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## Montana calls out for movie work with 'Studio 406'

By VINCE DEVLIN



Film crew members work with actors on the set of "Call of the Wild," filming in Lincoln last year.  
LINDA THOMPSON/Missoulian

"Studio 406" was unveiled at the Los Angeles Film Festival in June, and announced back home by the Montana Department of Commerce as a "new film incentive package" designed to lure more Hollywood dollars to the state.

And what's new about "Studio 406"?

The name, it turns out.

All the incentives were already in place.

"Studio 406 is merely Montana trying to stay competitive in the very competitive area of on-location shooting," says Sten Iversen, manager of the Montana Film Office. "There are more than 300 offices like mine vying for filmmakers. With Studio 406 we're taking all Montana's assets - the whole laundry list - and packaging them so they're easy to market and sell."

The "Studio 406" campaign, designed by Partners Creative in Missoula, highlights everything from the big stuff (Montana's refundable tax credits on labor and some expenses) to the seemingly mundane (free use of office furniture) and most everything you can think of in between (almost 16 hours of daylight to shoot in during the summer).

The name, of course, comes from Montana's area code.

"The concept is to be more innovative than our neighbors," Iversen says.

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The state was a favorite of filmmakers in the 1980s and 1990s, most notably Robert Redford, who made "A River Runs Through It" here in 1991 and returned for "The Horse Whisperer" in 1997. The biggest year was 1993, when eight feature films were wholly or partially shot in Montana, including "The River Wild" and "Beethoven's 2nd."

But by 1998 and 1999 Montana was the location for a single low-budget film each year.

By 2000, not a single movie was filmed here.

Other states, such as New Mexico and Louisiana, were aggressively pursuing Hollywood's business by offering tax incentives that made it cheaper to film there.

So, too, were other countries. The Montana-set "Legends of the Fall" was filmed just north of the border in Alberta and British Columbia, taking millions of dollars of economic impact with it.

When the state legislature passed the Big Sky on the Big Screen Act in 2005, Montana was just the 10th state to enact tax incentives for filmmakers. Production in the state jumped 34 percent the next year.

Today, Iversen says, 43 states offer filmmakers tax incentives. The most recent to pass them, ironically, was California, home to the movie business.

"They were losing so much business to other states they had to pass incentives," Iversen says. "Most other states have seen the wisdom in doing this."

It's been a while since the bulk of a big-budget movie was filmed in Montana - "The Horse Whisperer" was probably the last one - but others do stop in.

The recently released "My Sister's Keeper," starring Cameron Diaz and Abigail Breslin, spent a week filming scenes near the east side of Glacier National Park last year, and dropped nearly \$200,000 in the area in just a few days. Much of it was payroll for Montana-based crew members, and there was plenty spent on motel rooms, food and catering services as well, Iversen says.

With only a handful of states, such as Kansas and North Dakota, not offering any tax incentives, the competition is again fierce for Hollywood's business. Michigan, one of the most economically depressed states in the nation, has ramped up its tax incentives for Hollywood big time. The 40 percent it returns on direct production expenses makes the 9 percent of "qualifying local spend" that Montana offers seem rather pale in comparison.

But there's a bigger picture, and Iversen says that's what Montana seeks to capitalize on with the "Studio 406" campaign.

Unlike most states, Michigan included, Montana has no sales tax, and that's just one part of the laundry list.

Through "Studio 406," the Montana Film Office advertises everything from "the country's best microbrews" to enjoy after a long day of filming, to its speed limits.

"You can average around 70 miles per hour between locations so you can shoot an urban scene in the morning and a remote setting in the evening," it says at the Film Office's revamped Web site ([www.montanafilm.com](http://www.montanafilm.com)) that pushes the "Studio 406" theme.

A longer "golden hour," that time when the light is best for filming, is touted.

"We have extraordinarily long days in the summer, which extends our golden hour from one hour into three, giving crews much longer shooting hours," Iversen says. "You can get 14 or more hours in a day. There are very few other places that can offer an added benefit like that."

Also advertised in the campaign are the more than 300 Montanans who make their living as crew members (and the 14 percent tax credit for hired Montana labor, with no cap and no minimum spend), as well as a supply of interns from the film school at Montana State University.

The state Film Office offers producers free script breakdown, free location scouting and free office furniture. The furniture is just a few state surplus desks, tables, chairs and filing cabinets that Iversen's office purchased before they were auctioned to the public, but it's one less thing filmmakers have to worry about if they choose Montana.

Of course, the biggest selling point is the state itself. For several hundred miles along the Eastern Front of the Rocky Mountains, filmmakers can point their cameras in one direction at a vast ocean of open prairie, or turn them in the other direction and have mountains and forests that reach into the sky.

"The biggest distraction," says the new campaign, "is the scenery."

Putting all the incentives under one umbrella and giving it a name - "Studio 406" - is simply a new marketing ploy.

"It's a tough year for movies," Iversen admits. "There's not a lot of spare change out there for financing."

But his office sponsored a film financing conference at the L.A. Film Festival, where Iversen pitched the "Studio 406" theme to filmmakers for the first time.

"I came back with some good contacts," Iversen says, and he'll know how the campaign was received as the months progress, and upcoming productions decide where to plant their cameras.

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