

Lincoln County, Montana RAC Report

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Introduction

This study of Lincoln County (MT) Resource Advisory Committee and County “Title III” expenditures is part of a larger study of Public Law 106-393, the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination Act. Since the early twentieth century, states and communities throughout the U.S. have received funds through the sharing of receipts from revenue producing activities on the Forest Service’s national forests and the Bureau of Land Management administered Oregon and California (O&C) lands. In 2000, following many years of declining timber harvests—the primary revenue producer on much of this land—Congress passed P.L.106-393 to restore and stabilize county revenue payments from both national forests and O&C lands. The legislation was also to replace the “safety net” county payments in the area of the Northwest Forest Plan.

The Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination Act is novel legislation for two reasons: 1) it standardizes roads and school payments for six years; and 2) perhaps most unique, it pays for something other than roads and schools (which virtually all of the previous “receipt payments” were used for) through potentially innovative mechanisms. The legislation combines the creation of employment opportunities and maintenance of existing infrastructure with the enhancement and restoration of forest ecosystems and watersheds. The legislation calls also for strengthening cooperative relationships between local people that use and care for the land and the agencies responsible for it, and it establishes mechanisms and money for these groups to do so. Direct local involvement is achieved through the establishment of Resource Advisory Committees (RACs) and local governing body involvement in project identification and recommendation. Title II establishes new roles for local stakeholders through the creation of Resource Advisory Committees that recommend projects to fund. Title III in the legislation involves county of-

officials recommending projects to fund.

The Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination Act calls for monitoring and evaluation. The unique aspects of this legislation offer important learning opportunities—but only if systematic monitoring and assessment efforts are undertaken. Whether it represents a model for the future or not, implementation of the legislation and the Title II and Title III projects needs to be assessed to determine if funded projects are innovative, achieve desired outcomes, and are genuinely successful.

With support from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Forest Service Research and the U.S. Department of Interior, Bureau of Land Management, The Sierra Institute for Community and Environment is evaluating Title II and Title III of the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination Act. The Sierra Institute is evaluating the legislation by examining Title II and III projects and their outcomes in 16 cases across the country. In addition to examining specific project outcomes, the Sierra Institute is assessing if and under what conditions stakeholder collaboration, as structured by the RAC process, leads to innovative approaches that satisfy both social and resource management objectives. The Sierra Institute is also evaluating the institutional mechanisms established to implement P.L.106-393. A fundamental research issue is understanding how effective these mechanisms are for implementing P.L.106-393, as well as how they might be improved. This assessment will provide valuable information that can enhance the effectiveness of the ongoing implementation of Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination legislation and will contribute to the discussion about its reauthorization. Results of this assessment may also be used to inform broader policy discussions concerning community-based natural resource management approaches, such as the national fire plan.

There are eight Resource Advisory Committees in the counties surrounding Montana’s national forests. In Montana, the county, rather than the forest, is the key geographic and administrative unit in the imple-

mentation of Title II of P.L.106-393. RAC boundaries in Montana nearly all include areas of more than one national forest and most national forests come under the purview of more than one RAC (Table 1).

Table 1: Montana RACs and the national forests and Counties in which they operate

RAC name	National Forest(s)	County or counties
Flathead	Flathead; Kootenai; Lolo	Flathead
Lewis & Clark	[New - not listed on the Forest Service ‘Payments to Counties’ web site]	Lewis and Clark
Lincoln	Kootenai	Lincoln
Madison-Beaverhead	Beaverhead-Deerlodge; Gallatin	Madison; Beaverhead
Mineral	Lolo	Mineral
Ravalli	Bitterroot; Lolo	Ravalli
Sanders	Idaho-Panhandle; Kootenai; Lolo	Sanders
Tri-County	Beaverhead-Deerlodge; Flathead; Helena (x2); Lolo	Granite; Powell; Deer Lodge

In order to focus this case study on the impacts of secure payments at the county level, we selected Lincoln County and the Lincoln County RAC from the two single-forest, single-county RACs in Montana (the other being the Mineral County RAC). Both counties have allocated funds to Title II and Title III, but Lincoln County is receiving annual payments under P.L.106-393 amounting to some 10 times the total received by Mineral County (in 2005 Lincoln County received a total of \$775,376 in Title

II and Title III payments. Mineral County received \$74,039). The higher level of funding available to Lincoln County allows the county and the RAC to fund a wider range of projects whose cumulative impact might be expected to be more significant than in Mineral County. The case study pays particular attention, therefore, to the choices elected officials and the RAC have made in the use of funding, and their impact on the long-term well-being and the future of communities in the county.

Background Context

Lincoln County is located in the northwestern corner of Montana and covers a surface area of 3,613 sq. mi., making it larger than the State of Rhode Island.¹ The county population totaled 18,835 in 2003. Timber and mining have long been the mainstay of the economy. Because of

the sensitivity of timber and mining to national and international cycles, concerns have been expressed in the local press as early as the 1930s about the need for economic diversification to reduce dependence on the two sectors. By the mid 1990s, silver mining had ended in the county, while

¹ Data from the US Census Bureau 2005. (<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/30/30053.html>)

the vermiculite mine owned by the W.R. Grace Corporation had been identified as a source of serious asbestos contamination affecting the health of large numbers of residents. In 2004, the Revett silver mine started operations again in Troy, and one copper mine has been proposed although it had not yet been approved by May 2005.

