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Dear Ms. Erickson

I am writing this letter as a concerned multiple use recreationalist, as well as a fourth generation Montanan. I have been fortunate enough to have the Custer Gallatin National Forest (CGNF) in my backyard, and care for it greatly. Therefore, I have many concerns about what the future hold for this unique land.

Recreational use is my biggest concern. The CGNF draws many recreationalists for many different kinds of use, such as, snowmobiling, dirt bike riding, atving, hunting, biking, horseback riding, skiing, and hiking. This list goes on. Areas in the CGNF are well known for having some of the best snowmobiling in the world. Snowmobiles, more often than not, have one of the lowest environmental impacts of any other form of recreation. The Gallatin, Madison, and Lionhead mountain ranges all receive significant amounts of snow, even during a "low snow year," the snow depth is much greater compared to other areas. Being that the snow depth is so deep, there are very little impacts to the soil and vegetation. If, by the unlikely chance that a snowmobile is able to reach ground level, the soil is frozen, making it hard to disturb. Plant communities that are beneath the snow will more than likely be either annuals, plants that will die come winter time, or perennials, plants that go dormant during the winter months. Perennial plants are fortunate enough to be able to heal if disturbed during the times when they are inactive. By the time the snow depth is low enough for the to occur, snowmobiles are unable to reach these areas. This is because there is a lack of snow to travel on in the valleys to reach the snow covered areas.

Dirt bike riding, atving, and utving are also popular. These motorized vehicles are more limited to where they can go compared to snowmobiles, and are confined to the trails that the CGNF already has in place. This allows the vegetation to grow and not be disturbed, and allows extra space for animals that inhabit the area during the summer months.

Wilderness areas favor young and healthy people that can hike and travel without the need of motorized help. Wilderness areas do not favor the elderly or disabled, all who have a right to enjoy the landscape. With added wilderness, the elderly and disabled will be restricted even more than they already are.

All types of recreation can affect wildlife in the CGNF. The nice thing about snowmobiles is that there is very little interaction with wildlife. The many of the large mammals that live in the CGNF winter in the lower elevations where the snow levels are low and feed is easier to get to. Whereas snowmobiles are in the higher elevations, away from elk, deer, bighorn sheep, and moose that occupy the lower elevations during this time. This is not to say that some animals do not live in the higher elevations when it is colder. Varmint type animals such as wolverines, bobcats, mink, and ermines can be found year round. These types of animals are less likely to be harmed due to their reclusive nature. During the summer months, the large mammals move back into the high country. Once the snow has melted off they have more room to separate themselves from recreationalists.

The need to put extra protections on grizzly bears and wolves is far from needed. The wolf recovery has been a great success. As of 2018, there were approximately 900 wolves in the state

of Montana, far surpassing recovery expectations. They have done their job of helping reduce elk numbers in Yellowstone and the GYE. While the elk population has remained fairly stable, however, the moose population has plummeted and ranchers are losing livestock, do to the increase in predators.

The recovery of grizzly bears has been a great success as well. Biologists estimate there to be a total of 2000+ grizzly bears in Montana, again far surpassing recovery goals. With the increase in grizzly bears, there has been an increase in human to bear conflict. These conflicts, almost all have been with hikers. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, sheepherders were forced to quit summering their flocks in the Absaroka Beartooth Wilderness, south of Big Timber, because they were losing to many sheep to grizzly bears. Some of these people's families had been herding sheep here for almost 100 years.

Buffalo should not even be considered in this plan. They are the most destructive animals in Yellowstone. They have overgrazed the Lamar valley to the point to where it looks like a desert.

If bison are allowed outside the park, more so than they are, they will not only damage the soil and vegetation, but also fences, other human property, and be a threat to humans. If bison are allowed in the Gallatin canyon, they will be faced with the ever presence of humanity, but also compete with the elk that winter here. Possibly forcing elk into the high country where the snow is too deep to access proper vegetation and requires extra energy to move, thus causing them to burn through their nutrient reserves quickly. With the shortage of much needed nutrient reserves, the elk's chances of mortality increase.

The proposed wilderness would prohibit logging. Logging is much needed to help maintain a healthy ecosystem. The CGNF has been plagued with beetle kill. The beetle-killed trees have a very low moisture content, making them susceptible to wildfires. The great number of beetle-killed trees allows fires to spread quickly and easily, much like we have seen in the CGNF over the last decade. Removing the dead and unhealthy trees allows for new vegetation to grow in place of the dead trees. If a fire comes through a forest that has been logged, the chances of controlling the fire increases when all there is to burn are green trees. The healthy tree burn slower, and with added space between each tree, makes it harder for the fire to spread from tree to tree. While logging will cause some pollution, it will be nowhere near the pollution a wildfire can produce. The smoke is not only harmful to the environment, but also to human health.

With a smaller area to recreate, environmental disturbances will increase in these areas because people will not be able to separate as much. With people spread out, any disturbances that may occur will not be as severe. Think about a huge city with a population of a million people that are all crowded together. The air quality is bad, there is little vegetation, and human-to-human conflict is increased. Now think about the state of Montana. We have a population of about one million people. With the exception of the larger cities, we are well spread out. This allows for minimal disturbances, healthy vegetation, healthy wildlife, good air quality, and fewer human to human conflicts. This is no different than the issue at hand in the CGNF.

Recreation brings in a lot of money to the state of Montana. The addition of wilderness will not only negatively affect the economy of Montana, but also all the businesses in the country that are somehow tied to different forms of recreation. Anywhere from vehicle sales to clothing sales will be affected. Logging will bring in added revenue, as well as jobs. Ranchers depend on grazing allotments to run livestock to help support their families. All due to added wilderness. Grazing allotments help improve the range condition by removing vegetation to help make room for new plants. This cannot happen with added wilderness.

The addition of more wilderness to the Custer Gallatin National Forest is not a good idea. I am not saying that there should not be wilderness, I am all for it, but in certain amounts. The amount of wilderness that we currently have is fine, it has done its job. Animals that were once drove to near extinction have made a full recovery with the help of the Wilderness Act. The Forest Service needs to step up to help maintain the roads and trails, as well as help educate the general public about how to safely and properly recreate in the CGNF. We can learn to interact with one another, on the same land, without the need for added wilderness.

Think about the ones that this will affect directly, such as the ones that live here and use the CGNF regularly. Please also take into consideration the amount of form letter submissions from out of staters, many of these people have not done the research to fully understand the role that the Custer Gallatin National Forest plays in our community. The addition of more wilderness will be detrimental to our unique ecosystem.

Sincerely,

Christopher Norem