



Economic Development - Libby, MT

Press Release

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#For immediate release#

LINCOLN COUNTY PORT AUTHORITY TEAMS UP WITH THE UNITED STATES FOREST SERVICE IN AN EFFORT TO HELP KEEP OUR COMMUNITIES SAFE

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It has long been known that the residents of Lincoln County face a growing problem with forests near our homes and communities.

The Montana Forest Action Plan (MFAP) identifies Lincoln County with the most “at risk acres” from wildfire at 407,552 acres. The 2019 “Profile of Development and the Wildland Urban Interface Study”, ranks Lincoln County in the 97th and 98th percentile of all western counties in existing and potential fire risk. The United States Forest Service agrees with those facts and designated the Kootenai National Forest as one of the first 10 Priority Treatment Landscapes for implementing their 10 Year Wildfire Crisis Strategy. With all of this data piling up, it became clear that something had to be done.

In 2019, the Lincoln County Commission began a years-long effort to assist federal, state, and private forest landowners in addressing the fire danger in our Wildland Urban Interface (WUI). The Kootenai Shared Stewardship Initiative (KSSI), a Memorandum of Understanding between stakeholders, was signed and envisioned an aggressive, multi-stakeholder, cross-boundary approach to removing fuel (trees and brush) from Lincoln County’s WUI.

The early attempts at accomplishing this feat included encouraging industry to invest in a processing plant to utilize the small diameter trees that need to be removed. The Lincoln County Port Authority has set aside acreage for purchase by an investor who may be interested in building a plant of some kind in the old industrial sawmill area managed by the Port.

However, without a certainty of supply of those trees, it was nearly impossible to get someone to invest tens of millions of dollars with the ‘hope’ that our area will be able to provide a supply of appropriate small logs. That reality caused the Commission to refocus their efforts toward the implementation of the KSSI, becoming a true managing partner with the Kootenai National Forest, who is by far the largest landowner in the County, and helping to provide some of the certainty of supply that an investor will need to put down roots in Lincoln County.

In 2021, the Commission began assembling a Stewardship Advisory Committee, a small group of forest management specialists. That committee worked to assemble, and send to every Lincoln County boxholder, a flyer explaining the county's efforts and the need for forest management improvements in our WUI. Shortly after, they began a nationwide search to locate another area in the nation that faces a similar problem and to analyze the potential of replicating any successful efforts. The committee learned that, working under a Master Stewardship Agreement and using tools available through existing laws and regulations, Tuolumne County in California had been working for six years as a partner with the Stanislaus National Forest in a successful effort to reduce fuels around communities in that forest. This massive effort was launched after three towns were burned to the ground in the catastrophic Rim Fire.

Tuolumne County contracted a third-party - the non-profit entity Tuolumne River Trust - as the contracting entity to implement the County's Master Stewardship Agreement. In the six years since their effort began, the steady flow of logs coming from forest thinning has yielded the growth of small and large industry in their communities. Sierra Pacific invested over \$100 million in a sawmill to deal with the fuel being removed, and others have invested in post and pole, shavings, pellet, and biomass operations. Through all of these efforts, their forest is becoming fire resilient.

After learning about the good being done on the Stanislaus, the County approached the Kootenai National Forest (KNF) leadership in discussions about replicating the Tuolumne County effort and implementing our Kootenai Shared Stewardship Initiative within the WUI before we have a catastrophic event, not after. Since those early meetings, the leadership of the KNF has been working in earnest with the County to achieve the goal of partnering to protect our towns and our forest.

In the fall of 2024, Lincoln County and the Kootenai National Forest signed their Master Stewardship Agreement for implementation of management regimes in areas that the County Wildfire Protection Plan has listed as Priority Areas for protecting our homes and towns. The County then sent a small group from the State DNRC, USFS, and the County's Forest Advisory Committee to visit Tuolumne County to learn how they operated.

Since the Lincoln County Port Authority already existed and continues to hold potential acreage for someone, someday, to build a milling operation, Lincoln County decided to utilize that entity for the MSA contract implementation. Lincoln County understood that the Port Authority would have to be reorganized to achieve their goal and the Port Authority began a process of capacity building.

The Port hired an Executive Director in January of 2025, and three more employees followed. The Grants and Contracts Manager, Management Forester, and Wildfire Mitigation Specialist all started work in March.

"The mission of Lincoln County Port Authority is to promote, stimulate, develop, and advance the general welfare, commerce, and prosperity of Lincoln County and its citizens," stated Kate Stephens, Port Authority Executive Director. "We strongly believe that helping to protect our communities from wildfire aligns with this mission and are excited to be partnering with the Kootenai National Forest to help make that happen."

Since the team has come on board, they have applied for four grants to help achieve work in the WUI and have nine more in progress. There are close to 10 projects they are working closely with the Forest Service and DNRC to accomplish in the upcoming months. Furthermore, they have completed almost 20 home

assessments throughout the entire county to aid people in making their homes as resilient as possible to wildfire.

“The team is passionate and enthusiastic about this work, and ready to make a difference in our community,” Stephens continued. “Right now, we are just waiting for funding to break loose so that we can get to work.”

For more information on the Lincoln County Port Authority and the Master Stewardship Agreement, or have a home assessment done, contact the Port Authority at 293-8406.