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**For Immediate Release**

## **USFS and State of Montana Reach Proposed Negotiated Settlement on USFS Reserved Water Rights in Montana**

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**Helena, Mont.** – The Montana Reserved Water Rights Compact Commission (RWRCC) and the USDA Forest Service (USFS) announce today that a proposed USFS Reserved Water Rights Compact has been agreed to by both entities through a negotiated settlement and is now available for public review and comment. A reserved water right is a right to water that is created when Congress or the President reserves land out of the public domain. These rights must be resolved either in court through Montana's statewide adjudication process or by negotiation of a compact that settles the claims.

"After many years of negotiations, we're all pleased to be presenting this settlement to the public," said RWRCC Staff Director Susan Cottingham. "It would not have been possible without the teamwork and cooperation of everyone involved." Negotiations have been on-going for the past 13 years but have intensified over the last year, with meetings scheduled nearly every month.

The 26-page negotiated settlement outlines the specifics related to the water rights that the USFS will have, mainly in western and central Montana. The proposed settlement covers the reserved rights the USFS has for use of water for district offices, ranger stations, guard stations, work centers, housing and other facilities; tree nurseries and seed orchards; riding and pack stock used for administrative purposes; road construction and dust abatement; and water for emergency fire suppression. The proposed settlement also establishes state-based water rights for in-stream flows for nearly 80 basins in the compact as well as a future process for the USFS to acquire state water reservations for other watersheds. Added Cottingham, "Those in-stream rights will in many cases serve to protect senior water users in the future."

The Montana RWRCC and the USFS will be conducting an aggressive public outreach campaign to provide all interested parties the opportunity to comment on the draft settlement. "This process was not done in a vacuum. We encourage the public to come forward with comments and we look forward to

working with them to ensure this settlement meets their needs as well,” Kathleen McAllister, Deputy Regional Forester USFS-Northern Region stated. Public meetings and open houses are planned throughout the state in the month of October.

The draft negotiated settlement as well as the dates and locations of the meetings and open houses can be found on the DNRC website at [www.dnrc.mt.gov](http://www.dnrc.mt.gov).

After the public comment period, both agencies will make any necessary changes to the settlement before presenting it to the Legislature during the upcoming session. If approved, the settlement must be endorsed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of Justice.

For more information about Montana’s Reserved Water Rights Compact Commission, visit the web at [www.dnrc.mt.gov](http://www.dnrc.mt.gov).

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