

To: Missoula County Board of Commissioners
Subject: Open Space Bond Proposal
Date: 2 July 2018

Dear Commissioners,

I am writing to express my support for the open space bond measure you are considering for placing on this Fall's ballot. This proposal is in keeping with Missoula County's Community Wildfire Protection Plan.

Throughout much of Missoula County, citizens and visitors enjoy the recreational, aesthetic, and economic benefits of an open, forested setting. Through previous efforts, Missoula County has been able to maintain its sense of wildland, despite growth and development pressures. Certainly, these pressures will only intensify in the coming years.

From a wildfire standpoint, open space affords an important measure of protection. It is particularly important in the dry-forest types that are abundant throughout Missoula County. These types are adapted to frequent, low-intensity surface burning; the kind of burning that consumes accumulating dead fuel, rejuvenates grasses and shrubs, and maintains an open character. However, these same dry forests become vulnerable to severe, high-intensity burning when fuels and forest density build-up in the absence of periodic thinning and prescribed burning. Anything that the county can do to mitigate forest fuel hazards before a wildfire strikes is a positive step in the right direction. Open space allows land managers greater opportunities to proactively treat fuel hazards than those landscapes where homes and development have encroached into the wildlands. The costs and risks that come with treating large, contiguous landscapes is far less than those that come with attempting to treat fragmented areas where private property has become interspersed with public lands. The economies of scale are directly related to the size of hazard mitigation treatments. And, because less woody material is consumed when burning conditions are not extreme, smoke emissions from prescribed burning are commonly much lower than wildfire emissions.

Pattee Canyon, Marshall-Woods, and Blue Mountain are all examples where the county is better protected against wildfire because the forest has been made more resilient through thinning, selective harvest, and prescribed burning. Yet, much of the county is in need of more projects like these. In the past several years, there have been a number of high-cost, high-consequence wildfires in Missoula County. In drought years, where wildfire demands across the Western states rapidly depletes firefighting resources, any one wildfire is almost always forced to modify control objectives with respect to firefighter safety and the firefighting resources it has available. As a result, incident management teams are typically forced to protect homes at the expense of perimeter growth elsewhere on the incident. Although homes are often saved, the forested landscape, including watershed values, wildlife habitat, recreational values, and the viewscape – all values that define Missoula County – are altered; and more so when burn severity is high. In Missoula County, wildfire smoke has become an especially difficult issue when uncontrollable wildfires become long-duration incidents. In these cases, the impacts to human health and the local economy have become significant.

I support Missoula County's efforts toward securing open space and encourage the commissioners to, also, support wildfire mitigation efforts on these lands. Thank you.

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