



MONTANA STATE SENATE

Senator Mike Cuffe

Eureka, Mont.

Senate District 1

In support of the Montana Great Outdoors Project

May 14, 2024

As Republican legislators representing Northwest Montana and the western edge of our state, we write to express our full support for the Montana Great Outdoors Project. The draft environmental assessment for Phase 1 of the conservation easement clearly illustrates not only that this proposal is the right move for conservation and the environment, but it's also essential to protect good jobs and the Montana way of life, as well as preserve the very character of Northwest Montana.

Much of the land between Kalispell and Libby has been owned by a rotating set of timber companies for generations. Those companies have been stewards of their private property, managing the forest for its health and creating hundreds of good-paying, blue collar Montana jobs. They've also generously allowed the public to hunt, fish, and recreate on their properties. Generations of Montanans have grown up with access to these lands. It's impossible to count how many family memories of first deers, rainy Memorial Day weekend camping trips, and mountain sunset drives would have never happened without that access.

If we lose the land to subdivision and development, we'll never get back the magic of Northwest Montana. The Phase 1 easement will protect nearly 33,000 acres from such a generational loss.

The Montana Great Outdoors project is a win across the board. It will keep the land in timber production as it has been historically. With recent mill closures in the Swan Valley and Missoula, it's never been more clear that the future of forest health, wildfire prevention, and timber jobs are on the line with every land management decision.

The project will also maintain the public's recreational access to the land and preserve the character of Northwest Montana. Population growth is putting unprecedented development pressure on our part of the state. If we do not act to save open spaces and public access, we will lose them forever. This conservation easement will prevent that loss and ensure that future generations can hunt, fish, camp, and explore the forest north of the Thompson Chain of Lakes just as their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents have.

Finally, the financial impacts of the easement are positive ones. The land will remain in private ownership and contributing property taxes; there's no shifting of the property tax burden to homeowners. The cost of the easement is being paid for by a combination of the landowner's generous donation, the Forest Service, private fundraising, and state hunting license dollars. Montana taxpayers aren't on the hook for the project.

We are senators and representatives, elected by the people, but even more importantly we are hunters, fisherman, and outdoors enthusiasts. Some of us have history in the timber industry, several have multi-

generational ties to this region. Our families live here. Simply put, this is home. The proposed easement is about protecting and preserving our home. We support the Montana Great Outdoors Project.

Senator Mike Cuffe

Senate District 1—Eureka, Libby, Troy, and the project area

Former plywood plant and lumber mill operator, multigenerational local of the area who has hunted, fished, camped, fought fire and more on the land

Representative Steve Gunderson

House District 1—Libby, Troy, Bull River Valley

Hunter, fisherman, and recreational user of the project area. Four-term member and current Chair of the Environmental Quality Council

Senate President Jason Ellsworth

Senate District 43—Hamilton, Darby, Sula, and the south half of the Bitterroot Valley

Hunter and fisherman

Representative Amy Regier

House District 6—north end of Kalispell and West Valley

Lifelong Montanan who has fished and hiked in the project area

Representative Braxton Mitchell

House District 3—Columbia Falls, Polebridge, Hungry Horse, Martin City, Essex

Outdoorsman, hunter, fisherman. Raised by great grandfather who spent 45 years as a lathe operator for Plum Creek in Kalispell

Representative Courtenay Sprunger

House District 7—downtown Kalispell

Representative Tony Brockman

House District 9—Evergreen and North Kalispell

Recreational user of the project area

Senator Greg Hertz

Senate District 6—Polson, Lakeside, Somers

Hunter and fisherman

Representative Linda Reksten

House District 12—Polson and the south half of Flathead Lake

Representative Denley Loge

House District 14—Plains, St. Regis, Superior

Timberland owner who's worked on forest management issues in Western Montana for over 40 years, member of Montana Legislature's Fish & Wildlife Committee for four terms, block management cooperator for over 25 years, working for protecting access to private and public lands