



RUBY VALLEY  
STRATEGIC  
ALLIANCE

Senator Steve Daines  
320 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Senator Tim Sheehy  
Dirksen Senate Office Building SD-G55  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Representative Ryan Zinke  
212 Canon House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Representative Troy Downing  
1529 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

March 12, 2025

Dear Senator Daines, Senator Sheehy, Representative Zinke and Representative Downing,

We, the members of the Ruby Valley Strategic Alliance (RVSA), are writing today to express our strong disagreement with the recent staff reductions at the US Forest Service, Wildlife Services, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). We ask that you contact President Trump, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Brooke Rollins, and Interior Secretary Doug Burgum regarding the considerable unintended consequences from this action. As Montana's representatives in Washington, D.C., we request that you make it a priority to fully staff these land and wildlife management agencies so they can continue to serve important functions for our state.

The RVSA is a diverse group of multi-generation ranchers, grazing associations, landowners, conservationists and community members focused on maintaining and stewarding our working and public lands. We will be the first to acknowledge frustrations and we agree that public land agencies need improvement. Chronic underfunding of these agencies has led to a mixed track record of accomplishments and lowered public expectations. We need to ensure our agencies are working efficiently and that taxpayer dollars are making their way to the ground where they can be utilized to improve conditions and meet the goals of the agencies and the communities whose livelihoods rely on public lands. However, the recent agency layoffs will make the situation far worse.

Here on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest, more than 30 people lost their jobs with more expected to come. We are also aware that local staff from the BLM Dillon office were fired. Most of these folks worked on the ground, supporting essential management activities that the public relies on such as recreation, range management, road maintenance, and noxious weeds programs. The layoffs of these staff include many red-carded employees that typically support wildfire response on Type 2 Crews, which has the potential to significantly hinder the ability to effectively respond to wildfires this season. Recent statements also indicate that the

Forest Service is planning to eliminate an additional 7,000 employees as part of the reduction in force effort. Combined with the ongoing freeze on federal grants and contracts, these force reductions will cause major disruptions to the public, outfitters, permittees, and the Montana economy.

With the pressing need to address insect and disease outbreaks and hazardous fuels across public land in southwest Montana, these workforce reductions will have enormous long-term consequences for the economies and safety of our communities. Given the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest's chronic understaffing, timely NEPA for vegetation management has always been a challenge. Now we have significant concern that there will be no capacity to take on additional projects, let alone complete existing vegetation treatment projects that are in progress, such as the Greenhorn Project and the South Tobacco Roots project. We also expect to see BLM fuels reduction projects in the Ruby grind to a halt. DNRC fuel reduction projects are also likely to be affected as much of their funding is federal in origin and frozen. NRCS layoffs are impacting the maintenance of the SNOTEL program. This urgent situation undermines all of our land management agencies, threatening damage to public resources and livelihoods that depend on them.

The Forest Service has undergone budget cuts and staffing reductions before. In 2019 the [National Association of Forest Service retirees conducted a capacity study](#) at the request of the Secretary of Agriculture that reviewed capacity changes that occurred within the Forest Service over the past 25 years. Over that time, significant staff and budget reductions have impacted all aspects of the agency. Inadequate staffing levels at the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest have contributed to a significant backlog in special use permitting, and significant delays in everything from allotment management plans to environmental analysis and decision making. Investments from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, the Inflation Reduction Act and the Great American Outdoors Act, signed into law by President Trump in 2020, were beginning to address these issues and provide the agencies the funding they desperately need to accomplish their mission. Those gains are being eliminated with these reductions in capacity.

On March 1, 2025, President Trump signed an executive order concerning timber production. This order— considering the recent layoffs, plans for future cuts linked to the [Reduction in Force \(RIF\) order](#), early retirement offers, and the hiring freeze limiting seasonal workers— will be impossible to implement. The remaining personnel will simply be insufficient to support this initiative. Remaining Forest Service staff will be hard pressed to support basic services, and their ability to follow through on existing priorities such as implementing the 10-year fire crisis strategy, critical to mitigating catastrophic fire, and carrying out the new executive orders being signed, is in doubt.

Additionally, we are extremely concerned about staffing reductions at the USDA's Wildlife Services. In Montana there are 24 positions at risk of being lost with the current restrictions on extending temporary appointments or hiring replacements. This could mean that Wildlife Services will no longer be able to maintain service to 2,680 producers, landowners, and cooperators that have agreements in place, and that Montana could lose all three helicopter pilots this year, essentially ending aerial predator management operations. Livestock loss board

investigations and confirming predator depredations are critical services for ranchers running a business where grizzlies, wolves, and mountain lions are present. We are also aware that 9 Non-Lethal Initiative range riders and conflict prevention specialist positions will not be filled or will have terms expire. All of these staffing shortages will result in breaking multiple MOUs with Montana Department of Livestock, Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks, Montana Stockgrowers Association and Montana Woolgrowers Association. Without conflict prevention services agricultural businesses like those in the Ruby Valley will be faced with new economic difficulties. The ability to correct this lies in the hands of the USDA Secretary and the White House.

Public lands support our Montana way of life in many ways – from lifestyles to livelihoods. Public lands provide open space, clean water, wildlife habitat, access to wild backcountry, recreation, outdoor traditions, and they are inextricably tied to our local businesses. We need to critically evaluate efficiencies in our public land agencies, but we also need to adequately invest in them and in the people who devote their careers to carrying out the work so this land is properly cared for today and in the future.

We ask that you to immediately engage U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Brooke Rollins and Interior Secretary Doug Burgum regarding this urgent situation, and as the budget reconciliation process proceeds in the next several weeks, we ask that you oppose staff reductions unrelated to documented poor performance or substandard work outcomes at US Forest Service, Wildlife Services, BLM, USFWS, and NRCS, and adequately fund the agencies.

Sincerely,

Rick Sandru, Ruby Valley Stock Association & Sandru Ranch  
John Anderson, Ruby Dell Ranch  
Neil Barnosky, Ledford Creek Grazing Association & Silver Spring Ranch  
Jim Berkey, The Nature Conservancy  
Duke Gilman, Madison County Commission  
Les Gilman, Gilman IH Cattle Company  
Emily Cleveland, Wild Montana  
Dan Durham, Ruby Habitat Foundation  
Chris Edgington, MT Trout Unlimited  
Kathryn Eklund, The Wilderness Society  
Gary Giem, Warm Springs Grazing Association & Giem Angus Ranch  
John Helle, Helle Livestock  
Chad Klinkenborg, The Montana Land Reliance  
Kaye Counts, Chair, Preserve Reynolds Pass  
George Trischman, Former Chairman, Montana Public Lands Council  
Donna McDonald, Upper Canyon Ranch Outfitters, Montana Outfitters and Guides Association  
Sally Schrank, The Greater Yellowstone Coalition  
Ruby Valley Conservation District

Cc: Governor Greg Gianforte