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First name: Jake

Last name: Gunther

Organization:

Title:

Official Representative/Member Indicator:

Address1: 1221 CHESTNUT ST

Address2:

City: Helena

State: MT

Province/Region:

Zip/Postal Code: 59601

Country: United States

Email: jake.gunther21@gmail.com

Phone: 5036793317

Comments:

Dear USFS review team:

I am writing to express my thoughts about the upcoming Custer-Gallatin National Forest (CGNF) Plan Revision.

With the recent, and completely unnecessary, FS Region 1 policy change to disallow mountain bikes from using Recommended Wilderness Areas (RWA's) in the Bitterroot, it is critical that the CGNF revision process takes a fair and balanced approach to bike use in our wild places. Cyclists have proven themselves to be responsible non-motorized stewards who dedicate more volunteer hours to maintaining backcountry trails than perhaps any other user group. Our peaceful and quite non-motorized sport has been proven to have minimal impact on trails (the same as hikers, significantly less than equestrians), and it would be a shame to ban the very people who ensure that ALL user groups get to continue to enjoy trails free from deadfall - just look at what happened in the Bitterroot when bikes were temporarily allowed back into the forest in the summer of 2018 and bikers cleared hundreds of trees from miles of trails that were just over a mile from a trailhead - clearly our trails fall into disrepair when our highly motivated bike stewards are banned from using them (even areas close to trailheads).

The time that I get to spend in the forest is unique from all other aspects of my busy modern life. The sound of a creek running in the background with birds chirping, trees swaying in the wind, and the quiet crunch of my tires on the dirt are the things that I live for and think about while occupying my office cube during work each week. My bike provides me with the freedom to escape to our wondrous wild areas in a non-destructive and peaceful way that cannot be replaced. While I cannot imagine attempting to deny others this simple joy (from whatever activity), that is exactly what the Sierra Club and other Wilderness zealots preach when they advocate for bike bans. Mountain bikers are conservationists by nature and the ONLY reason we cannot support conservation groups is that they have proven themselves to be ruthless in their quest to deny us access to the wild places that we love. My hope is that the review team for the CFNF plan will recognize this hypocrisy from conservation groups and will revise the forest plan in a manner that continues to provide for continued bike access to the trails that have been ridden and maintained by bikers for decades. The argument that bicycle use is inconsistent with Wilderness is completely nonsensical and emphatically proven by the fact that the Boulder-Whitecloud Wilderness, which was used by bikers for decades, somehow still managed to gain designated Wilderness status.

While I am not in favor of ANY trail closures to bikes, I can support the Gallatin Forest Partnership Agreement (GFP) as I recognize it is the result of collaboration and hard work amongst multiple user groups including the Southwest Montana Mountain Bike Alliance (SWMMBA). Given the vehement anti-bike stance of many large conservation organizations, nationally and in Montana, it seems likely that the GFP agreement is the best hope for bikes in the CGNF.

I implore you to continue to manage Recommended Wilderness Areas to allow bicycle use. Multiple times each summer I travel to the Bozeman area (from Helena) to ride trails such as Sypes, Middle and South Cottonwood, Truman, and others that are threatened by the short-sighted and unacceptable Alternative's C and D. These alternatives are non-starters for the bike community and if adopted will ensure that there will be reduced maintenance, increased user conflict, and 'illegal in name only' trail use.

I advocate for the Lionhead area to be managed as a Backcountry Area (BCA) as described in Alternative E. This designation provides significant protection while allowing for historical user groups to continue to access this special place by the non-motorized method of their choice. True backcountry rides like this are more special than any other and cannot be replicated by front country trails. The ruggedness, remoteness, abundance of wildlife, and natural feel of the trails in the Lionhead are irreplaceable to bikers - just as they would be to hikers or equestrians if their continued access was threatened. Climbing above the treeline and soaking in all the wonderous beauty that we have just outside our doorstep in Montana is a truly unparalleled feeling. Motivated mountain bikers have volunteered thousands of hours of trail work keeping trails in the Lionhead clear (often in partnership with equestrian groups) and have undoubtedly left the area significantly better than they found it. Please designate the Lionhead as a BCA to ensure that fair and equitable access is provided to all non-motorized user groups.

Thank you very much for taking the time to read and consider my comments on the forest plan revision.

Sincerely,
Jake Gunther