

Date submitted (Mountain Standard Time): 6/6/2019 8:50:17 PM

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Comments:

Gallatin Forest Plan comments . June 6, 2019

I have lived in Bozeman for 35 years and have been involved in recreating on the Gallatin Range and advocating for its protection the entire time.

I've skied every drainage on the western side of the range, pushed my children up to the Windy Pass Cabin in a baby stroller for long weekends, fished the streams, hunted elk and spotted mountain goats on peaks in the northern part of the range. I've backpacked the Gallatin Crest multiple times.

One conservation advocacy effort I'm most proud of is during my time on the staff at The Wilderness Society, working with sportsmen groups, the Forest Service and the congressional delegation to complete multiple phases of the Gallatin Land Exchanges to erase the checkerboard ownership of the Gallatin Range. If we hadn't accomplished that task, the range would now be crisscrossed with roads and housing developments, instead of the wild country it remains today.

I also engaged in the travel planning process more than a decade ago, and am relieved the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the Forest Service had to do more to protect the wilderness characteristics of the Range, which resulted in the travel planning system we find on the ground today.

During my family time at the Windy Pass Cabin, we witnessed how obnoxious the motorized use can be on the ridge, hearing motorcycles for miles as they speeded down the Crest trail, scattering elk and other wildlife. We witnessed mountain bikes going off trail in many places.

I am a strong advocate for wilderness designation on the Gallatin, and endorse the Gallatin Forest Partnership proposal as a reasonable approach to protecting wilderness as well as providing fair recreational access. The partnership proposal calls for wilderness on the Gallatin Crest south to Yellowstone Park, the wildest portion of the Range, and high-quality wildlife habitat, especially for elk and grizzly bears. The one change I'd make to the Partnership proposal would be to move the wilderness boundary west of Ramshorn Lake. The wilderness around Ramshorn is narrow as it approaches the park boundary.

The southern portion of the Gallatin Range is the only mountain range adjacent to Yellowstone Park that is not protected by Wilderness. It deserves Wilderness protection for its wildness, wildlife habitat and the sense of contributing to a larger, more resilient Greater Yellowstone.

Trails are malleable, they can be changed, rerouted, or moved over. In these processes, people - and agencies -- tend to focus on existing trails and access, as if they'll never change. I recommend we move the trail from Porcupine to Ramshorn Lake west and have it intersect with the Big Horn trail farther downslope, then build a trail to loop it back to the Porcupine trailhead. This would satisfy recreational users from Big Sky and open up a wider corridor of wilderness, which would facilitate more wildlife movement along and alongside the Gallatin Crest.

The area on the eastern side of the Gallatin Range, the Big Creek drainage remains wild and undisturbed and in the future will be a key wilderness area in the Range.

The recreation aspects of the Northern part of the Gallatin Range, in the Hyalite area is appropriate, considering the high use that area receives. In the past two decades, mountain bikers have created a whole network of non-system trails that the Forest Service needs to recognize and stop.

I recommend you adopt the Gallatin Forest Partnership proposal, with the wider strip of wilderness that includes Ramshorn Lake.

For the rest of the forest, I encourage the Gallatin-Custer to consider how to accommodate and enhance wildlife movements and corridors from the Gallatin Range to include the corridors north to the Bridgers, Bangtails and Crazy Mountains. This could include special management zones that would limit motorized and mechanized use, as well as any habitat alterations that would harm wildlife movements.

As for the Crazy Mountains, please honor the Crow Tribal heritage and history in those mountains, but affording the highest protection possible. I understand the checkerboard ownership in the range presents management challenge, but that should not be an obstacle to improved protection. I recommend the forest provide leadership to prioritize land trades to consolidate ownership so that land protection and access in the Crazies can be improved.

Future management of the Gallatin Range has been an issue since the Wilderness Study Act was enacted in 1978. Today, the Gallatin Forest Partnership has provided leadership for the best path forward to finally resolve some of these issues. The Custer-Gallatin Forest can provide additional leadership by implementing a forest plan that solves issues and conflict.

Thank you,

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