



City of Hamilton
223 South Second Street
Hamilton, MT 59840

The Honorable Brooke Rollins
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, D.C. 20250
AgSec@usda.gov

Dear Secretary Rollins,

We write concerning federal government actions related to staffing of the Bitterroot National Forest. It appears from public reports that the U.S. Department of Agriculture is initiating a “reduction in workforce” process that may result in future staff changes at the Bitterroot National Forest. Such actions have the potential to endanger the safety and economic well-being of our community and its residents. Prior to taking any such action, we request formal consultation between the City of Hamilton, the county seat of Ravalli County, and whoever is making reduction in workforce decisions for the Bitterroot National Forest, whether that be USDA or the Forest Service.

Established in 1898, the Bitterroot National Forest is roughly 1.6 million acres in size, over 70% of which is in Ravalli County. Among other tasks, Forest employees provide critical fire prevention, preparedness and response services. Wildfire risk is high in our community and our collective ability to minimize and respond to this risk requires close relationships and coordination between our governments. This is not an imaginary concern. Wildfire is a constant in the Northern Rockies. In 2000 a massive wildfire complex burned over 350,000 acres in Ravalli County. The fires raged for over 5 weeks, destroyed homes and property, displaced hundreds and disrupted life and business for all county residents. Without the Forest Service’s organization, personnel and resources the outcome would have been much worse.

Further, public land use on the Bitterroot National Forest is a large economic driver for our community. As one example, the Bitterroot National Forest manages the Lake Como Recreation Area, which is the busiest national forest recreation area in the Forest Service Northern Region with roughly 250,000 annual visits.

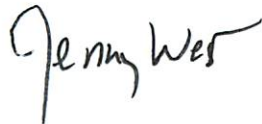
This natural jewel provides significant economic benefits to Hamilton and Ravalli County, and changes to staffing levels and Forest services that are not informed with local knowledge risk destabilizing our rural economy.

Please note that we do not object to government actions to prevent fraud and abuse and to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of government. That said, it is important that action addressing these issues occur in an informed and transparent manner. This is especially true when missteps in addressing them have the potential for safety and economic consequences for your neighbors in the Bitterroot Valley.

Additionally, the City of Hamilton is the only city in Montana that has a National Institutes of Health satellite facility. Currently, 72% of our county lands are public lands owned by the US government. Any potential reduction of US Forest Service employees and/or National Institutes of Health employees results in a disproportionate impact for our community's economy when considering the City of Hamilton population is less than 5,000 citizens and there are less than 50,000 citizens living within our county.

In closing, the Forest Service motto "Caring for the Land and Serving People" expresses values that we too share. In that spirit, and in one of cooperation and for the reasons above we invite any state or federal representative to come visit our amazing city and to speak with our constituents. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Hamilton City Council

Cc: Governor Gianforte

Montana Congressional Delegation

Bitterroot National Forest

Ravalli County Commissioners