



HELENA GETS TO WORK IN SOUTH HILLS



SONNY TAPIA PHOTOS, INDEPENDENT RECORD

From left, Hudson Hasselbach, Seth Blanksma and Kyle Engnes work on a connector trail between the Northwest Passage Trail and Ambrose Trail on June 18 in the Mount Helena Nature Park.

New trails, forestry project and trailhead closures

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It's South Hills maintenance season for the City of Helena Parks and Recreation Department.

Over the last week crews have worked on three projects within the city's open lands system "aimed at improving trail connectivity, enhancing recreational opportunities, and supporting forest health," a city spokesperson said.

The projects included a trail reroute, new connector trail and more fuel reduction work on Mount Ascension.

Next week, two trailheads will be temporarily closed in continuation of maintenance efforts.

The Mount Helena Trailhead will be closed on Tuesday, June 23, from 7 a.m. to noon and the Beattie Street Trailhead will be closed on Wednesday, June 24, from 7 a.m. to 11 a.m. for routine grass trimming and maintenance.

City officials are encouraging visitors to plan accordingly and use alternative trail access points during the closure periods.

"The City appreciates the public's patience and cooperation as staff work to maintain safe and well-kept recreational areas," a city spokesperson said.



Cohen Lee works on a connector trail between the Northwest Passage and Ambrose trails in the Mount Helena Nature Park on June 18.

For 40 years, people hiking from Oakes Street Trail to Virginia Dale have accidentally been crossing onto private property, Helena city staff discovered in 2025, according to city documents.

At the Oakes Street Park Trail, city staff constructed 190 feet of new trail, linking Oakes Street Trail with the Virginia Dale sidewalk in a way that keeps pedestrians in the public right-of-way.

Construction also began on a new

connector trail linking the Northwest Passage Trail and the Ambrose Trail in Mount Helena Natural Park.

Contract crews continued tree felling, pruning and slash-piling operations on approximately 73 acres of the north face of Mount Ascension. Work is taking place along portions of the Aftershock, 2006, Entertainment, and Mount Ascension Loop trails.

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Montanans Decide submits 100K sigs

Ballot initiative needed more than 61K sigs

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The campaign aiming to protect Montana citizens' right to enact changes to the law through ballot measures and limit lawmaker interference in that process announced on Thursday it had collected enough signatures to be considered by voters in the November election.



One day before the deadline to submit petitions to county elections offices, the group behind the initiative called Montanans Decide said it had gathered more than 100,000 signatures from residents of every county in the state. As a proposed constitutional amendment, CI-133 needs more than 61,000 verified signatures to qualify for the ballot.

"We want to say 'thank you' to the 100,000+ Montana voters who signed petitions and believe in keeping our government in check," said campaign spokesperson SK Rossi in a statement. "Ballot measures allow Montanans to propose and pass laws on the issues that matter to them, and CI-133 safeguards that right from government interference."

The measure, if passed by a majority of voters, would stamp into the Montana constitution the right to "impartial, predictable, transparent and expeditious processes for proposing a ballot issue, qualifying a ballot issue and submitting a ballot issue." It would bar government interference "unless justified by a compelling government interest achieved by the least restrictive means."

Put more simply, the proposed amendment would keep state officials from placing burdensome requirements on ballot measure campaigns. Montanans Decide says GOP lawmakers and statewide officials in Helena have used their power as government officials to target citizen-led initiatives more and more as abortion rights, recreational marijuana and other priorities have been codified by a majority of voters.

If passed, CI-133 would ban the government from taking a side on ballot measures and set a timeline for key steps in the ballot measure process such as approving language, resolving legal challenges and verifying signatures.

Heightened attention on the ballot initiative process comes after two high-profile efforts successfully amended the state's constitution: one in 2020 legalized adult-use of recreational cannabis and another in 2024 enshrined the explicit right to abortions.

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FOREST SERVICE

Chief signs 'momentous' plan to boost logging in Montana

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The U.S. Forest Service's top official was on hand in Missoula Wednesday to formally approve a plan intended to create a more reliable supply of timber from three of Montana's national forests — the first of its kind in 76 years.

"It's a momentous day," Forest Service Chief Tom Schultz said before putting his signature on the Tri-Forest Federal Sustained-Yield Unit.

The initiative coordinates logging projects across the Helena-Lewis and Clark, Custer-Gallatin and Beaverhead-Deer Lodge national forests, in an attempt to overcome timber harvest volumes that persistently fall below their stated goals.

It sets a target for harvesting 350-500 million board feet of timber over a 10-year period.

Speaking before the outdoor signing ceremony at the soon-to-open National Museum of Forest Service History, Schultz said the plan is designed to give "certainty

of supply" to the remaining lumber mills in the area, while eliminating more forest fuels to reduce the wildfire potential in those forests.

"They have to know that the supply is going to be there," he said. "They have to know that there's a regulatory environment they can count on ... government needs to be consistent. If they are swinging back and forth, that's the last thing industry wants."

The agreement covers the three largest national forests in Montana, together encompassing nearly 9.2 million acres of federal forest land.

Eli Ilano, the agency's deputy natural resources director, said the sustained-yield unit will rely on existing tools and authorities, including timber sale contracts, stewardship contracts and the Good Neighbor Authority, while including "accountability measures" to track timber volume in sales and deliveries.

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BEN ALLAN SMITH, MISSOULIAN

Tom Schultz, chief of the U.S. Forest Service, speaks during an event to celebrate the creation of a sustainable yield unit between the Helena-Lewis and Clark, Beaverhead and Custer-Gallatin national forests on Wednesday.