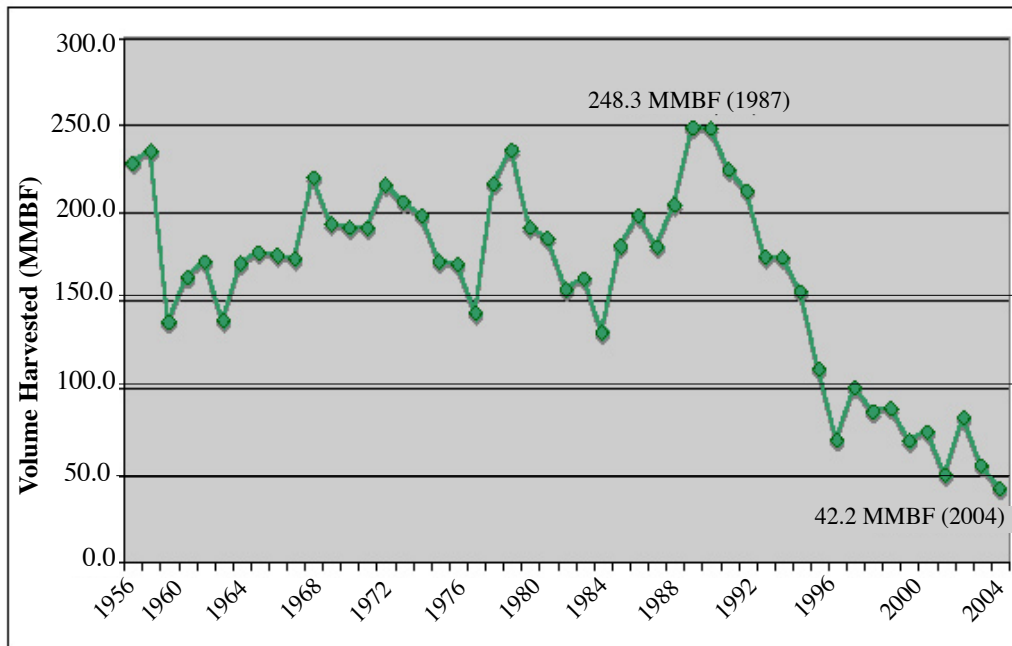
A total of 76% of the land in the county is in the Kootenai National Forest, with a further 14% of the land owned by the Plum Creek Timber Company and Stimson timber. The boundaries of the RAC include four out of five ranger districts on the forest—Rexford, Fortine, 3 Rivers, and Libby. Within those boundaries, the main communities in Lincoln County are: Libby, Eureka, and Troy. The forest supervisor's office and the Libby Ranger District office are located in the county seat of Libby. The offices of the Rexford and Three Rivers Ranger Districts are located in the county's two other main towns of Eureka and Troy, respectively. The community of Fortine gives its name to the ranger district that surrounds it.

The pattern of land ownership defines both the opportunities and constraints for the economic development of the county. Management and disposal of 90% of the land base is, in effect, subject to decisions taken in response to forces outside the control of county residents. On the Kootenai National Forest, management priorities have shifted from a primary concern with timber production to implementation of the broader mission of the Forest Service in which recreation and conservation, in particular, play a more prominent role than in the past. The changing regional and global economics of timber production have, in turn, affected the private sector. Smaller companies have been unable to compete and operate profitably in the face of changing prices and sources of sup-

ply. Larger companies have consolidated their operations in fewer and more efficient sawmills and have moved their operations to other regions and countries. As players in the global market, Plum Creek and Stimson are, in fact, liquidating significant areas of their forest holdings in Lincoln County, mainly around Libby and Troy, and selling the land for real estate development. The outcome in both cases has been the loss of timber-related jobs in local communities.

The Kootenai National Forest has experienced dramatic reductions in timber harvesting over the last 10 years (Figure 1) with a consequent loss of revenue for the county under the system of 25% payments. It has been the site of intense controversy over the designation of wilderness areas, with litigation challenging below-cost timber sales, and forest management practices considered to have a negative impact on threatened and endangered species such as the grizzly bear (*Ursus arctos horribilis*), migratory bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*) and the Canada lynx (*Lynx canadensis*). The reductions in timber harvest on the Kootenai National Forest have been blamed for the closure of four sawmills in Lincoln County between 1993 and 2003, although the reduced supply of logs has been only one factor in a changing timber sector marked by structural adjustments favoring large corporations with the ability to operate across regional and national boundaries to meet demand from new international markets. At the end of May 2005, the Owens and Hurst Lumber Company, the last remaining family-owned timber company closed its mill in Eureka. There is now only one sawmill operating in the county, owned by the Plum Creek Timber Company, along with two small wood processing plants.

Figure 1: Lincoln County. Volume of Timber Harvested, 1956 - 2004



Source: Kootenai National Forest 2004

Recreation is perhaps the most significant non-timber use of the Kootenai National Forest. The Cabinet Mountains Wilderness attracts visitors and there are outfitters in the county catering to them. County residents and visitors both use the forest for other recreational activities such as fishing and hunting, river sports, skiing, horseback riding, and mountain biking.

Other non-timber uses of the forest include huckleberry picking and mushroom harvesting. Huckleberry picking does not require a permit from the national forest. Most picking is for local consumption rather than commercial use although one small company in Libby uses huckleberries to make a range of confectionary sold in Libby and in other western states. Mushroom harvesting, especially for morels after fire, does have commercial value and requires permits from the forest, but it has little direct impact on the county's economy and on local prospects for employment. According to the RAC coordinator, most mushroom harvesters are from Central America, staying

in camps on national forest land and selling to intermediaries from outside the county.

Several interviewees expressed the hope that timber harvesting would return to earlier, higher levels, but it is unlikely that the timber industry will play the same role in Lincoln County that it formerly did. Some diversification is taking place with a small number of successful new enterprises such as metal manufacturing and the production of recreation-related equipment such as fishing poles, hunting bows, and associated activities such as taxidermy. These enterprises, however, are small, new businesses which could benefit from support and assistance to strengthen their marketing skills. Lincoln County, in common with many other rural counties in Montana, is experiencing a transition to a more service-oriented economy and to tourism in particular, but the sector has yet to attract a level of investment that would drive a more vibrant and diverse local economy.

