



**Agreement for Shared Stewardship
Between
THE STATE OF MONTANA
And the
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
FOREST SERVICE**

This Agreement for Shared Stewardship is hereby made and entered into by and between the State of Montana and the United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service (Forest Service).

Introduction

The State of Montana's forests are a vital national resource, underpinning local economies, supplying raw materials for construction, housing, and energy, providing clean water, and offering abundant recreational opportunities. Active management of these forests also plays a crucial role in reducing wildfire risk and safeguarding community safety. However, Montana's forest landscapes are increasingly threatened by a convergence of challenges: more frequent and severe wildfires, widespread insect and disease outbreaks, and a historic lack of active management. According to the Montana Forest Action Plan, over 60 percent of Montana's forested acres are classified as being at high or very high risk of wildfire, insect infestations, or both. These risks not only jeopardize the ecological integrity of Montana's forests but also threaten rural livelihoods, water supplies, and the sustainability of forest-dependent communities.

In support of these objectives, the State of Montana has made unprecedented financial commitments to bolster forest management and wildfire preparedness. The passage of House Bill 883 during the 2023 legislative session, and its continued reauthorization, significantly increased funding for the state's Fire Suppression Account. This legislation appropriated \$30 million annually to ensure robust, flexible resources for fire suppression, fuel reduction, forest restoration, and forest management projects on private, state, and federal lands. This sustained investment, coupled with annual reporting and legislative oversight, has empowered the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) to steadily increase the pace and scale of forest management, consistently meeting and exceeding annual treatment goals, and positioning Montana as a leader in proactive, landscape-scale wildfire risk reduction.

Despite these growing threats, full utilization of available authorities and active management of forest resources has not been achieved. This has resulted in increased reliance on foreign

timber, lost economic opportunities for Montana's workforce, and a backlog of untreated, high-risk acres. Recognizing this urgent need for action, the President issued *Executive Order 14225*, Immediate Expansion of American Timber Production, prioritizing activities to restore American self-reliance and economic security, including the immediate expansion of domestic timber production, streamlining the permitting approval process, and eliminating unnecessary regulatory burdens.

To meet these challenges, a new, integrated approach is required. The U.S. Forest Service (Forest Service) and DNRC have a strong tradition of partnership, but the current scale and urgency of threats demand even closer collaboration and continued work on all lands. Recent federal legislation, including the EXPLORE Act (P.L. 118-234), and authorities such as the Good Neighbor Authority (GNA), provide powerful tools to accelerate forest management and wildfire risk reduction at the landscape scale. Successful cross-boundary projects, such as the Basin Creek Municipal Watershed and Red Lodge Restoration, have already demonstrated the effectiveness of innovative partnerships in achieving shared stewardship goals. Building on these successes, and guided by the Montana Forest Action Plan, it is imperative to dramatically increase the pace and scale of forest management and wildfire mitigation to protect Montana's forests, communities, and economy for generations to come.

Purpose

The purpose of this Shared Stewardship Agreement (Agreement) is to formalize a shared stewardship framework between the USDA Forest Service and DNRC. This framework is designed to accelerate landscape-scale restoration, increase the pace and scale of forest health treatments, and expand sustainable timber production in Montana's National Forests and adjacent lands. Leveraging the EXPLORE Act GNA, and categorical exclusions, this agreement prioritizes wildfire risk reduction, forest health improvement, and sustainable timber production. By aligning planning, funding, and implementation strategies, the agencies aim to maximize the effectiveness of available authorities and resources.

Statement of Mutual Benefit and Interests

Both the Forest Service and DNRC share a commitment to securing America's timber independence, revitalizing rural economies, and protecting Montana communities from catastrophic wildfire while recognizing the mutual benefits of a coordinated, landscape-scale approach to forest restoration and management. The agencies are jointly committed to fulfilling the goals and direction from Executive Order 14225, Secretarial Memo 1078-006, and the Forest Service Associate Chief's letter on implementation of Secretarial Memo 1078-006. By working together, the agencies can:

- **Increase the pace and scale of restoration:** Coordinated planning and implementation will enable larger, more effective projects that cross jurisdictional boundaries, addressing wildfire risk, forest health, and watershed protection at the scale required by current challenges.

