

Montana Shared Stewardship Learning Exchange: **Takeaways**

In June 2026, 25 people from diverse organizations – including government agencies, private industry groups, nonprofits, foundations, collaboratives, and academic institutions – gathered for a field tour in western Montana to discuss state-federal shared stewardship agreements.

The group visited three project sites in the Flathead National Forest where staff from the Forest and Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) shared about their use of Good Neighbor Authority agreements to advance on-the-ground work and realize goals of their 2025 Shared Stewardship Agreement.



All photos by Hannah Nikonow.

Sites visited on the field tour included the following:

- The 366-acre **Blacktail Powerline Project** was the first project announced under the 2025 Shared Stewardship Agreement. Through a Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) agreement, the DNRC contracted NEPA analysis for the project. The Forest Service signed the NEPA decision, a categorical exclusion under an emergency action determination, and DNRC awarded the timber sale, which is expected to pay for the NEPA analysis and fuels reduction on 245 non-commercial acres.
- The 526-acre **Kerrtail Timber Sale Project**, with the timber sale awarded by the DNRC in 2023, is intended to improve forest resilience to disturbance and support the local economy with the harvest of 5 million board feet. On this project, DNRC relationships with industry helped bring new harvesting techniques that reduced costs and lessened soil impacts.
- The 230-acre **Ashley Lake Fuelbreak Project**, with timber sales awarded by the DNRC in 2024 and 2026, is designed to reduce wildfire risk in the wildland-urban interface. DNRC's more efficient contracting processes helped move this project forward.



The Ashley Lake Fuelbreak Project. Photo credit: Hannah Nikonow

About the DNRC and Forest Service partnership:

- **Origins of the GNA program:** The DNRC's GNA program started in 2018. At the time, GNA was a "total mystery" on the Flathead National Forest. The GNA program has since grown significantly: DNRC, which started with one GNA forester in 2019, now has 6.5 FTE GNA foresters, and in 2026, DNRC expects to sell 20 million board feet from the Flathead National Forest across 11 projects. In addition, when the Forest Service lacks capacity, the first place they now turn is to the state. Types of GNA projects have "run the gamut," including culvert replacement, road reconstruction, pre-commercial thinning, wildlife habitat improvement, and NEPA analysis.
- **Vision for shared stewardship:** Both partners see a pressing need to support the dwindling timber industry with more projects, since the timber industry enables the

treatments needed (at increased pace and scale) to promote forest resilience to disturbances.

- **Funding and revenue for shared stewardship projects:** The state's GNA program kicked off with an infusion of money from a variety of sources, including a Forest Service capacity-building grant, Montana Forest Action Plan dollars, the 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, and the 2025 Shared Stewardship Agreement, along with revenue from timber sales. Montana has not been investing money in GNA programs; all GNA staff are modified FTE rather than permanent state employees. DNRC staff have a "start-up mentality" and hope in the future for the GNA program to receive enough money from sales to be sustainable. Therefore, the GNA program blends commercial and non-commercial work to balance profit and stewardship. To be clear, GNA projects do not earn revenue for the state: Any revenue from GNA projects primarily funds DNRC GNA staff and post-project work by the Forest Service such as burning, restoration, or planting, with all additional revenue going back into restoration work on that Forest.
- **Process for identifying shared stewardship projects:** There has been a "squishy" process to identify shared stewardship projects on the Flathead National Forest; partners identify projects based on staff knowledge/experience rather than dedicated modeling or analytics. The Forest aims to complete projects identified in the Forest Plan through a mix of internal and GNA implementation. DNRC staff have decided which projects they have capacity to take on based on each project's complexity and economic viability. In essence, the partners have started with shared stewardship projects they think will be profitable and lower-complexity. The partners now have an annual meeting of GNA and Forest Service staff where both organizations pose ideas for shared stewardship projects. In addition, the Kootenai and Flathead National Forests are contracting NEPA to support a 5-year GNA plan. A challenge ahead will be navigating how shared stewardship can move the needle on higher complexity projects that aren't shelf-ready.
- **Process for implementing GNA projects:** GNA projects still must meet Forest Plan requirements, have Forest Service silviculturists sign off on prescriptions, and have Forest Service leadership sign NEPA decisions. On the Flathead, designating one Forest Service point of contact for DNRC staff for each project has been valuable, rather than having state staff track down applicable specialists, such as soil specialists, timber management officers, fuels reduction staff, etc.

Key takeaways from the learning exchange included:

Recipes for success

- **Relationships are central to the success of shared stewardship. Build a chain of good leadership with commitment to partnership across all levels.**
 - The Montana DNRC and Flathead National Forest have built a genuine collaboration where the state is not doing work *for* the Forest Service but rather *with* the Forest Service; the GNA program is not a state takeover of federal lands, just a new way of getting work done. Back in 2019, the GNA program largely grew out of efforts of good friends at the DNRC and Forest. Over time, growing a depth of Forest staff support for the GNA program has contributed to its success.
- **Collaboration increases limited Forest Service capacity. In addition, increased capacity increases efficiency.**
 - Importantly, DNRC procurement and contracting processes are more efficient than the Forest's. GNA contracting flexibility enables GNA foresters and industry partners to be creative and propose new approaches. The state is also more nimble than the Forest Service to address urgent needs. For example, the state issued timber sale permits in high-value recreational sites in the Flathead after a widespread blowdown event.
 - As one speaker put it, "increased capacity has increased our efficiency as a program." Additional staff capacity enables the Forest to focus more on delivering work and less on managing competing demands for limited resources.
 - Collaboration allows partners to tap into diverse strengths; it's valuable to have more people with different perspectives, backgrounds, and strengths working together on shared stewardship projects. For example, some DNRC foresters have a stronger background with forest operations, contracting, and industry, and have operators' trust from working on state trust lands; meanwhile, Forest Service staff contribute a depth of understanding of the Forest Plan and landscape complexities such as threatened and endangered species. Bringing people together across broader skillsets has enabled creative treatments of areas previously overlooked due to their complexity.

"Shared Stewardship works on the Flathead National Forest because the Forest Service and DNRC staff work well together, are aligned on goals, and commit to ongoing conversations about adapting GNA."

- **Small successes build toward bigger successes.**
 - The partnership between the DNRC and Forest Service has grown incrementally relative to the complexity of shared stewardship projects.

Challenges ahead

- **Not every Forest wants to engage in shared stewardship.**
 - There must be a committed lead in both the state and federal agencies to start a GNA program. The right people in the right jobs matter. In Montana, for example, it has been critical to have the Forest Service Timber Management Officer's support for shared stewardship projects.
- **Montana's Shared Stewardship paradigm is built around projects being profitable and so may be difficult to replicate in other landscapes.**
 - The profitability of projects showcased on the Montana field tour was a big surprise to field tour participants who came from other regions of the country.



All photos by Hannah Nikonow.