The changing economy of Lincoln County is reflected in the changing composition of its

population. While the discourse of change and economic distress in Lincoln county focuses intensely on an identity shaped by a heritage of timber and logging, more than 50% of the current residents of the county were, in fact, born in another state. The face of the community

is changing and there may be a time when the identity constructed by community spokespeople does not match the profile of the majority of community residents, with significant effects on the formulation of priorities for the future development of the county.

County Elections for Titles II and III

At the peak of timber harvesting during the late 1980s, Lincoln County received one of the highest forest revenue totals in Montana under the 25% payments system, and had been able to invest some funds to set aside as reserves. With reductions in timber harvest during the 1990s, revenue fell from over \$6 million in 1994 to \$2.86 million in 2000,² by which time the county had begun to use the returns on its reserve investments to support road maintenance and schools, with no funds available to upgrade or purchase new equipment.

Initiative 105, approved by Montana voters in 1986, capped property taxes at 1986 levels, and specifically prohibits “taxing units,” such as school districts or counties from tax levies.³ Currently, Title I payments under P.L.106-393 cover some three mills of the county’s levied revenue. If the county no longer received these payments, county commissioners feel that Initiative 105 would leave them with no alternative but to make further cuts in the county’s budget.

Under these circumstances, county commissioners saw the decision to choose secure payments under P.L.106-393 as an easy one. Not only did the County enjoy an increase in revenue to \$5.66 million in 2001, but it has also been possible to budget with greater confidence knowing that payments will be stable during the lifetime of the legislation. County commissioners contrasted the reliability and security of payments under P.L.106-393 to Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILT), which are lower, calculated accord-

ing to a more complicated formula derived from the different categories of public land in a county, and which have not been fully funded for many years. A further benefit of P.L.106-393 payments is that interest on the funds can be dedicated to the county’s general fund. County commissioners estimated that this results in a savings equivalent of \$100 for each taxpayer in the county.

From their earliest deliberations about the allocation of funds, commissioners were enthusiastic about the potential of the RAC to identify and fund activities on or near public lands that would benefit the community. Their decision on the allocation of funds between Title II and Title III responded to two other important factors: the commissioners’ belief that the success of P.L.106-393 is likely to be judged to a considerable degree in the light of the achievements of the RACs, and the way in which payments affect the calculus fixing PILT payments. Title I and Title III payments are disbursed directly to counties and are therefore included as revenue from the federal government, reducing the county’s total entitlement to PILT. Title II payments, however, are considered to be payments made through the U.S. Forest Service to the RAC and are not counted against PILT, giving the county an incentive to allocate Title II funds to the RAC. Table 2 shows that county commissioners have allocated between 11% and 13% of P.L.106-393 payments to Title II since 2003 (the RAC had not yet been approved in 2002).

² Kootenai National Forest 2002.

³ The implementation of Initiative 105 has, in practice, been more nuanced with differential impacts on different components of local taxation. See Young, 1996.

Table 2: Lincoln County P.L. 106-393 Allocations, 2002 - 2005

Year	Total \$ Title I, II, and III	Title II \$	Title II % of total	Title III \$	Title III % of total
2002	\$5,658,720	\$0	0%	\$848,808	15%
2003	\$5,703,990	\$607,475	11%	\$248,124	4%
2004	\$5,772,437	\$612,456	11%	\$253,410	4%
2005	\$5,847,478	\$775,376	13%	\$101,746	3%
Total	\$22,982,625	\$1,995,307		\$1,452,088	

Title III Projects

The county commissioners decide each year on the allocation of Title III funds. In July 2002, they set up a budgeting and accounting system under the supervision of the county clerk and recorder with a manual of procedures to track expenditures. Funds are allocated each year to search and rescue services; youth correctional services for cleanup crews on federal land; and emergency operations conducted on federal lands. The sheriff’s office directs search and rescue operations, which are contracted to a private entity, the David Thompson Search and Rescue Association. The exact amount of funding allocated to these three activities varies from one year to the next, and is calculated on the basis of the time spent on national forest lands. Both search and rescue, and emergency operations are becoming increasingly important as new residents move into Lincoln County, many of whom are looking to settle in remote, quiet locations where it is difficult to reach them with these services. Title III funds have proved to be of assistance to the county in addressing its changing demographics.

In addition to these three categories of expenditures, the commissioners have used a portion of Title III funds to respond to proposals for projects on federal land in the county and to support activities that would otherwise be curtailed due to cuts in federal and state programs. Projects have included firewood education in Libby and

Troy, support for the Kootenai River Network, and the Provider Pals project, which organizes exchanges between urban and rural youth with the objective of building greater understanding among urban communities of forest communities and forest management. These projects come under the rubric of community forestry and forest-related education opportunities authorized under the Act and recipients of funds bill the county.

Lincoln County has made no attempt to link Title III projects to Title II projects. In some cases, the RAC has determined that a project may not be eligible for Title II funding and has suggested that the sponsors apply instead for funds from the county under Title III. The one project that received both Title II and Title III funds is the Provider Pals project mentioned above. The project received Title III funds in 2003 and 2004 for restoration of a building that has historic significance as the site of a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp, later used as a ranger station and then abandoned in the early 1970s. The RAC approved a grant to the project for an additional \$25,000 to repair the roof to upgrade the facility (see below, under Title II projects). The county has a particular interest in the project as a way to address their conviction, articulated by the project’s executive director, that the future of forest communities is dependent on “... ultimately [being] seen as a part of a desired healthy forest outcome.”

