there were 30 signatories going along with a requirement for complete consensus or no recommendations at all, the accomplishment of the Whitefish Range Partnership is remarkable, particularly at a time when divisiveness dominates the national political stage.

“Polarization is real easy,” said former state legislator and Secretary of State Bob Brown, who chaired the partnership. “It’s easy for politicians and political leaders to play to their own loyalists and it’s hard to compromise, but when you’re sitting across the table from someone who is your fellow community member, you see how much you have in common.”

And that’s exactly what the privately organized partnership did, meeting roughly twice a month at venues where home cooking and beer were on tap. The idea was to work through differences on wildland fire management, weed management, wildlife, timber management, backcountry trails, mountain biking and trail use, fisheries management, snowmobiling and recommended wilderness.

Initially, there were plenty of differences, as there have been for years. But the North Fork is a bit different from other places.

Michael Jamison, who served as a group coordinator and representative of the National Parks Conservation Association, recalls going to a North Fork community meeting at Sonderson Hall about 15 years ago. At that meeting, he recalls, Larry Wilson and John Frederick were having some serious disagreements over land-use planning for private property.

Jamison describes Frederick, president of the North Fork Preservation Association, as a “back-to-the-land liberal,” and longtime North Fork resident Wilson as a “salt-of-the-earth conservative.”

“It was getting rather heated, and I was kind of shocked how much conflict there was, especially between those two,” Jamison said. “I said something about how they might not want to sit right next to each other. John looked at me like I was crazy, and he said, well [Wilson] is my ride home.”

Even though the two have sharp political differences, they both have chosen to live in the North Fork — a place where people don’t end up by accident — and they both care deeply about the North Fork.

Those characteristics were a common denominator among participants in the Whitefish Range

Partnership, which included Frederick and Wilson, of course.

“We were trying to replicate what I saw that night in Sonderson Hall,” Jamison said.

Wilson entered the process after years of opposing recommended wilderness in the North Fork.

“He became one of the staunchest advocates, oddly, for the whole package,” which includes a recommendation for just over 80,000 acres of recommended wilderness in the Thompson-Seton, Tuchuck, and Mt. Hefty areas at the north end of the Whitefish Range, Jamison said.

That recommendation closely resembles what the Flathead Forest included in a draft forest plan that had to be abandoned because of litigation in 2006. But it still represents compromise, because there have been proposals in the past for more than 200,000 acres of recommended wilderness in the North Fork, Jamison noted.

In the beginning of the partnership, there was plenty of concern about what people would have to give up, but in the end, it became apparent that participants were getting more for their personal interests by ensuring that others’ needs were being met.

“We came close to things falling apart, but we just stuck with it,” said former Glacier National Park Superintendent Chas Cartwright, who participated as a citizen member without any particular pursuit in mind.

“I was more interested in people and how they interacted working through” differences, said Cartwright, who was frustrated for years with the difficulty in getting substantive public input on issues he was involved with in the National Park Service.

“People were for or against things, as opposed to really working through some of the tough issues,” he said.

In a follow-up message to partnership members, Brown put it this way: “I suggest we accomplished this less by ‘giving up’ acreage, and more by simply allowing each other room on the map in the places where our interests did not conflict,” he wrote. “For us, this basic recognition of one another’s right to a place in the Whitefish Range has resulted in more timber base, more snowmobiling, more summer motorized, more private-land fire protection, more trails and more wilderness.”

And those were the main areas of differences, said Dave Hadden, who represented the conservation group, Headwaters Montana.

Hadden, whose main interests were wilderness and providing wildlife habitat connectivity, offered the example of snowmobiling. The current management guidance for snowmobiling comes from a forest plan amendment that was adopted more than a decade ago.

Since then, “play areas” used by snowmobilers have been shrinking due to encroaching timber.

“So there was an effort to find ways to replace snowmobiling areas that are disappearing,” he said.

The group located two new play areas on the Whitefish Range and found a way to connect them with a three-mile route. Those provisions are included in the 58-page set of recommendations that are being forwarded to the Flathead Forest, which is kicking off its multi-year forest planning process on Dec. 5 with a meeting in Kalispell.

Joe Krueger, the forest plan revision team leader, said forest officials are impressed with the work done by the Whitefish Range Partnership.

“That’s a very big group,” Krueger said, referring to a membership roster that included representatives for raft companies, timber interests, conservation groups, business owners, hunting and angling, mountain biking and much more. “Anytime you can get a group of diverse folks together and problem solve like that ... we’re going to give that a lot of weight.”

Notably, the main environmental groups that litigate over forest management were not involved. Jamison points out that they will have an opportunity to be involved in the broader forest planning process, and he quips that he is never consulted by those groups when they file lawsuits against the Forest Service.

“Now it will be easy for people who weren’t part of the process to take pot shots at it,” Krueger said. “The hard part was working through this.”

Because forest-planning rules adopted in 2012 stress the need for collaboration in developing future forest plans, the Flathead Forest is ramping up efforts to generate public involvement.

“The whole idea is to get the public engaged in this,” Krueger said.

The meeting on Thursday will be held from 4 to 8:30 p.m. at the Red Lion Hotel in Kalispell. Those interested in participating are asked to register online at <https://www.eventbrite.com/event/4730387717>.

More information on the forest planning process is available on the Flathead Forest website at: <http://www.fs.usda.gov/detailfull/flathead/home>.

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