

The Forest Products Industry Relationship with the Flathead Watershed

Holly McKenzie, Consulting Forester, Tree Farm Inspector,

President of Montana Women in Timber, & Awards Chair for Society of American Foresters

The Forest Products Industry has played a key role in shaping the way the Flathead Watershed benefits our Citizens; both from an economic and forest health standpoint. Perhaps less obvious, is the way the Industry has shaped access and recreation across the watershed. Many towns were the original sites of sawmills that brought jobs

upon fire as their primary tool of management to increase forage for their horses and to improve big-game hunting opportunities to feed themselves. They relied upon young lodgepole pine trees for tipi poles and shelters, and regular fires helped keep the forests more open so they could guard their camps against predators and enemy tribes.

Tree ring scars indicate that Native Americans burned their travel routes and huckleberry patches as frequently as every 5 to 15 years....thereby creating a pattern of disturbance that our modern forest ecosystems have evolved from. In the absence of fire, our forests have become dense and crowded with too many trees and shrubs. Such accumulations create an

unsafe fire condition in our modern times. A mosaic of age classes and tree species is the best mitigation measure for combating widespread insect outbreaks and wildfires. In addition to this commitment to excellence, timber harvesting professionals have proven their dedication to continual improvement. Educational workshops designed by the Montana Logging Association, MSU Extension Forestry, and the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation give loggers reasons, not just rules. Every year, Montana Certified Loggers attend thousands of man-hours of training! In 1994, the Accredited Logging Professionals (ALP) program was conceived by loggers to advance professionalism in timber harvesting. ALP graduates are required to attend 56 hours of training including a 3-day Forest Stewardship Workshop. Training topics include "best management practices" (BMPs), the Streamside Management Zone Law, the Endangered Species Act, forest ecology, insects and disease, business, safety, and first aid. Once accredited, an ALP logger must attend 32 hours of additional training per year to retain accreditation. The results seem to speak for themselves! While Montana's Best Management Practices

Source: Paul McKenzie, 2004



Diminished water quality at the convergence of the North Fork and Middle Fork of the Flathead River. Following the 2001 Moose Fire and the 2003 Robert Fire and Wedge Fire... several hundred thousand acres of burnt forestland contributed an abundance of ash and soil erosion to the North Fork River until adequate vegetation was reestablished.

to the area so people could settle there and build towns. Thousands of miles of logging roads were built to access trees for lumber, plywood, bark, and paper products. These same roads continue to provide access to dozens of lakes, rivers, campgrounds, Nordic ski trails, snowmobile routes, huckleberry patches, fire lookout towers, and hunting camps. Timber dollars once funded all of the road construction and recreation site development in the greater Flathead Watershed as is true for most of the United States forested regions.

Our local forests were once used intensively by Native American tribes long before white settlers arrived here. The natives relied

upon fire as their primary tool of management to increase forage for their horses and to improve big-game hunting opportunities to feed themselves. They relied upon young lodgepole pine trees for tipi poles and shelters, and regular fires helped keep the forests more open so they could guard their camps against predators and enemy tribes.

unsafe fire condition in our modern times and our forests are suffering the consequences. The forest products industry has been instrumental in addressing this situation through forest wide fuel reduction projects that thin out the crowded trees and attempt to restore a healthy balance of large trees and seedling /sap-

Source: Holly McKenzie



Log loader utilizing small diameter logs at F.H. Stoltze Land and Lumber Company

are voluntary, compliance is monitored by the DNRC. Random, statewide audits of recent logging sites are conducted every two years by teams of interdisciplinary specialists from the private and public sectors. Since the inception of BMP audits in 1990, there has been a steady improvement in results. Figures from the 2008 audits show that BMPs were properly applied on over 97% of the practices evaluated, while timber harvest practices were effective in protecting water quality in 95% of the rated categories.

Of 3.1 million acres (1.3 million hectares) in Flathead County, the U.S. Forest Service manages 56% of the landbase, Montana DNRC (State School Trust Lands) administrate 4% of the land, and Glacier National Park makes up 21% of the acres. The remaining lands are 19% private landowners, and 1% Salish Kootenai Tribal lands. Almost half of the private lands are managed to benefit the Forest Products Industry in the Flathead Valley. Plum Creek Timber Company is considered one of the primary forestland owners in the Flathead Watershed with 8% of the total acres or 256,000 acres (103,600 hectares). These lands have been managed under other names like Burlington North-

ern, Champion International, St. Regis Paper, Anaconda Company, etc. Currently, Plum Creek feeds and operates several sawmill facilities in Evergreen and Columbia Falls and has recently eliminated their dimensional lumber mills in Fortine and Pablo Montana. Montana Forest Products (MFP) is a small family owned company with approximately 8,000 acres (3237 hectares) of forestland. F.H. Stoltze Land and Lumber Company has 38,000 acres of forestland managed for a small family owned sawmill since the early 1900s.

Within the Flathead County area, there are approximately 100,000 acres (404,686 hectares) of privately owned forestland that is managed periodically to promote and maintain forest health. Most of these smaller forestland owners have 10 to 100 acre (4 to 40 hectare) parcels that are certified through the Montana Forest Stewardship Program and/or Montana Tree Farm Program. These forests offer excellent examples of sustainable forest management. The owners are periodically audited and their track record of resource protection is one that Montanans should be proud about.

The Flathead River Watershed is comprised of a greatly varied and diverse forested ecosystem. With 13 different commercial species of timber, the local sawmills are capable of producing a wide variety of products made from trees. There are local manufacturer-

ers that make dimensional lumber, log homes, plywood, MDF board, siding and trim, doors, flooring, frames and molding, bark mulch, etc. Residuals from manufacturing get shipped out to make paper, cardboard, carpeting, cosmetics, toothpaste, books, vitamins, food additives, etc. A recent study estimated that almost 15% of Flathead Valley's economy was dependent upon Plum Creek Timber Company being located here. One might assume then, that the addition of other mills, truck drivers, logging contractors, log home builders, and retail lumber sales would contribute an additional 5% to the area economy... thus making our forest products industry

responsible for one-fifth of the Flathead Watershed's economic well being. Our industry is committed to the concept of sustainable forestry, which balances the manufacture of forest products with the commitment to protect and conserve our environment. We are dependent on clean air, clean water, and healthy, resilient forests...and the health of our watershed is a function of how healthy the forest is.

Source: Holly McKenzie



Western larch is one of several seral species that thrive in full sunlight on logged or burned sites