

Missoulian

Keeping it local when it comes to management of natural resources

Guest column by TOM VILSACK | Posted: Monday, June 21, 2010 7:33 am

This past April, President Barack Obama launched the America's Great Outdoors conservation initiative in an effort to confront the serious challenges our natural resources face today. This initiative recognizes that while we've made significant progress in protecting natural resources in America, we still face significant challenges. Our public and private working lands face threats from fragmentation and development. I'm particularly concerned about the loss of prime agricultural and forests lands that provide a wealth of benefits to Americans including clean water, wildlife habitat, food and fiber, and others. Through America's Great Outdoors, the President has tasked us with developing conservation agenda worthy of the 21st century and to reconnect Americans with our great outdoors.

In an attempt to address these issues, Obama has instructed the U.S. Department of Agriculture and our federal partners to host a series of listening sessions to learn about what's working and what's not in land conservation, in getting Americans outside, and to learn how the federal government can be a better partner in these efforts. Our first listening session was held in early June in Ovando.

There, I joined Sens. Max Baucus and Jon Tester, Gov. Brian Schweitzer, as well as Director of the National Park Service John Jarvis and Chairwoman of the White House Council for Environmental Quality Nancy Sutley for an event on Jim Stone's ranch. We were not there to give speeches, but to listen to a thoughtful conversation with Montanans about the work they are doing to preserve their natural treasures.

We learned about the innovative partnerships along the Blackfoot River Corridor, the Rocky Mountain Front, and in the Seeley-Swan Valley where ranchers, conservation groups, outfitters, forest industry, and others are working to conserve Montana's natural resources and preserve its environmental heritage. In Montana, every rancher, landowner and farmer we met with emphasized the importance of getting federal employees involved at the ground level, stressing that decisions that are made with local input will lead to the most promising solutions. We also learned about the importance of voluntary incentive programs and a number of other ideas that could help Montanans protect their natural heritage and strengthen the connection between Americans and the great outdoors.

Following the forum in Ovando, the America's Great Outdoors' initiative held three other listening sessions in Bozeman, Helena and Missoula, giving over 500 Montanans the opportunity to share their ideas. Men and women across the state suggested successful conservation strategies, ways to engage youth in the outdoors, and discussed the appropriate role for the federal government in fostering community-led conservation efforts.

On my visit to Montana, I was reminded why we cannot wait any longer to get Americans back outdoors. Too many Americans have lost touch with their outdoor heritage that is present everywhere in Big Sky country. Too many Americans have never enjoyed the fishing, hunting, hiking or camping that are not only to America's rural heritage, but also have a major economic impact on small communities. Outdoor recreation is worth \$730 billion to the American economy each year. And the truth is that these activities not only yield a strong economic impact, they also promote good physical health. And I would remind folks that there's no better time than June, Great Outdoors Month, to get involved in this project and reconnect with our country's plentiful outdoors.

Over the next few months, representatives from the Obama administration will continue what began in Montana with listening sessions across the country to craft a national conservation plan. Other states will have their opportunity to let Washington know what great work is being done on the local level, and how we can partner in our efforts to reach conservation plans that best serve your communities - but also the nation.

If you weren't able to attend an America's Great Outdoors listening session, we still want to hear from you. You can visit www.doi.gov/AmericasGreatOutdoors to share your ideas and learn more about our path to America's Great Outdoors.

With input from this initiative, USDA will continue to work every day to conserve the nation's natural heritage. I know that with participation from local leaders like the ones I met in Ovando, we will be successful in preserving our nation's treasures while still taking advantage of their potential for economic development, so that we hand them over to the next generation better than we found them.

Tom Vilsack is the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture.