

Date submitted (Mountain Standard Time): 6/2/2019 4:20:17 PM

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Comments:

Please accept these comments on the Draft Forest Plan and EIS for the Custer Gallatin National Forest. I have spent hours reading and reviewing these documents and associated maps. As background, I have lived in Bozeman for 25 years, am raising my family here, and engage in a diverse array of recreational activities (hiking, backpacking, mountain biking, fishing, climbing, nordic skiing, backcountry skiing, etc). I get out in the Forest at least a half dozen times per month with these outings being mostly in the Gallatin, Madison, Bridger, and Absaroka ranges. But I've also spent lots of time in Bangtails, Pryors, Beartooths, Lionhead portions of the forest.

The growing population and recreation pressures in the Gallatin-Park county areas threatens to dramatically impact the wildlife, solitude, and backcountry values found in the Custer-Gallatin NF. It is therefore critical that the USFS proceed with a new plan that is proactive and anticipating these pressures including an overall approach (at least for the western - old Gallatin NF - portion of the Forest) of protecting backcountry areas through Recommended Wilderness (and in some cases, Backcountry Management Area designation - with stronger/clearer management prescriptions than in Draft) while also investing in more recreational access and infrastructure in the front country.

It is personally very important to me that the Final forest plan have clear language and prescriptions that prohibits all non-conforming uses in Recommended Wilderness areas. Mountain bikes, snowmobiles, dirt bikes have enough other areas to use on the Forest and it is critical that the recreating public understand that the agency is not punting on hard decisions and allowing uses that are guaranteed to increase over time and decrease the very wildland values for which the agency has decided made these areas worthy for recommendation as Wilderness. I urge you to follow the lead of recent forest plan revisions for Flathead and Helena-Lewis and Clark NF and ensure you keep language in the Final that prohibits any mechanized or motorized recreational uses in Recommended Wilderness.

Here are some area specific comments:

Gallatin/Madison Ranges:

Overall I support the Gallatin Forest Partnership agreement, though I would like to see one change to its boundaries in the Porcupine-Buffalo Horn area. Specifically I'd like to see the Rec. Wilderness boundary extended further west so that it came out to just east of second creek in Porcupine and then ran south over Lone Indian Peak and due south from there. This would put Ramshorn Lake and the excessively steep, eroding part of Buffalo Horn trail (#160) into Rec. Wilderness (and so closed to bikes and motorcycles) but still allow for loop riding between the two drainages via trail #199 as well as keep lower Porcupine trails and loops open to bikes. Please consider making this change in the final plan.

Also, key to the Gallatin Forest Partnership agreement is having strong and the clear guidance and prescriptions for the three Backcountry or Recreation areas that is laid out in the Agreement. But in reviewing the Draft plan it appears that in some cases the agency did not follow incorporating all of these detailed components from the Agreement. It is critical that the final plan incorporate the exact guidance in the Agreement regarding management emphasis, monitoring, enforcement, etc for these areas.

Lionhead area:

I have backpacked in this area twice and ridden my mountain bike several times, including the Mile to Sheep Creek loop. But I recognize how wild this country really is and how important it is for grizzly bears. So I support keeping the existing Recommended Wilderness boundary from the 1987 Forest plan and so having Sheep, West Fork Watkins, and Watkins trails closed to all biking. Long, alpine type biking could still continue with Mile Creek trail and over into Caribou NF portion (Upper Targhee Creek and Dry Fork). This seems like a reasonable compromise for this area.

Crazy Mountains:

Having backpacked, hiked, and skied into the heart of this island range on multiple occasions I can vouch that it is both truly unique and truly wild. Today, there are the challenges of checkerboard sections in heart of the Range but I believe in decades to come that we'll see exchanges (similar to the Gallatin range consolidation bills that passed Congress) which will ultimately address at least some of these ownership and access challenges. So given this and given the spiritual importance to the Crow and other Tribes, I urge you to have at least some Recommended Wilderness in the heart of this range. It's deserving and what the Tribe wants; the checkerboard situation should not be an excuse to not have this (i.e. the USFS should learn from its mistake with the 1987 Plan where it didn't recommend any wilderness for the Gallatin Range because of checkerboard management concerns present then).

Pryor Mountains:

As the Draft Plan notes, the Pryors are different from the Beartooths or the Prairies and have exceptional floral and ecosystem diversity. Found in this range are landscape and ecosystem types totally missing or underrepresented in the national wilderness representation system. So I urge you to go beyond the paltry Recommended Wilderness in alternative C (6800 acres) and include much of the Rec. Wilderness laid out in Alternative D. Having hiked in Big Pryor mountain, Lost Water canyon, and Bear Canyon I can personally attest that they are truly wild and it is important for my and others enjoyment of these areas to not have any motorized vehicle use or presence.

Greater A-B area:

I strongly support the Final plan retaining areas currently recommended for Wilderness in the Absaroka Beartooth area, and additionally recommend Dome Mountain, Emigrant Peak, Chico Peak, Woodbine, East Rosebud to Stillwater, and Red Lodge Creek.

In closing, I commend the Custer Gallatin forest staff for the overall effective approach they have taken to public involvement and the in depth, helpful analysis that is found in the Draft plan. There is certainly a wide range of options laid out in the alternatives. As above detailed comments make clear, my hope is that the final plan will be some mix of Alternatives C and D as I think this would protect key wildlife and backcountry values (inc. wilderness) while still allowing for some compromises with regard to the existing and growing recreation uses (mountain bikes).

Please make sure I receive notice of the final Forest Plan and I have standing/details for potentially participating in the objections process.

Sincerely,

Peter Aengst