

City of Hamilton
City Council

DATE

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.

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, we look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Hamilton City Council

Cc: Governor Gianforte
Montana Congressional Delegation
Bitterroot National Forest

City of Hamilton
City Council

DATE

Matthew Memoli, Acting Director
National Institutes of Health
9000 Rockville Pike
Bethesda, MD 20892

Jeanne Marrazzo, Director
National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases
5601 Fishers Lane, MSC 9806
Bethesda, MD 20892-9806

Dear NIH Acting Director Memoli and NIAID Director Marrazzo,

We write concerning federal government actions related to staffing of Rocky Mountain Laboratories (RML). It appears that the federal government is initiating a “reduction in workforce” process that may result in fewer staff at RML. Such actions have the serious potential to endanger the safety and economic well-being of our community and its residents. Prior to taking such action, we request formal consultation between the City of Hamilton and the official(s) making reduction in workforce decisions related to RML.

Established almost 100 years ago (1928), RML is located on a campus in downtown Hamilton. RML plays a long-proven role in [protecting America’s health and well-being](#) through research on infectious, and some contagious, diseases. Its campus includes a Level 4 lab, which allows RML scientists to handle and research the most dangerous pathogens known to humans. Any changes to employee status raise serious safety questions for Hamilton and Ravalli County. These include concerns for the safety of RML staffers, local emergency responders and, if the integrity of the research labs is compromised, the broader community.

Further, RML has been a central component of our community and our economy for a century. RML’s roughly 450 employees live in Hamilton and Ravalli County. They, and their family members live, work and volunteer in our community, and their children go to our schools. In addition to the vast human health and safety benefits to the nation that come from RML’s work on infectious diseases, RML provides substantial economic benefits – nearly \$250 million annually -- to our community and the State of Montana. *See The Economic Contributions of Rocky Mountain Laboratories, Bureau of Business and Economic Research, University of Montana School of Business (April 2023).*

Given the safety and economic interdependence of Hamilton and RML, formal consultation between us is prudent and important prior to any significant changes in staffing levels. Please note that we do not object to government action to prevent fraud and abuse and to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of government; these are goals we share for our own 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 both dangerous safety and economic consequences for your neighbors in the Bitterroot Valley.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Hamilton City Council

Cc: Governor Gianforte
Montana congressional delegation
Rocky Mountain Labs