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Comments:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the draft Custer Gallatin Forest Management Plan and EIS. I have lived in Montana for 35 years and worked as a Wildlife Biologist during that time. I was a 20-year federal employee (Forest Service and US Fish and Wildlife Service), and enjoy recreating (hiking, skiing, birding, bird hunting, camping) on our public lands. I appreciate the amount of effort that goes into this level and amount of planning.

In summary, after reviewing all the alternatives, I feel that Alternative D provides the best strategy for managing our forest lands as we move forward. Alternative D will give us the best shot at sustaining ecosystem integrity, especially in the face of growing threats from climate change, a huge increase in recreational use, and encroaching private land development throughout the region. We must act very conservatively before releasing any Wilderness Study Areas - we only have this one chance and the need to protect them is greater than ever. Mass species extinctions are occurring now and this is our chance to help stem that tide. Although Alternative D is the one with the most recommended Wilderness in it, this is actually only a modest amount when we consider what we are up against as we move into the future. Proposed "Backcountry Areas" (BCAs) proposed in other alternatives are not an adequate substitute for Wilderness. BCAs focus too much on recreation, rather than ecosystem integrity. With increasing urbanization (Bozeman is forecast to approach the size of Salt Lake City within 25-50 years), it is imperative we fully protect as much of our wild ecosystems as possible.

Pryor Mountains: I support Alt D's proposal of four Recommended Wilderness Areas in the Pryors, rather than the Backcountry Areas of Alternative C. The Pryor Mountains are a hot spot of biodiversity and an ecological treasure, as well as being vital archaeologically and culturally, for the entire United States and sovereign Indian nations. I am a member of Montana Audubon and Montana Native Plant Society, and both groups have designated Important Areas (one birds, one plants) in the Pryor Mountains, due to unique and biologically rich assemblages of plants and birds. The south Pryor Mountains are home to several plant communities that are globally rare, yet locally common there in the Pryors. Bear Canyon area is phenomenal in terms of biodiversity for both plants and birds (Greater sage-grouse breed there also). These unique ecosystems have been seriously underrepresented in our national wilderness preservation system, and this is our chance to right that wrong. The Pryors are threatened by increasing recreational use and human encroachment, and designation as Wilderness is the best way to protect these resources. There are already more than 100 miles of motorized routes there - nearly all of the existing motorized and bike routes will remain with Alt D - so it is a moderate proposal in this respect. The proposed Backcountry Areas do not offer the level of ecosystem protection these sensitive areas need, particularly that of motorized and other uses. Time is of the essence in protecting the priceless ecological and cultural treasures of the Pryors, before it is too late. Please protect these areas with Wilderness designation.

Madison, Henry's Lake and Gallatin Mountains Geographic Areas: I support at least 230,000 acres of Recommended Wilderness in the Gallatin Range. This area is a crown jewel of our entire continent, and the importance of high species diversity and connectivity within the ecosystem must come first in an area with such great ecological value. As climate change closes in on the western U.S., these areas will only become more important for the well being of this ecosystem. The Buffalo Horn and West Pine Creek drainages should certainly be proposed as Wilderness (not as "Backcountry Areas"). These lower elevation habitats are critically important for many wildlife species, yet seem to be considered as sacrifice zones by the Gallatin Forest

Partnership (GFP). I am not sure why mountain biking has ever been allowed in the West Pine Creek area, since it is a WSA, but it is not appropriate there due to the extreme disturbance being caused to wildlife, not to mention other wilderness users. As a hiker in West Pine Creek, I have been dismayed to see a great deal of increasing heavy traffic, especially mountain bikes, in this important wildlife habitat.

In addition, the Lionhead Mountains are another important corridor - between Yellowstone National Park and the Centennial Mountains - and I fully support at least Alt D's 31,389 acres of Recommended Wilderness in the Lionhead area. Again, we are talking about the crown jewel ecosystem in North America: please allow it to flourish by fully protecting it.

I urge the Forest Service to include as much as possible of Cowboy's Heaven as Recommended Wilderness, to connect the Spanish Peaks and Bear Trap Canyon units of the Lee Metcalf Wilderness - this is a critical travel corridor for wildlife. It is also adjacent to the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest's Recommended Wilderness to the west, and thus would create a healthy, contiguous block of habitat.

I am not a supporter of the Gallatin Forest Partnership's (GFP) proposals that seem to be reflected mostly in Alternative C. I do not see how Alternative C would meet the legal mandate of "maintaining ecological integrity." Alternative C has "cookie-cuttered" out too many areas from recommended Wilderness, for example, where people want to expand mountain biking, rather than considering the greatest good of this area. This is short sighted. Mountain bikes are not appropriate in such critical grizzly bear habitat, and the Forest has many, many miles of trails available for biking (as well as motorized use). With burgeoning growth and development surrounding these wild places, time is of the essence in protecting them fully as Wilderness. It is well known scientifically that we need corridors and connectivity, and large areas, to protect the species and ecosystem processes in these landscapes - this is likely our last chance - please heed the urgency, and protect at least to the level of Alternative D's recommended Wilderness.

Bridger, Bangtail and Crazy Mountains GA: I support Alt D's recommendations for Wilderness in the Crazy Mountains, and also in the West Bridgers and Blacktail Peak areas, rather than as Backcountry Areas. Again, these areas are adjacent to one of the fastest developing urban areas in the nation, and we will lose the opportunity for maintaining ecological integrity if we don't take a strong stand now with protection. The Crazy Mountains are perhaps most importantly a spiritual and cultural area for the Crow Indians to utilize through their existing treaty rights, all the more reason for strong protections through Wilderness recommendation.

In closing, as a frequent public lands user in the Custer-Gallatin area during more than 30 years, I am dismayed and concerned with the growing and heavy recreational use and crowded trailheads we are experiencing throughout the region - it is alarming. Coupled with climate change and development, the future of our wild landscapes and resources looks grim indeed. I appreciate the Forest Service's great responsibility and work toward managing this burgeoning use in the face of unprecedented climate challenges. Thank you for your commitment to our resources.