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Comments:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit comments for your review regarding the Custer Gallatin National Forest. First, I consider myself a conservationist as well as a lover of recreational access to public lands on my mountain bike. My primary concern regarding the forest planning process is the loss of mountain bike access to historically ridden trails. I would like to advocate for no net loss of bike access in the forest plan revision and I support protections that are friendly to mountain bike use.

The Gallatin Forest holds a special place in my heart and in my memories. Between spring 2005 and late summer 2007 I worked as a guide at a wilderness program that operated in the Gallatin Mountains. I spent every other week of my spring/summer/fall months hiking with groups of at-risk kids around the Gallatin Mountains. I have seen fresh bear tracks, had close encounters with a mama bear and her cub, fished for trout in the alpine lakes, and have seen unforgettable sunsets and sunrises, and have weathered summer snow storms in the high country. In over 2 years of working every other week in the Gallatins, I never saw another group of people. The wild nature and remoteness of the Gallatin mountains is what attracts me to this range. As I spent time hiking along the crest trail (#96), I considered other ways to visit this place during my off-trail time. In 2009, some friends and I rented the Windy Pass cabin and hired some horse-packers from the Gallatin Gateway area to pack our gear and food (and some cold beverages) up to the Windy Pass Cabin for us as we rode our mountain bikes from the Hyalite trail head up to and along the Gallatin Crest Trail. This experience changed my life! It showed me the value and the importance of backcountry mountain biking experiences. I will never forget the August snowstorm that made our trip somewhat harrowing - and then the sun coming out as we rounded the final promontory before the descent into the Windy Pass cabin. Then the next day summiting Eaglehead mountain by bike followed by a descent down to Portal Creek and over to Porcupine to some cold beers waiting in our shuttle rig. The sense of remoteness and adventure this ride offered is exactly what myself and so many other mountain bikers across the country come to Montana to find - a grand and unforgettable backcountry mountain biking adventure! Words cannot adequately describe the sense of loss at the McAllister Lawsuit and subsequent reversal of the Forest Service shutting down mountain bike access to such an amazing experience. There are so few places that rival the Gallatin Crest trail ride, and with every forest plan, the mountain bike community faces the stinging loss of access to more and more of these wild, remote, challenging riding experiences.

As a backcountry mountain biker, my goal on a ride is to immerse myself in the wild in a way that allows me to slow down and connect to nature in these wild areas as well as to reconnect with myself. Backcountry and alpine mountain biking is a slow, deliberate, and intentional experience - many of the rides I have done in the backcountry average in speed 3 to 5 mph. This style of riding is not the adrenaline and Red Bull fueled antics that those who oppose bikes in the back country would have you believe; back country rides are deeply immersive experiences. The trails sought out by backcountry mountain bikers like myself are rugged, undeveloped, they are remote, and they are quite difficult to ride. They require solid navigation skills, self sufficiency, and they often require sections of walking or carrying your bike. When I, and other mountain bikers ride back country areas like the the Gallatin Crest or the Lionhead, we are seeking challenge, connection to place, opportunities for self sufficiency, solitude, and an undeveloped wild experience - essentially we seek a wilderness experience on our bikes. This is something that front country trails and roaded areas cannot provide. During the forest plan revision process, I would request that you consider using alternative land designations such as Backcountry Area in order to maintain wild, remote, and undeveloped areas for mountain bikers to access by bike. I would also urge you to consider maintaining connections for long distance trail riding

opportunities through wild and remote areas and across multiple landscapes for backcountry riding and for bikepacking. Long distance connectivity of trails is immensely important in helping back country mountain bikers and bikepackers pass through areas rather than be stopped or detoured to a road or highway, turned around at a trail junction or mid trail mid trail, or state boundary line because of a Wilderness boundary. Corridors through Wilderness or Recommended Wilderness would accomplish this connectivity while also protecting the resource.

Please note that I am in support of the bulk of the Gallatin Forest Partnership Agreement. This broadly supported agreement was the result of hard work and compromise from a diverse group of stakeholders. It offers an excellent starting point to work from with a few exceptions - I would like to see some changes for long distance connectivity of trails considered as I stated above. In addition to this, I'd like to see the Rock Creek, Windy Pass, Cooper Bench, and Big Creek areas removed from the Hyalite Porcupine Buffalo Horn WSA and added to the proposed Buffalo Horn Backcountry Area. Where boundary adjustments are not feasible, I would like to see the forest make use of corridors through, and cherry stems into, Recommended Wilderness and potential future Wilderness. The Gallatin Crest Trail #96 is an excellent example of where a corridor would be useful in providing egress through the proposed Gallatin Wilderness area.

In addition to the small change to the Gallatin Partnership Agreement, I'd like to see the Lionhead RWA managed as a designated Backcountry Area to allow for existing and historical mountain bike access to the The Lionhead Trail, Targhee Pass Trail, Sheep Creek and Coffin Creek areas, as well as Mile Creek Tr #214 - as outlined in Alternative E. The mountain biking community has worked diligently with other stakeholders such as the Gallatin Chapter of the Backcountry Horsemen to steward the Lionhead area and we have a vested interest in maintaining our access to this area. The Continental Divide National Scenic Trail is open to mountain bikes unless prohibited by Wilderness or travel planning. The same goes for National Recreation Trails, such as the Bridger Foothills Trail and Garnet Mountain trail. I value my access to these areas by bicycle and managing these trails to exclude bikes as described in alternative D is unacceptable.

Regarding Wilderness Study Areas and Recommended Wilderness Areas; I am of the opinion that until formal designation by congress, the all RWA's and WSA's should continue to allow bicycle access where it has been established. The scientific research is clear that there is no statistically significant difference between hiking and mountain biking on a variety of physical environmental conditions of our wildlands. In addition, there is a body of research that has begun to demonstrate that the presence of mountain bikers in wild and natural areas does not negatively impact others perceptions of quiet and solitude. In fact, Cessford (1995, 2002) found significant similarities in values and attitudes of "trampers" and "wilderness bikers" and that hikers who encountered bikers on trail had a more positive perception of mountain bikers than those hikers who didn't encounter bikers on trail. The 2012 planning rule Chapter 70, section 74.1(2) states the forest managers may "Continue existing uses, only if such uses do not prevent the protection and maintenance of the social and ecological characteristics that provide the basis for wilderness designation." The presence of mountain bikes does not degrade wilderness character nor does it prevent Wilderness designation as evidenced by the Boulder White-Cloud Wilderness designation in Idaho, where bicycling was allowed for generations up to the day former president Obama signed the Wilderness bill into law. The mountain biking community shares the same Wilderness values with the conservation community and would like these values and these large wild landscapes to be protected without having to sacrifice our bike access. For more in-depth information, please consult with the International Mountain Biking Association (IMBA) and local mountain bike advocacy organizations regarding best available science on physical and social impacts of mountain biking.

Thanks again for taking the time to gather information and involve the general public in this process.