

Missoula County Commissioners

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Sen. Steve Daines
320 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Daines,

We are writing to express our grave concern regarding the reckless decision-making of the Trump administration to freeze and cut federal funding that is impacting the livelihoods of Montana's small businesses, private contractors and working families. We are hearing frequently about the impact to conservation projects aimed at forest management and wildfire resilience as well as individuals impacted by cuts to the federal workforce. We request your assistance to quickly resume funding and restore staff positions that have been affected by federal freezes and cuts.

As you know, Montana is blessed with abundant natural resources, large landscapes and working lands that espouse the traditions and values of our rural communities. Public/private, nonpartisan collaborative work has long been a hallmark of success in conservation efforts, not only in Montana or Missoula County, but throughout the western United States. Ensuring this collaboration can continue is essential to sustaining working relationships and local economies as well as the character of our rural communities in places such as Condon, Seeley Lake and Potomac.

The Blackfoot Challenge, arguably one of the nation's greatest shining examples of collaboration for the purpose of enhancing conservation and rural lifestyles, is currently impacted by \$4.5 million in frozen federal funds, some of which would support projects over the next four to five years. Just last week their board voted to pay \$232,000 to contractors and landowners who had completed project work only to find out that the federal funding freeze denied them reimbursement previously obligated to them. These cuts impact real Montanans: Small businesses and working families with equipment expenses and payroll obligations. They do not have cash reserves to cover the cost of being hung out to dry by the federal government, with no sound explanation or guidance as to when things might change or funding might break loose. In one example we've heard, one contractor received four separate phone calls in one day regarding projects being put on hold due to the freeze.

At a broader level, the State of Montana faces the same predicament. On Feb. 21, the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation posted a stop work order on their website with the following statement:

"Due to ongoing delays in federal reimbursements, the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) Forestry and Trust Lands Division can no longer fund any United States Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management federally funded projects, grants, subawards, and contracts. All work under these agreements must stop immediately."

“DNRC does not have the financial reserves to continue payments without federal reimbursements. The length of this work stop remains uncertain and will depend on the federal review of funding; DNRC is not in control of that process.”

In Missoula County, the timber industry is already on the ropes, and there are fewer and fewer destinations for processing material from forest management projects. Recent closures of Pyramid Mountain Lumber in Seeley Lake and Roseburg Forest Products in Missoula are two poignant examples. We need more resources to support work, not fewer. Forest management aimed at landscape restoration and community wildfire resilience through private land fuel mitigation treatment and home hardening are critical. Freeze impacts and loss of funding will last beyond the short term and could create a domino effect of continued impact to our mills and processing facilities and further threats to existing and future infrastructure to keep the industry going.

The timing of these funding decisions and recent federal job cuts could not be worse. Contractors need to be in the forests doing work now, while conditions are optimal before spring thaw and breakup. Our federal agency partners, many of whom already deal with grossly austere staffing and budget levels, are being eviscerated of some of the hardest working “boots on the ground” laborers and firefighters preparing for upcoming the land management, wildfire and recreation seasons. Our communities are bearing the brunt of this detached decision-making, and we are trepidatious about unforeseen impacts that will result in the future.

As elected officials like you, we understand the need for efficiency and stewarding of government resources on behalf of taxpayers and constituents. However, the Trump administration’s wanton approach is like performing surgery with a machete rather than a scalpel. We can only anticipate the kinds of collateral harm our communities will face with an effort so lacking in precision, understanding and regard for those affected and the importance of their work in our communities.

We urge you to find immediate resolution to these funding freezes and staffing cuts to ensure our communities, economies and way of life will continue to thrive.

Sincerely,

BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

Juanita Vero, Chair

Josh Slotnick, Commissioner

David Strohmaier, Commissioner

BCC/ac