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Solidarity

This past May 13 a couple hundred trucks filled with logs rolled into the Darby Lumber Co. sawmill in Darby, Mont. Owner Bob Russell greeted drivers with a big cookout. No, the event didn't mark the opening of a new operation. This was a protest convoy. It was spearheaded by industry people concerned over tied-up timber sales in national forests. Their message: a timber shortage, caused mostly by preservationist pressure combined with bumbling bureaucracy, is forcing sawmills out of business. Darby Lumber was picked as the symbolic mill because in recent months it has gone from two shifts to one shift to periodic shut-downs. I tip my hat to these folks for having the gumption to protect their livelihood.

Yes, something did happen to put the demonstration into motion. Recently, a three-judge 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled unanimously that the Forest Service had not considered the environmental consequences that rebuilding a road, followed by intensive logging, would have on grizzly bears and other animals in Kootenai National Forest in northwest Montana. The road, which climbs about the Yaak River, provides access to 57MMBF of sales already under contract and up to 150MMBF scheduled for sale the next two years. The court's decision stemmed from an appeal by preservationist concerns. The Forest Service had originally denied the appeal, as did a U.S. district judge. The ruling has put on hold sales of the 150MMBF until the Forest Service reassesses the environmental impact of road reconstruction.

Immediate reaction from industry was

heated, particularly in nearby Eureka where the convoy idea came from trucker Mike Mrgich at a town meeting. Commitments from various mills donating loads of logs poured in. The procession began in Eureka and moved down Highway 93, through Kalispell and Missoula, picking up trucks along the way. Some rigs came from Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Wyoming. Darby Lumber's Russell called the event "historical," adding, "it's the biggest thing that's ever happened like this."

Russell described his operation as a grateful recipient of the raw material. He paid a reduced cost for the logs, while truckers donated the hauling and local communities pitched in to cover some fuel costs. Russell says the stumping will only fire the mill for a couple of weeks, but added that it's the message that counts. Darby, which produces 30MMBF annually of Doug fir, lodgepole, larch, white fir and spruce, provides employment for 150 and contributes \$10 million annually to the economy. It receives raw material from Beaverhead, Bitterroot, Salmon, Lolo and Deerlodge National Forests, all of which Russell says are reducing annual sales drastically because of appeals.

Apparently, industry people in this area have realized it takes more than talk to be heard. What they must realize now is that it will take more than a one day demonstration to straighten what they believe is a tilted timber sales process, and to draw the support of the urban public. It will take continuing, convoy-like pressure in the courts and in the political arena. A way of life deserves nothing less.