- **Expand sustainable domestic timber production:** Jointly establishing and meeting timber harvest targets will support Montana's forest products industry and rural communities while improving forest resilience. By setting and meeting aggressive annual timber harvest targets (in millions of board feet or MMBF) as required by *Executive Order 14225*, the agencies will reduce reliance on imports, lower construction costs, and support job creation in Montana's forest products sector.
- **Streamline project delivery:** The agencies have a shared commitment to implement the new and expanded categorical exclusions available to the Forest Service, to accelerate environmental reviews, and eliminate unnecessary permitting delays to ensure rapid deployment of forest management projects, as directed by the Administration. The Forest Service will use all tools and authorities to the extent possible, as well as implementing new tools that can be used to facilitate active forest management, including current and future emergency authorities.
- **Leverage state-federal partnerships:** Through the Good Neighbor Authority and shared staffing strategies, the agencies will address capacity constraints, enabling Montana to play a leading role in the management of all lands and utilization of its forest resources, in accordance with applicable law.
- **Enhance wildfire resilience:** By increasing the pace and scale of thinning, timber salvage, and fuels reduction projects, the agreement will help safeguard Montana's communities and infrastructure from wildfire disasters, in line with federal priorities.

The Forest Service and Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation agree to;

- **Jointly identify a landscape-size area where the State can take on implementation of authorized restoration goals with a 20-year mutual commitment to planning and implementation.** The State of Montana and the Forest Service, utilizing GNA, will select one area in northwest Montana to begin project implementation in federal fiscal year 2026. The project should cover an area of approximately **200,000** acres or more on National Forest systems lands with a focus on areas with marketable timber to meet *Executive Order 14225*. Good Neighbor Authority will be used to conduct authorized forest management activities in this project area during the term of a GNA agreement to be entered into by the parties. The agencies agree to develop and sign this GNA agreement by December 31, 2025.
- **Plan for future landscape-scale work.** Upon successfully initiating one landscape scale project, DNRC and the Forest Service agree to **select two to four additional landscape scale projects** for a feasibility assessment and implementation planning. Additional GNA or other agreements could be entered into as necessary.

- **In addition to the large landscape projects described above, the agencies will identify 5-10 site-specific projects to utilize the expanded authorities and streamlined permitting processes provided by the EXPLORE Act to accelerate and broaden the scope of GNA projects to include recreation infrastructure improvements.** The benefit of this effort will allow for the investment in critical access and community infrastructure that supports both wildfire response and forest operations; integrate improved data collection and planning to target high-risk areas; and leverage new partnerships and funding opportunities with counties and tribes to maximize landscape-scale impact. DNRC and the Forest Service will seek to complete one initiated agreement that uses EXPLORE Act authorities by the end of calendar year 2025 and will seek to add up to 10 additional projects over the next five years.
- **Jointly maintain five-year plans of work for Good Neighbor Authority timber sales and projects across all other National Forests in Montana.** The plans should be cooperatively developed and identify and implement landscape-scale forest restoration and management projects that prioritize both the immediate expansion of timber production and the reduction of wildfire risk consistent with applicable law and policy. These plans should demonstrate potential to deliver significant increases in timber harvest (measured in million board feet), enhance forest health, and protect communities, watersheds, and infrastructure. The State of Montana and Forest Service agree to have work planned out through calendar year 2027 no later than December 31, 2025. Work plans through 2030 will be completed by June 30, 2026.
- **Apply the Montana Forest Action Plan.** Use of the plan will guide and inform project development and coordinate to maximize the use of Good Neighbor Authority, stewardship contracting, and categorical exclusions to expedite project delivery and regulatory compliance. The agencies will focus on areas where cross-boundary collaboration can yield the greatest benefits.
- **Jointly track and report progress on all projects, including acres treated, board feet harvested, and improvements to forest health and community safety on an interactive dashboard.** The agencies will jointly release quarterly progress reports which will be used to assess effectiveness, identify bottlenecks, and adapt project selection and implementation strategies as necessary to meet the goals of this agreement. The joint interactive dashboard shall be released to the public by January 1, 2026.
- **Commit to an annual sustainable volume of up to 100 MMBF through DNRC Good Neighbor Authority projects in response to the President's directive to increase harvested timber volume by 25 percent on federal lands.** Within 60 days of the signing of this agreement, the Forest Service shall provide DNRC with a prioritized list of critical staffing shortages that may impact the pace and scale of forest management work. The Forest Service will collaborate with DNRC to identify specific opportunities where GNA can be used to hire or contract personnel and services to address these gaps.

- **Both parties will commit to assigning one staff person to serve in statewide coordination and implementation** on Good Neighbor Authority to facilitate progress outlined in this agreement by October 1, 2025.

It is mutually understood and agreed by and between the parties that:

- The intended result of this Agreement is to focus coordination by the parties to increase public safety, forest health, and community resiliency by creating resilient landscapes through increasing the number of forested acres treated to reduce wildfire risk and impacts; creating safer conditions for wildland firefighters; increasing the efficiency of treatment execution and planning efforts; leveraging resources and funding opportunities through cross-boundary coordination and interagency planning.
- The cooperators will evaluate the use of separate instruments to implement management activities associated with forest lands. Specific projects or activities that involve a transfer of services, and/or anything of value, require the execution of separate instruments. Such instruments may include but are not limited to: Good Neighbor Authority Agreements, Collection Agreements, Challenge Cost-Share Agreements, Participating Agreements, Collection Agreements, Volunteer Agreements, Domestic Grants, or through procurement actions.
- **Commencement, expiration and termination.** This Agreement is executed as of the date of the last signature. Any of the parties may, in writing, terminate this Agreement as a whole or in part at any time before the expiration date.
- **Participation in similar activities.** This Agreement in no way restricts the parties from participating in similar activities with other entities.
- **Nonbinding agreement.** This Agreement creates no right, benefit, or trust responsibility, substantive or procedural, enforceable by law or equity. The parties shall manage their respective resources and activities in a separate, coordinated mutually beneficial manner to meet the purposes of this Agreement. Nothing in this Agreement authorizes any of the parties to obligate or transfer anything of value.
- Specific, prospective projects or activities that involve the transfer of funds, services, property, and/or anything of value to a party requires the execution of separate agreements and are contingent upon numerous factors, including, as applicable, but not limited to: agency availability of appropriated funds and other resources; cooperator availability of funds and other resources; agency and cooperator administrative and legal requirements (including agency authorization by statute); etc. This Agreement neither provides, nor meets these criteria. If the parties elect to enter into an obligation agreement that involves the transfer of funds, services, property, and/or anything of

value to a party, then the applicable criteria must be met. Additionally, under a prospective agreement, each party operates under its own laws, regulations, and/or policies, and any Forest Service obligation is subject to the availability of appropriated funds and other resources. The negotiation, execution, and administration of these prospective agreements must comply with all applicable authorities. Nothing in this Agreement is intended to alter, limit, or expand the agencies' statutory and regulatory authority.

- **Principal contacts.** Individuals listed below are authorized to act in their respective areas for matters related to this agreement and/or designate others to act on their behalf.

Authorized Representatives

By signature below, each party certifies that the individuals listed in this document as representatives of the individual parties are authorized to act in their respective areas for matters related to this agreement for shared stewardship. In witness whereof, the parties hereto have executed this agreement as of the last date written below.

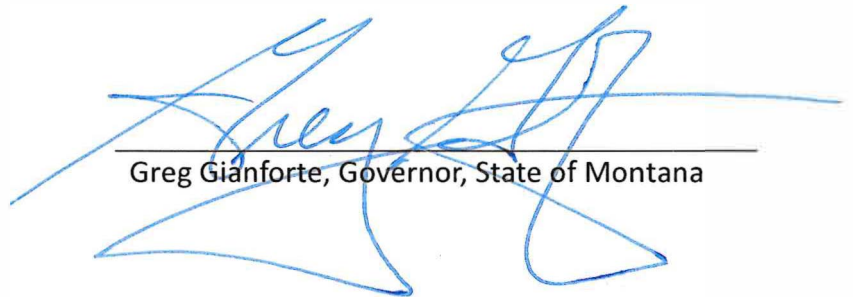
U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service

Date 6/30/25


Tom Schultz, Chief, USDA Forest Service

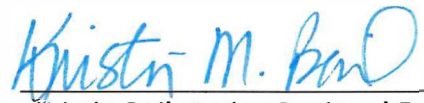
State of Montana, Governor

Date 6/30/25


Greg Gianforte, Governor, State of Montana

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service

Date 4/30/2025



Kristin Bail, Acting Regional Forester,
Northern Region

State of Montana, Department of Natural Resources and Conservation

Date 6/30/25



Amanda Kaster, Director, Montana
Department of Natural Resources and
Conservation

Date 6/30/25



Shawn Thomas, State Forester, Montana
Department of Natural Resources and
Conservation