

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This update for the 1995 Kootenai National Forest Social Assessment brings up to date relevant secondary source data and presents new primary data to address the following topics.

1. The interaction of county governments with KNF managers.
2. New stakeholder/constituent groups and their place in the mix of groups in Lincoln and Sanders counties.
3. The nature of community-forest interactions, including perceived benefits of National Forest lands for local residents.
4. Community assessments of forums for public involvement.

Primary data to address these topics were collected using a discussion guide with an open-ended format. This was intended to allow discussants to structure their responses to express their points of view. Sixty eight persons participated in these discussions. Discussants represent diverse stakeholder groups including, environmental interests, recreation groups, local businesses, outfitters and guides, loggers, mill owners, economic development staff, local government officials, teachers, USFS staff, and other community opinion leaders. Some discussions were conducted with small groups, but the majority of the discussions were with individuals. The length of these discussions ranged from about forty-minutes to more than three hours. The average discussion lasted about one and a half hours. The findings reported in this update report are based on an analysis of the data from these discussions combined with a review of secondary source data. Below key findings from each chapter are summarized.

Chapter 1: Introduction and Background

This chapter summarizes selected regional and local literature relevant to this update. The regional studies are the Columbia Basin Socio-Economic Assessment (CBSEA) the Interior Columbia Basin Ecosystem Project (ICBEP), and the Northwest Regional Comprehensive Economic Strategy (NRCES). The local studies are the Idaho Panhandle National Forest Social Assessment, and the original 1995 Kootenai National Forest Social Assessment. Relevant findings from each of these studies are summarized to update the social, economic, and demographic setting for this update. The ICBEP categorized communities based on multiple criteria to compute a “specialization ration.” The criteria for computing the specialization ratio are community isolation, proximity to public lands, and employment specialization in natural resource industries. Specific communities were examined for their specialization ratios and the higher the specialization ratio the higher the potential for socioeconomic impacts. Most communities in Lincoln and Sanders counties received “high” specialization ratios in at least one category. Noteworthy findings from CBSEA include communities in Lincoln and Sanders counties have “lower” vitality scores among all counties studied for the CBSEA; and, the two project counties also cluster with other rural counties in having lower vitality scores. Each of these findings suggests these counties have a higher potential for socioeconomic impacts related to forest management decision making. The NRCES reports on changes in regional populations and economic trends. This report also suggests some vulnerability to socioeconomic impacts based on demographic changes and economic conditions. Collectively these regional studies suggest some vulnerability to socioeconomic impacts within Lincoln and Sanders counties.

Comparisons of the Idaho Panhandle National Forest (IPNF) and Kootenai National Forest 1995 Social Assessment suggest some differences and similarities in the communities

adjacent to these forests. Although a thorough analysis of these similarities and differences is beyond the scope of this summary review, important dimensions for comparison are land ownership patterns, population structure and dynamics, income, employment, and wildland dependency measures.

Chapter 2: County Government and the Kootenai National Forest

The KNF and the two counties have mutual interests in the management of federal lands. Local governments receive important revenues from Payments to States funds as well as from Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILT). These provide important fiscal benefits to citizens of the two counties. Cooperation and collaboration between the KNF and the counties has shown a significant change since the 1995 Social Assessment. Trust in leadership has improved along with overall assessments of the working relationship between KNF and the County Commissioners. The contributions of KNF personnel to leadership and civic involvement are recognized as an important asset for community well-being. The existing working relationship with the counties is a basis for continued improvement in KNF relationships with both counties.

Chapter 3: Natural Resource Interest Groups

Since the 1995 Social Assessment several new natural resource interest groups have emerged in Lincoln and Sanders counties. The groups identified by this work are the Resource Advisory Council (RAC), TIMBER (Totally Involved in Managing Better Economic Resources), The Yaak Valley Forest Council, local watershed groups, Project 56, and the Lincoln County Recreation Association. The RAC is a citizen's group that was mandated by Payments to States legislation. This group is evaluated by its participants as providing a cooperative working environment for addressing natural resource management issues among participants with diverse views. TIMBER is a group based in Eureka that has formed to focus on providing community input during the process of Forest Plan revision. The group is composed of a range of community interests with some limited participation by environmental interests. The Yaak Valley Forest Council is based in the Yaak Valley, but it has members in other parts of Lincoln and Sanders counties. The focus of this group is the protection of wilderness and especially roadless areas, although they have concerns about the spectrum of forest management issues. They have worked with other interest groups to identify potential areas of cooperation to resolve long-standing differences between environmental and industry interest groups. Watershed councils are most active in Sanders County where they work to maintain and restore stream water quality. In Lincoln County the Kootenai River Network has new leadership that is working with other community groups to address water quality issues as well as the Kootenai River as a community asset. These watershed groups work with the KNF on selected issues where forest management affects watershed issues. Project 56 is based in Lincoln County and has specific concerns about local control of resource management. This group indicates a specific interest in the process of plan revision and advocating for access issues and increased use of timber and other natural resources on National Forest lands. The Lincoln County Recreation Association is in the initial stages of development as an organization. The interests of this group are in advocating for more consideration of recreation issues in the management of forest resources. The relationships between some groups suggest the potential for improved cooperation to address existing conflicts about the use and management of forest resources.