Lincoln County has used Title III funds to cover some of the costs associated with its obligations to provide services to users of the national forest, as well as to support a small number of local initiatives fostering a greater appreciation of the importance of forests to the community. It has not always been easy, though, to determine what can and cannot be done with the funds. In the absence of any recognized source of information and advice at the state or federal level, county officials have turned to the Forest Service for assistance, valuing

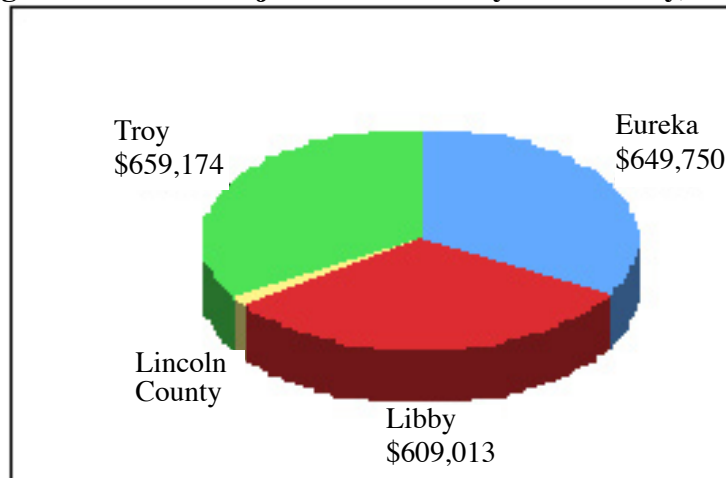
the opportunity to develop a team based approach in areas of joint responsibility such as search and rescue and emergency services, even though they know that Title III is not under the jurisdiction of the Forest Service. The need to account separately for time spent in the course of different activities on national forest land, however, requires a significant investment in staff time, and has led to some suggestions that counties should be able to do more at their own discretion, without reference to the Forest Service.

Title II Projects

The RAC first met in 2002, and approved its first projects in 2003. As of May 2005, 73 projects had been approved with a total of \$1,942,337 of Title II funds committed. There is an informal understanding between the RAC and the county commissioners that RAC projects should be distributed relatively evenly between the county's three electoral districts. An analysis of approved projects shows that this has,

in fact, happened (Figure 2). There is one project listed for Lincoln County as a whole (\$1,000 in 2003 for a county-wide bark beetle control program with non-industrial forestland owners) and further expenditures of \$15,000 and \$8,400 for RAC administrative expenses and for administrative expenses incurred by the Kootenai National Forest Supervisor's office, respectively.

Figure 2: Title II Project Allocations by Community, 2003 - 2005



Project Solicitation

The Lincoln County RAC places announcements in the local media and by word-of-mouth to ask project sponsors to send their proposals by June for approval in August. Until recently, the local media has not followed the activities of the RAC very closely, which has limited the public's awareness of the availability of funding from the RAC and of the procedures to apply for grants. This is likely to change since the editor of one local newspaper now serves on the RAC, and the other main newspaper serving Lincoln County has begun to send a reporter to RAC meetings. Asked about channels of communication in the county, one informant said that informal personal contacts are perhaps most effective and that there would be little advantage in relying on electronic media such as the Internet because the technology is still not widely used in the county.

Of the 73 projects approved so far, all but 17 are listed in the RAC's database as coming from ranger districts in Lincoln County. Of the 17, 11 are listed as being presented jointly by a ranger district and another entity. Only six projects are listed as being proposed independently of the Forest Service. At first sight, it might seem that the RAC is funding Forest Service activities, rather than community projects. There is, however, more community involvement than is apparent from the data. Ideas for projects often come from community groups who share an interest but are not organized in any formal way. They may discuss their ideas for a proposal with a district ranger, then have it presented to the RAC jointly or by the ranger. When visiting recreational trails near Troy and Libby, cyclists and hikers met on the trail confirmed that they were residents of surrounding communities and that they had been pressing their local ranger station for some time to build or upgrade the facilities that the RAC then funded.

Informants gave a number of reasons for the preponderance of Forest Service projects. Some RAC members felt that it would take time for local people and organizations to become familiar with the process of proposal submission and approval. In

the meantime, the RAC is able to approve projects that the Forest Service has planned but not implemented because of funding constraints at a time of shrinking budgets. In selecting Forest Service projects of benefit to the community, the RAC is moving quickly to become operational and to demonstrate that it has the resources to serve local needs. Others also pointed out that under P.L.106-393, Title II projects must benefit the national forest. While many people assumed (mistakenly) that this meant that all projects must actually be located on national forest land, they also felt that, in any case, it was not easy to determine whether a project did or did not benefit Forest Service land. They felt that channeling ideas for projects through the district ranger was one way to be sure that the project would be considered of benefit to the Kootenai.

Members of the RAC felt that they were now seeing an increase in the number of proposals from community groups. The RAC's list of approved projects shows that in 2005, eight projects were presented jointly by a ranger district and a local group, while in 2004, there were just four projects presented jointly with a ranger district or independently by a local group, and five in 2003. Awareness of the program and willingness to take the initiative in preparing a proposal do seem to be growing, although its impact on the public-at-large might be greater if there were a way to recognize community-initiated projects even where a district ranger might have approved the proposal itself. Nevertheless, there are still concerns in the county that the RAC may be approving and funding some projects that should be a normal part of Forest Service activities funded by the Forest Service.

Project Review, Prioritization, and Selection

Members of the RAC say that in reviewing proposals, they look for common ground on which they can agree. Projects such as trailheads, "sweet-smelling toilets" (outhouses), and forest restoration are activities that all interest groups can readily accept as being beneficial to the forest and to the community. As of June 2005, there had only been one project on which the RAC had not been able to

come to agreement. The project involved upgrading a road to Best Management Practices standards. The road was an access route related to a proposed timber sale, and the environmental interests on the RAC voted against the project. Under RAC voting rules, if one of the three categories of members turns down a project, it cannot be funded.⁴ All members of the RAC felt proud, though, that while they had disagreed on the project, its rejection had not precipitated a crisis. The RAC turned down the project and continued its review of other proposals, setting a positive precedent that disagreement is to be expected, but not to be feared.

The voting procedures, which require the agreement of all three interest groups to approve a project, have ensured that there have so far been no challenges from outside the RAC to its decisions. Members of the RAC understand the reason for the procedure, but there was some disagreement as to whether it promoted dialogue to reach consensus, or whether it offered an opportunity for a minority of the committee's members to block a project that would otherwise be accepted on the basis of a simple majority vote. In a variation on this view, one member felt that the RAC had selected only uncontroversial projects, steering away from some of the more pressing management needs on the forest such as large scale hazardous fuels reduction, commercial thinning, and even small-scale harvesting. In 2005, the RAC did in fact approve one pre-commercial thinning operation and it has approved some fuels reduction activities on the Wildland-Urban Interface. Nevertheless, it is possible that the good working relationships that have developed between representatives of different interests on the

RAC might be put to the test as they are asked to consider potentially more contentious projects involving thinning with the removal of merchantable material, or even some harvesting.

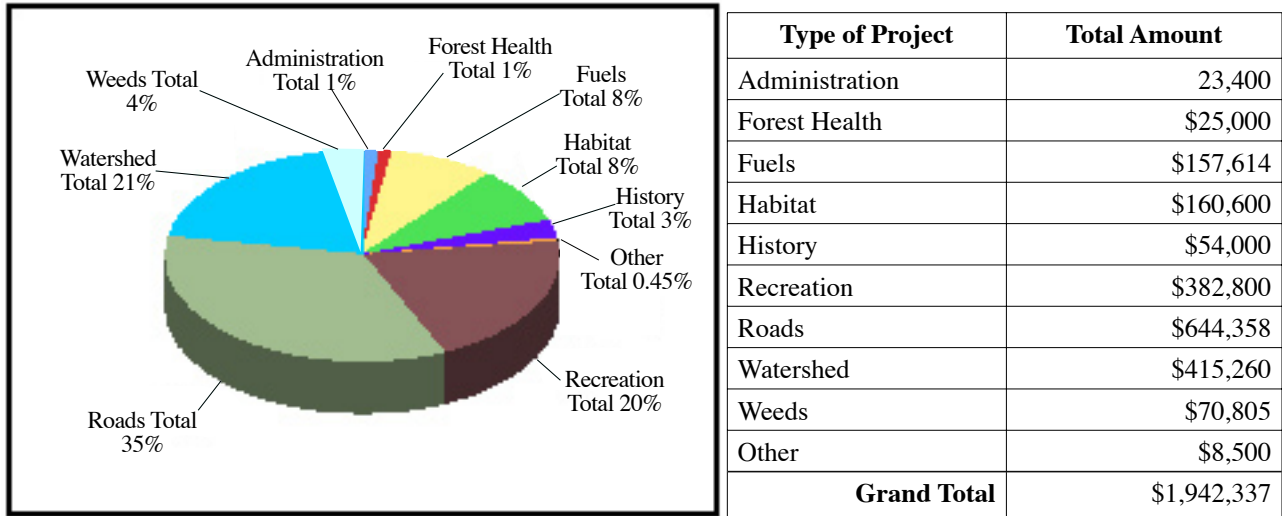
Approved Projects

The Lincoln County RAC has approved projects across the full range of categories specified in Section 2 (b) of the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act. Figure 3 shows a breakdown of funds committed to each type of project, with the addition of three categories not specifically mentioned in the legislation: fuel management ("Fuels"), recreation infrastructure and facilities ("Recreation"), and historic preservation ("History"). "Administration" covers one grant of \$15,000 for expenses incurred in running the RAC, and a further payment of \$8,400 to the Kootenai Forest Supervisor's office, which the RAC approved to compensate the Forest Service for the time staff contributed to the preparation and processing of proposals. There was also one payment of \$8,500 for an easement grant for a rails-to-trails project, listed here under "Other."

The RAC has allocated 54% of its funds to projects relating to roads and watersheds, meeting the requirements of the legislation. The majority of watershed improvement activities have involved stream habitat restoration as well as a meadow restoration project and some bank stabilization work. The RAC and the Forest Service have also been careful to select projects for funding in consultation with a hydrologist, to identify those stretches most likely to have a beneficial impact on the watershed.

⁴ The RAC did not approve the proposal, and the Forest Service ultimately used its own funds to upgrade the road.

Figure 3: Lincoln County RAC. Approved Projects, 2003 - 2000



Many projects are recreation-oriented, including sweet-smelling toilets, road access to trailheads and trailheads, as well as maintenance and upgrading of walking and bicycle trails. These projects not only improve the quality of life for residents of Lincoln County, but they are increasingly being seen as elements of an all-season “recreation corridor” with trails and other facilities leading to Turner Mountain ski area, which is an important part of Lincoln County’s longer-term vision for a transition away from a timber-based economy.

One of the recreation projects of particular interest is the Sheldon Mountain Trailhead (\$20,200 approved in 2004), proposed by the local chapter of the Backcountry Horsemen. The project is unusual in that the proposal came independently from a not-for-profit group with logistical, design, and material support from the district ranger and staff. The project’s sponsors sought specifically to demonstrate that recreation, wildlife conservation, and timber harvesting can coexist. Some harvesting has taken place at and immediately surrounding the trailhead, which gives access to trails that take horse riders through a diversity of forest land-

scapes, including harvested and regenerated areas. The Backcountry Horsemen believed that in working with the district ranger to prepare and present a project for RAC funding, they had achieved more with less investment than would have been the case if they had had to wait for the project to work its way through a lengthy internal process of prioritization and funding within the Forest Service. With funding approved through the RAC, the Forest Service has cleared the way for the project to proceed by completing the necessary NEPA process. In addition, many local people have contributed their time and labor to the project, and approval of the grant has allowed the Backcountry Horsemen to leverage further private donations. An alternative source of funding might have been the Recreation and Trails Program (RTP) administered by the Montana State Department of Fish and Game. The RAC process for soliciting and approving projects was, however, easier and quicker than the RTP process, which requires a large amount of documentation for grants smaller than those the RAC make.

