

June 5, 2019

Ms. Mary Erickson
Forest Supervisor – Custer Gallatin National Forest
PO Box 130
Bozeman, MT 59715
VIA – email

RE: Custer Gallatin National Forest Draft Revised Forest Plan

Dear Ms. Erickson,

Thank-you for the opportunity to have input into the Forest Revision Plan. I am a lifelong resident of Sweet Grass County and chose to stay here and raise my family due to the lifestyle opportunities this area offers. I have enjoyed back packing, hiking, camping, 4-wheeling and recreating in the forest both South of Big Timber as well as North in the Crazyes. My family currently has a recreational cabin permit in the Gallatin Forest on the Main Boulder.

These are my concerns with the various alternatives, specific to the Absaroka Beartooths - Boulder River Drainage south of Big Timber and the Crazy Mtns north of Big Timber.

1. There is the potential for unintended negative socio-economic impacts to small communities such as Big Timber. Over 25% of the land in Sweet Grass County is either National Forest, BLM or State lands. This property is not part of the tax base and as such Sweet Grass County relies on PILT funds and other dollars to help pay for road maintenance, firefighting, and active emergency response and other general community type services. The county ends up picking up the costs of providing these services. Increasing Wilderness, Wilderness study, Back country areas, Research Areas and Special Areas have the potential to increase costs while limiting benefits. I am concerned that reducing the types and variety of recreational opportunities will severely limit and reduce the number of people able to recreate in the forest and reduce the recreational dollars spent in Big Timber and other small communities along the interface of the forest and private land. Furthermore, the upper Boulder River Valley has a rich history of mining and many artifacts including old mining equipment, abandoned mines and abandoned cabins offer a unique opportunity to explore and understand this area. Additional wilderness in this area will limit the ability of people to explore and understand while impacting the economy of the local community.
2. I am opposed to more regulation and restriction placed on the forest. Our Community relies on the forest being "user friendly". Additional wilderness restricts the opportunities for all citizens to use. While I recognize the rights of those who live outside of the area to comment, I also think they are unrealistic as to the amount of use, types of recreation and commercial endeavors and what limitations a wilderness/recommended wilderness/wilderness study area designation creates. Furthermore, the development of the Sibanye-Stillwater platinum/palladium mine in the Stillwater Complex of the Gallatin Custer Forest has created many job opportunities and is the largest taxpayer in Sweet Grass County. The mine employs over 600 people right here in Big Timber and my family business provides services to the mine.

This enable us to employ several families who live and work in Big Timber. Currently, the Good Neighbor Agreement allows a mechanism for input and compromise between the people who live and interact daily with those who operate the mine. A win-win for all. I believe that any plan or alternative that would require any additional permitting or a mineral withdrawal would be detrimental to all stakeholders. The FS needs to clearly acknowledge where the mineral rights exist and the right to access them

3. A forest that is unlogged and unmanaged becomes a potential fire hazard. Fire mitigation has taken over the forest budgets and redirects spending from maintenance. We see limited to nonexistent weed control, logging, trail improvements and watershed enhancements. The very act of doing sound maintenance helps mitigate fire. I recognize that budgets have been cut however more bureaucracy does not necessarily result in the limited resources being directed to where the most benefit can be derived. Providing trail and weed crews the dollars they need to do maintenance work allows healthier forests and better experiences for those using the forest to recreate. Timber production and harvest should be encouraged. Grazing permits should be encouraged.
4. As a cabin permittee holder I am concerned that increasing restrictions, new designations for use will have a dreaded creep effect that will eventually impact on the future of our cabin, one of the oldest cabins on the Main Boulder, south of Big Timber. The various alternatives claim to look at contributions to social and economic sustainability, however the conclusions drawn are very subjective and not a true reflection of the cross section of people who recreate and use the forest. Additionally, others who own small private parcels within the forest boundary are concerned that identification of potentially wild and scenic river eligibility (not a designation – yet) will limit their ability to fully enjoy their property. Areas designated as Recreational Emphasis appear to provide the most opportunities.
5. The concept of Connectivity is not clearly defined and as such it is unclear exactly what and where the “linkage” areas would be and what they would look like.
6. The Boulder Drainage has been identified as being impacted by pollutants due to mining and abandoned mining activities with a TMDL that surpasses some threshold established by MT DEQ. It is unclear what mitigation measures would be adopted, if any and/or what effect those could have on the public's ability to use the water and riparian areas. Although not identified as a priority watershed, there were 12 segments identified and it is not clear what the plan revision would do to try and reach its objectives or how it might impact recreation and access to the forest.
7. Finally, I am curious as to why the Forest Service is including Aircraft landing strips as such a high priority. Some explanation of need (I was unable to find any) and more specific identification of the areas where these would be built would be helpful.