Chapter 4: Community Forest Interactions

The relationship between the KNF and surrounding communities has demographic, economic, social, and cultural characteristics. These characteristics are briefly summarized in this chapter. Among the noteworthy demography changes are an increase in the median age for Lincoln (42.1 years) and Sanders (44.2 years) counties in comparison to the state as a whole (37.5 years) as well as an increase in the over 50 age cohort and a decrease in the under 25 age cohort. In the 1990-2000 decade Montana's population increased 12.9 percent while Sanders County increased 18 percent and Lincoln County 7.8 percent.

Economic trends affecting other rural communities of the west are also present in Lincoln and Sanders counties. These include lower than average household incomes, an increase in non labor sources of income as a share of personal income, increases in service sector jobs, and decreases in jobs associated with natural resource extraction. Unemployment in both counties has traditionally been above the state average with seasonal patterns that suggest the influence of employment in natural resource industries. Recent mill closures in Libby have contributed to Lincoln County unemployment rates in the range of 14-18 percent in the spring and summer of 2003. Other data also suggest a dependency on natural resource industries as indicated by IMPLAN income analysis. This preliminary analysis suggests that for Lincoln County 18.41 percent of total labor income is accounted for by natural resource industries (grazing, timber, mining, government, and recreation). Timber accounts for the largest share of this total with 13.63 percent. In Sanders County, natural resource income accounts for 8.76 percent of total labor income. Timber accounts for 4.62 percent of this total.

Social conditions are also changing. Residents point to decreases in school enrollments as an important local indicator of social change. In the 1993-2003 decade total enrollment in the state decreased 6.2 percent, but in Lincoln County the decrease is 18.5 percent and in Sanders County 4.6 percent. Per capita public assistance payments are also generally increasing. In Lincoln County per capita public assistance was \$634 in 1997, dipping to \$611 in 2000 and then rising to \$866 in 2002. In Sanders County the 1997 per capita public assistance amount was \$547. This decreased to \$462 in 2000 and then increased in 2002 to \$622. The persons in poverty in Lincoln County increased from 14.1 percent in 1989 to 19.2 percent in 1999. Sanders County numbers show a decline from 19.6 percent to 17.2 percent for the same years. The Montana poverty rate decreased from 16.1 percent in 1989 to 14.6 percent in 1999. Libby's designation as a superfund site and health problems associated with asbestos exposure from the W.R. Grace mines is a noteworthy characteristic of the changed social environment from the 1995 Social Assessment.

The KNF makes several noteworthy institutional and social contributions to communities in Sanders and Lincoln counties. The institutional contributions are leadership resources, professional expertise, infrastructure capabilities, and fiscal contributions, especially from Payments to States funds. The social contributions of USFS personnel to the communities are perceived as enhancing overall community resources to adapt to changing conditions. Residents also suggest that they receive a variety of other benefits from the presence of the KNF in their counties. These perceived benefits include recreation, wildlife and plant habitat, scenic and existence values, environmental quality, lifestyle enhancements, and economic opportunities.

Chapter 5: Public Involvement: Assessment and Expectations

There are several consistent themes and issues in the data regarding public involvement and information needs. Participants indicate that ample opportunity exists for participation if

residents choose to do so. They also acknowledge that many choose not to participate for one or a combination of the following reasons: their lives are too busy; they believe forest management issues do not affect them; or, they assess the process of public involvement as not meaningful. Some residents also argue that the public comment process has been “captured” by environmental and non-local interests. These residents suggest they are at a disadvantage in relationship to those who know the process and use that knowledge to manipulate it. The methods for public involvement are evaluated differently. Public meetings are often described as “public performances” in which there is limited useful discussion or exchange of ideas about topics of interest to participants. Other methods such as open houses, field trips, and letter writing are each evaluated as having different strengths and weaknesses. Publics generally believe they have good access to Rangers and the Forest Supervisor; and, these are assessed as meaningful channels for public input. These evaluations suggest the need to use multiple methods to reach diverse constituents.

Residents also expressed desire for other changes in agency interactions with communities and individuals in the two counties. They wish to have more information from the USFS about plans, management decisions, and natural resource issues. They also desire more leadership from the agency to identify and resolve natural resource conflicts as well as more leadership to address community problems and issues. There is also a strong desire for the agency to explain the scientific basis for decision making about forest plans and management decisions. There is also sentiment that local input should have more weight and value because it is based in local knowledge about ecological processes and conditions.