Among the more unusual or unexpected recreation projects is a shooting range near Libby

airport (\$45,500 approved in 2004). RAC funds have covered the costs of land clearance, thinning trees, and putting in utilities. The RAC grant has successfully leveraged National Rifle Association funds, which have been used to build the clubhouse and the shooting galleries at the range. The facility is a high priority for the community providing a gathering place and a venue for social events. The project had been prepared, mapped, and permits received for over four years before the availability of funds through the RAC made it possible finally to move ahead with the project. There is another, more controversial proposal for a shooting range on the Three Rivers Ranger District to replace informal current use of a former gravel pit where residents often come for target practice (\$56,100 proposed for approval in 2005 by Lincoln County, the National Rifle Association and the Sheriff's office). Being close to one of the main trailheads into the Cabinet Mountains Wilderness, unsupervised use of the area has raised safety concerns, and generated support for the project, although some residents oppose funding a second shooting range.

The RAC has no explicit policy to link projects with Title III activities. As noted above, however, the Provider Pals program, which organizes exchanges between rural and urban youth, does receive funding under both Titles. Through its parent organization, Communities for a Great Northwest, the Provider Pals program is using a grant from the RAC (\$25,000 approved in 2005) to repair the roof of the former Ranger Cabin that is used during the program's summer camps. In recognition of the historic importance of the building, the project has been listed under the heading of "History" (Historic Restoration), together with two other projects, one in Eureka, and one near Libby, involving the resto-

ration of structures of importance to the history of the Kootenai National Forest and its surrounding communities.

There is widespread agreement that the projects approved so far have made a substantial contribution to the quality of life of Lincoln County residents, and to the health and safety of the Kootenai National Forest. The projects have not, however, made a lasting impact on prospects for employment in the county. Project proposal forms and project completion forms ask how much employment is generated by the project generated. The airport shooting range will employ two full-time caretakers, who will both be retirees, living in their own mobile homes located at the range. In most cases, however, although contracts have been awarded to local companies, they have ensured some seasonal employment, but few new jobs have been created.

In view of the large area of Kootenai National Forest land in Lincoln county, there is some question as to whether RAC projects related to forest health and fuels management can have an impact on the backlog of work that remains to be done, and on the daunting needs for forest management activities of all kinds. One RAC member felt that the RAC should address this issue by funding more projects experimenting with alternative timber management and harvesting technologies to revitalize and renew the county's timber economy. For the present, Forest Service staff and RAC members are all agreed that the projects they are funding are comparatively small and few in number. They point out, though, that the significance of the projects is that they demonstrate that it is possible for different interests to come to agreement on priorities and to projects that address them. Completed projects also send a strong signal that not only is there important work to be done, but the community is capable of doing it.

RAC Formation, Operation, and Process

RAC Formation

The Forest Service regional office in Missoula coordinated the formal process of chartering the RAC, but it was left to counties together with forest supervisors to determine its size and boundaries. The forest supervisor on the Kootenai National Forest had served previously in Oregon and worked with some of the BLM advisory groups that were precursors to the RACs. He saw RACs, with their mandate to fund projects, as an advance on the advisory role of these earlier groups and made presentations to the Lincoln County Commissioners to show historical trends in forest receipts and the level of support to be expected under the new legislation. Lincoln County decided to establish one RAC in consideration of the size of the county and its location in the heart of the Kootenai National Forest.

The Forest Service placed announcements in the two local newspapers and sent a circular letter to a list of contacts. The county's school board was particularly enthusiastic about the passage of P.L. 106-393 and encouraged its members to apply to join the RAC. As mentioned above, Lincoln County residents are more likely to respond to personal contacts than to announcements in the media, so the county commissioners together with the forest supervisor worked closely together to recruit candidates and to reach county residents through presentations at local organizations such as the Rotary Club and the Society of American Forests.

Although the supervisor's office conducted a Civil Rights Impact Analysis, there are no members of minority groups serving on the RAC. There is no reservation adjacent to or in the immediate vicinity of the forest, but there are many sacred and historic sites on the forest of significance to the Salish-Kootenai Nation. The Salish-Kootenai Tribal Government, based in Pablo, Montana on the Flathead Reservation, has a liaison person stationed with the Supervisor's office who has assisted in identifying important sites during the planning for trails and roads approved by the RAC.

By the end of the RAC recruitment process, the Forest Service had received enough applications that it was possible to make a selection of those most suited to the interest group positions that make up the RAC. It initially proved difficult to locate a representative of mining interests, but the position was, ultimately, filled. The office of the Secretary of Agriculture in Washington DC questioned the selection of a member of Trout Unlimited to represent national environmental interests, arguing that it would be preferable to select someone active and visible on the national stage rather than a local member of the organization. In response to a further request from the county, the Secretary did later approve the nomination and authorized the RAC in April 2002.

Formation of the RAC appears to have been a relatively smooth but lengthy process. While informants praised the efforts of the forest supervisor, his staff, and the county commissioners in forming a RAC that represents the different interests and communities in the county, there was disappointment at how long it had taken to obtain the Secretary of Agriculture's approval. The process took over a year, so that the RAC was not able to fund any projects during the first year of its existence and the county added what was to be a RAC allocation for that year to its Title III funds instead.

RAC members completed their three-year term in 2005. Though there has been some turnover in the committee's membership and some members have moved from one category to another, re-authorization of the group has been quicker than the initial authorization. The ease with which they have made the transition from one interest group to another suggests, however, that the categories are rather fluid and raises questions about how meaningful they are. The present chair of the RAC first applied as a member of the school board. He now serves as a representative of permittees on the forest since he owns some water rights attached to property he owns as an inholding on the forest. He

feels though, that his main interest in management of the Kootenai National Forest is as the owner of a plant producing wood pellets for fuel. Some flexibility in assigning members to different categories is a realistic recognition that most people in a forest community have multiple interests and do not only represent one issue. The RAC, however, risks compromising its legitimacy if it consciously or unconsciously avoids the need to make a particular effort to reach out to include groups that have so far preferred to keep their distance—such as the Native American community.

