

# DAVY'S COLUMN

*Davy Sheets, MLA President*

**Recently, Congress finally enacted legislation** that will benefit America's national forests. I would like to be able to tell you that Congress acted because they were primarily concerned about healthy forests... however, the forestry reforms of which I speak were attached to an Omnibus spending package that—had it not passed—would have shut down the federal government. Nonetheless—and regardless of the motivation—significant forestry reforms include:

- A long-term solution to the practice of "**fire borrowing**" that forces the U.S. Forest Service to redirect money from non-fire accounts when the agency has exhausted its fire suppression budget. With wildfire seasons growing longer and more severe, the agency has exceeded its firefighting budget 13 of the past 16 years, disrupting the funding, planning and implementation of preventative forest health projects.
- A reversal of the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals' disastrous **Cottonwood** decision; thereby eliminating a need to re-consult on existing forest plans when a new species is listed or new critical habitat is designated, unless the affected forest plan is more than 15 years old, and a species has been listed for more than 5 years from the date of enactment of the Omnibus bill.
- Furthermore, the omnibus spending package includes a new **Categorical Exclusion** (CE) to expedite hazardous fuels reduction projects in at-risk forests; and
- The package significantly improves the federal **Good Neighbor Authority** (GNA) law that allows state agencies to perform forest management activities on federal land by making it easier to repair and rebuild forest roads on some areas of national forests—an important provision for Montana.
- The bill also eliminates restrictions on **Stewardship Contracts** created by obscure government bonding requirements, (so-called "cancellation ceiling" requirements); and also allows use of 20-year Stewardship Contracts on Federal forests with frequent fire return intervals, and creates a preference from projects that can demonstrate innovative use of forest products, including cross-laminated timber.
- Importantly for county governments, the Omnibus deal includes a two-year extension of the **Secure Rural Schools** (SRS) program—funds that used to come from timber sales receipts, but now provides direct payments to over 700 Counties across the rural US. SRS expired in 2015.

It is important that we recognize the efforts of Montana's entire congressional delegation in helping to usher this Omnibus package through. **Senators' Daines and Tester, along with Congressman Gianforte, each played a significant role in the negotiations.**

The package of reforms is not all that we would have liked to see... but after 4 years of having the door slammed in our face by partisan politics, we finally have some laws on the books that will benefit this profession we call logging.

To be clear, however... our commitment to enacting beneficial congressional reforms is not over ... and the passage of judicial reforms remains a priority. Next up? The Farm Bill.

*On another note ... as the **Save the Date** post on the front cover of this issue informs, the **MLA's 2018 Convention** will be held on May 18/19 at KwaTaqNuk Resort in Polson. Watch for a registration package in the mail... and make sure you register early. An outstanding Program is taking shape... and you will not want to miss Saturday nights **Tall Timber Awards Banquet** where awards will be given and we will be honoring (roasting) Keith Olson for his 40+ years of dedication to this profession we call logging... **Davy***