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Comments:

June 5, 2019

To: Custer-Gallatin National Forest

Re: Comments for CGNF Forest Plan Revision

Dear Forest Plan Revision Team,

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in the forest plan revision. As a mountain biker and outdoor recreation enthusiast, I want to make it clear that I support the Gallatin Forest Partnership agreement as well as the Outdoor Alliance Vision recommendation.

I strongly urge the Forest Service to consider designating the Lionhead area (particularly the Mile Creek, Coffin Lakes, and Sheep Creek trails) as a non-motorized Backcountry Area (such as in Alternative E) as an alternative to a Recommended Wilderness designation. The Lionhead area is practically a holy land for backcountry mountain biking that has captured the imaginations of mountain bikers across the Country with it's amazing alpine vistas and primitive experience.

Mountain biking opportunities like the Lionhead are very few and are quickly shrinking in Forest Service Region 1. The Lionhead is home to a very unique group of trails that offers a rare combination of qualities that backcountry mountain bikers cherish deeply. These qualities encompass the following:

1. Rideability and Trail Quality: This is obviously relative to the rider, but backcountry mountain bikers expect backcountry trails to be tough. However, there is a tipping point where the misery of walking outweighs the joy of riding. The Lionhead trails offers that rare perfect combination of tough vs. rideable.
2. Scenery: This often sets backcountry mountain bikers apart from "frontcountry" riders that rarely leave metropolitan area trails. Backcountry riders deeply prize the scenery of their rides and will drive great distances to rides trail systems like the Lionhead.
3. Alpine Character: This is similar to #2, but worth categorizing because of its high importance. Scenic alpine areas that can be reasonably accessed by mountain bike are becoming extremely rare in Montana. With recent forest plan and travel plan trail closures in the Bitterroot NF, Beaverhead-Deerlodge NF, Custer-Gallatin NF, and Flathead NF (and pending closures in the Ten Lakes area of the Kootenai NF), mountain bikers have lost access to well over 1,000 miles of backcountry trails in the past 10-years alone due to Wilderness expansions and shifting policies regarding recommended wilderness and wilderness study areas. Many of these trails encompassed the highly scenic and remote alpine areas that we cherish the most. The loss of additional alpine trail access in the Lionhead is simply unacceptable. The rarity of this unique experience for mountain bikers should be considered by the Forest Service.

It is important to me to preserve the wild undeveloped character of the Lionhead area while continuing to allow mountain bike use. This is why I believe a Backcountry Area designation is a perfect fit for this area. I value the rugged, remote, and untrammed experience that the Lionhead represents, and I do not feel that mountain bikers cause any degradation to these values by simply riding a bicycle there. Scientific studies support this viewpoint and it is frustrating to me that there is rampant misinformation and inaccurate conclusion about

mountain bike impacts to the wild character of landscapes and the wildlife that live there. Studies show that mountain biking has trail erosion impacts more akin to hikers, and usually much less impact than horses and motorcycles. Studies have also shown that mountain bikes often have less impact on wildlife than hikers since they move through the landscape relatively quickly and do not dwell in any particular location for very long. If anything, mountain bikers have improved the Lionhead by volunteering thousands of hours of trail work over the years.

Unfortunately, I have not yet been able to personally visit the Lionhead to ride, but many of my friends have brought back amazing stories, so it is at the very top of my bucket list to experience. Now with two young kids, it is difficult for me to escape to remote trail destinations, but I still try to carve out time for it a handful of times a year because the alpine backcountry experience is extremely important to me.

Outside of my support for the Gallatin Forest Partnership Agreement Area and Backcountry Area designation for Lionhead region, I generally believe that the Forest Service should continue to manage recommended wilderness areas to allow bicycles. Excluding bikes (as described in alternatives C and D) is unacceptable and would remove my preferred way of accessing an enormous portion of wildlands in the forest. Further, Alternative D would make many new Recommended Wilderness Areas and remove bicycles from hundreds of miles of trails across the Forest, potentially creating a profound impact upon mountain bikers. I believe that bike access should be maintained for trails such as Sypes, Truman, Middle Cottonwood, South Cottonwood, Mystical Bear and others in recommended wilderness areas. If bike access were lost to these areas, it could end up concentrating use in front country areas and degrade the experiences of cyclists and other recreationists.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment and participate in the planning for our shared public lands. I appreciate your time and consideration of this letter during your evaluation.