Operation

At the first meeting of the RAC, the Forest Supervisor reviewed the legislation and circulated handouts explaining the committee's role and functions. Members of the RAC did not receive further training or reference materials to guide their work. During interviews for this case study, RAC members and many Forest Service staff felt that the guidelines about what funds can be used for were not sufficiently clear and said that they have, at times, been unsure about what is permitted under the legislation. In case of doubt, the DFO or the Forest Service coordinator have contacted colleagues in other offices, or contacts at other levels in the Forest Service for advice—a functional solution, but one which leads easily to inconsistent and contradictory decisions depending on who is contacted.

The RAC meets on the last Wednesday of each month at the Forest Supervisor's office in Libby. The annual calendar is focused on the deadline for proposal submissions in July. The RAC prefers to vote on all projects at one time during its August meeting after which the Forest Service forwards them to the Secretary of Agriculture for formal approval. Project monitoring—based on completion forms submitted to the DFO by district rangers—and accounting are the subject of further meetings in September and November. During the summer months, there may be a field trip coupled with the monthly meeting.

At the first meetings of the RAC, members

agreed on the basic rules under which it would operate. Starting from the principle that the RAC is a vehicle to build trust and respect, they agreed to express opinions frankly, to respect other opinions, and to stand behind the consensus when it is reached. All those interviewed believe that this is happening. Dissent and disagreement are aired, but when a decision has been taken, even dissenters will accept and support the decision taken by the group. There is also an understanding within the RAC that it will solicit proposals and seek to approve projects equitably across the different communities within the county. Voting proceeds by a show of hands. RAC members are aware that assignments of all three groups must agree to a project for it to be approved, but this has not yet been an issue and only one project has been rejected so far due to the objections of one of the three groups.

One source of dissatisfaction among RAC members and Forest Service staff is the role of replacement members. The legislation requires that each interest group should have one replacement member who is expected to attend and participate in meetings, but who does not have the right to vote on projects. Demands on their time and commitment are the same as for other members, but their voices cannot be a part of the final decision on a project. Their colleagues on the RAC felt that the role and the rights of replacement members should be reconsidered, allowing them perhaps to vote when one member of the interest group is absent.

Public, Agency, and Interest Group Relationship Building

The consensus in Lincoln County is that the RAC has established trust among representatives of interests that have been hostile to each other, and it has broken through negative stereotypes such as “environmentalist,” “logger,” and “mill owner.” After many years of hostility, litigation, and recrimination, residents of Lincoln County have tired of conflict over forest management. A turning point came in 2000, following major wildfires when the community joined forces in support of intensified fuels management

programs, which are now becoming a priority for RAC funding.

The RAC is perceived as contributing to a new readiness to search for common ground or “points of convergence” between previously adversarial interests. Asked to give an example of the common ground they are finding, several people described how environmental and timber interests are both concerned about the liquidation of corporate forest land and conversion to real estate developments. Fragmentation threatens the viability of timber management, while the integrity of the forested landscape is vital for wildlife habitat and conservation. The community-at-large also fears that subdivision will threaten customary access to recreation, and especially to hunting and fishing areas, which timber corporations have traditionally recognized.

The RAC is also perceived as a venue from which to convey a positive message to the community about an interest group’s position, to reach out to the community and to build positive relationships with the county commissioners, school board, and other elected officials. For the representative of an environmental group, for example, participation in the RAC has been an opportunity to inform the public that the group advocates for more wilderness on the forest, but that they support sustainable logging, too.

Over the last few years, several groups have formed in Lincoln County to provide community input into the county’s economic development strategies and into the forest planning process on the Kootenai National Forest. The example of collaboration within the RAC has opened the door to wider discussions of the county’s future. Coalitions of different interests are forming focused on issues such as timber management, recreation, or conservation. Pointing to these initiatives, the county commissioners concluded that the most significant impact of the RAC is not limited to reducing hostility between interest groups, but is seen in the signal it has given to the community that there is reason to hope that there is a way forward out of the county’s present difficulties.

The RAC appears to have shown that there is a possibility of collaboration, but it is widely believed that it would not have had the same impact if it only had an advisory role, without access to funding for grants. Experience with earlier advisory groups on the Kootenai National Forest has led many residents of Lincoln County to believe that members of an advisory group tend to fall back on their long established and entrenched positions. In the case of the RAC, the outcome of negotiations is the decision to fund visible and tangible projects, giving the group a goal, a focus, and a willingness to come to agreement.

The RAC may have begun to break down the hostility between local interest groups, but there are mixed views on its impact on the national dynamics affecting management of public lands. One county commissioner felt that the voices of local groups have been lost in the rhetoric of litigation and challenges to forest service management. She felt that the RAC has been instrumental in giving local environmental groups—whose views are more rooted in local concerns—a voice in national debates that they did not have in the past. Other informants shared her view and felt that some national environmental groups have taken note of how local groups are addressing issues within the RAC rather than seeking solutions in the courtroom to conflicts over forest utilization. In support of this view, they note that a recent editorial in a newspaper, usually vocal in its support of an activist environmental agenda, questioned how organizations claiming to represent the public interest could pursue strategies that appear to have forced the county’s last family-owned mill, the Owens and Hurst mill in Eureka, into closure. On the whole, though, there is little confidence that local willingness to collaborate in the interest of the future of the forest and surrounding communities will be replicated at the regional and national levels.

