

HELENA *National Forest* *Update*

Caring for the land and serving the people since 1906



Welcome to the Helena National Forest....

This Helena National Forest *Update* provides you an overview of the activities, programs, and accomplishments of the Helena National Forest over the past year. Unfortunately, Montana saw no respite from the persistent drought which continues to impact all of our lives. A relatively wet spring was followed by the hottest and driest July on record. While our interagency fire crews were successful in initial attack suppression of nearly 200 fires this summer, a handful of fires did escape, with the two largest both burning in the Lincoln area. We coordinated with Lewis and Clark County, Powell County, Montana State DNRC, and others to develop appropriate suppression strategies for these large fires, and particularly for Snow/Talon we implemented a "least-cost" option and utilized "light-on-the-land" suppression tactics, basically steering the fire into the wilderness and away from private lands. The fact that no serious injuries occurred and that no private structures were lost is a testament to the skills of the firefighting community. I particularly want to applaud the efforts of local law enforcement agencies in managing the evacuations necessitated by the wildfires.

As soon as the fires were controlled, we transitioned into rehabilitation actions to mitigate fire effects. This fall we were able to complete hazard tree removal, replacement of undersized culverts, make other road drainage improvements, and rehabilitate control lines. This spring we will move ahead with weed control, additional road work, and treeplanting.

In early July, the Forest participated in the Helena Regional Airport's Anniversary Celebration by hosting an open house at our new Tanker Base. Nearly 1,500 visitors toured the facility. The Tanker Base became operational in April and paid big dividends throughout the fire season.

We continued to engage Forest visitors in travel planning. We initiated a second round of scoping for the South Belts, Divide, and Blackfoot travel plan areas through a series of conceptual alternatives that allowed people to provide additional refinement to alternatives that will be considered. And we issued a Draft EIS for the North Belts travel plan in July. While travel revision is taking a lot of work and time, I am confident completion will pay big dividends in our ability to provide reasonable and responsible access to and through the Forest.

Day-to-day operations continued despite the fire season. Roads were maintained, weeds were controlled, salvage sales were harvested, range permits were managed, contracts for services were let, outreach opportunities were provided to local communities, wildlife and fisheries monitoring and enhancements were completed, all with the support of Financial Management, Human Resources, and Information Systems staffs.

I would like to again acknowledge the wonderful assistance we enjoy from our partners, which include individuals, other natural resource agencies, non-profit organizations, volunteers, and civic groups. We truly appreciate the time and effort of our partners in helping us accomplish the important land management work we do. Many of the services enjoyed by visitors to the Helena National Forest would not be possible without the help of these partners.

The Forest is looking forward to many accomplishments in 2004, including numerous ongoing projects undertaken in concert with the Helena Forest Foundation.

We hope you enjoy this issue of the Helena National Forest *Update*. Please visit us at any of our offices or on our new website with your thoughts and ideas on management of the Helena National Forest.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tom Clifford".

Tom Clifford, Forest Supervisor