County-RAC-Forest Service Relations

Northwestern Montana has a tradition of libertarian, anti-federal government sentiment. The Forest Service is often treated with suspicion

as a federal agency. In the past, suspicion did not translate into outright hostility, but there was a sense that the Forest Service and the community were two distinct groups with little in common. Attitudes have been changing over the last two decades, however. The Forest Service has become more aware of its responsibility towards forest communities, and there is a greater recognition that Forest Service staff are a part of the community, with shared concerns about the quality of life, safety, schools, and education. Nevertheless, wariness of federal intervention in local affairs remains strong, and may even have increased somewhat as a result of heightened security measures along the Canadian border imposed in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

The Forest Service is the largest landowner in the county and is widely perceived as being directly responsible for any changes in management practices that affect local use of the forest. Residents of Lincoln County tend to blame the Forest Service for the shrinking timber economy and mill closures. There is little consideration of the significance of wider economic forces affecting the timber sector nationally, or of the impact on the Forest Service of shifts in policy under different administrations, and of its obligation to adjust its practices to court verdicts that guide the implementation of a growing body of sometimes contradictory legislation affecting forest management.

Under these circumstances, the RAC has improved relations between the Forest Service and the forest communities of Lincoln County. Collaboration with the federal agency has fostered a better understanding of its actions, its priorities, and

its responsibilities towards multiple users locally, regionally, and nationally. Local users of trails and other facilities built with RAC funds agreed that projects to improve the quality of life for residents have helped defuse a lot of community anger that had been directed towards the Forest Service as the goals of forest management have shifted away from timber production to a mix of goods and services with a greater emphasis on conservation and recreation.

Greater understanding and smoother collaboration with the agency are not only the outcome of the RAC and the projects it supports with funds allocated under Title II of P.L.106-393. The County Commissioners felt strongly that use of Title III funds has also given them new opportunities to work with the Forest Service to develop a team-based approach to more effective provision of essential services such as search and rescue and emergency planning where collaboration had been more difficult in the past.

Improved relations with the agency and its staff at the level of the Kootenai National Forest have yet to extend to improved relations with the agency at the federal level. The lengthy process of review and authorization of the RAC and the requirement that projects must be forwarded to the Secretary of Agriculture for approval have only served to confirm the desire for a stronger community voice in decision-making on the forest. There is a sense that decisions about the RAC should not be under the control of the highest level of the agency in Washington D.C., but should be devolved to the forest supervisor who is more aware of local conditions and concerns.

Conclusion

The Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act has allowed Lincoln County to continue to meet its basic obligations to provide roads and an education to citizens. Title I payments under P.L.106-393 represent a significant portion of the county's budget without which it would be obliged to cut many important services,

since Montana State law restricts the ability to raise revenue through increased taxation. The importance of payments under P.L.106-393 is not only that they are higher than in the years immediately preceding approval of the legislation, but that they are secure, allowing for greater confidence in planning and budgeting.

Title II and Title III both contribute to the “Community Self-Determination” that the Act calls for. Elected officials and the public have taken advantage of the opportunities both sources of funding offer to identify and to fund activities that improve the quality of life in the county. The RAC has demonstrated that the community can have a voice in decisions affecting its future if it identifies shared concerns rather than differences and if it engages with the agency that has a mandate to manage the forest. The RAC has limited funds and the projects it supports are unlikely, in themselves, to have much immediate and direct impact on the lives of resource-dependent communities such as those in Lincoln County. Their significance, rather, is that the process of identifying projects and reaching a consensus has demonstrated that communities in and around the Kootenai National Forest can act together to begin plotting out a viable future. In the words of one member of the RAC, “It is an incubator to look at the options. Will the future be subdivisions, or will the future be a community forest?”

As a counterpoint to the generally positive assessment of P.L.106-393, elected officials, RAC members, and members of the public have some concerns with the implementation of Title II and Title III.

The most common complaint is the lack of information and documentation about the uses of both Title II and Title III funds. What information is available is found on the internet, which is not yet as widely accessible or accepted in rural communities such as Lincoln County as the printed word and personal contacts. There is no accepted authority to turn to when there is uncertainty about requirements for proposals, the kinds of projects that are acceptable under the Act, and issues related to contracting and financial reporting. Forest Service staff suggested that it would be helpful to have a manual of some kind with examples of project proposals, and guidelines to assist in making decisions about the approval and monitoring of projects.

The composition of the RAC raises questions about the representation of different interests. De-

spite the efforts of the DFO and RAC coordinator, there is no tribal representation on the committee. Under a narrow reading of the legislation, which requires representation of tribes “within or adjacent” to the national forest, the present composition of the RAC would seem to be acceptable. The strong historic and cultural ties to the forest of the Salish-Kootenai, however, make it hard to justify their absence from the RAC.

A closer analysis of representatives of the interest groups within the three categories of stakeholders on the RAC raises further questions about how they are represented. It is not clear what the role of the replacement member in each category is, since she or he cannot vote. Of more significance, perhaps, is the assignment of RAC members to the different interests within the categories and the ease with which they are able to move from one category to another. Those concerned feel that as residents of the county their concern for the future of the forest is not restricted to any one sphere of interest and that they are able to serve on the committee on behalf of more than one category. Caution is needed, though, to avoid compromising the RAC’s claim to legitimacy as an inclusive forum embracing all stakeholders.

Given the positive impacts of P.L.106-393 on Lincoln County’s budget as well as on collaboration between the county, communities, and the Forest Service, it is not surprising that there is widespread support for reauthorization of the legislation. Title II and Title III have shown that there is interest in more local participation in decision-making and that greater cooperation between formerly hostile interest groups benefits the whole community. In a testimony to the importance of the legislation, the DFO in Libby hoped that in the event that Congress choose not to reauthorize it, the local groups that have learned to work together on the RAC would still want to collaborate to provide community perspectives and guidance to the Forest Service as it updates the management plan for the Kootenai National Forest and develops a long term vision for the future.

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