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Comments:

Dear Custer Gallatin National Forest,

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on the Draft Custer Gallatin Forest Plan. I have lived in Big Timber, Livingston and Bozeman for the last 40 years and a large percentage of my recreational time has been spent enjoying hiking, backpacking, birdwatching, cross-country skiing and mountain biking on the Custer Gallatin National Forest. Overall, I find the Gallatin Forest Partnership plan to be a well balanced agreement providing management solutions for wildlife protection and various recreational uses and I have been encouraged to see the Forest take these recommendations seriously in Alternative C. Below are some of my comments and concerns about specific areas.

Gallatin Geographic Area: Of all the areas being considered for recommended wilderness I feel the Hyalite-Porcupine-Bighorn Wilderness Study Area is the most important. The scenic and wildlife values are superb; I have enjoyed watching Bighorn Sheep, Mountain Goat, Elk, and Black Bear along the Gallatin Crest. I have also watched as 4 motor bikers rode up Hyalite Canyon and then proceeded to ride to the top of Hyalite Peak. The trail degradation, damage to vegetation, and erosion caused was terrible to see. The Gallatin Crest will always be a temptation and goal for motorized and mechanized riders. I have seen motorized tracks above Windy Pass too. The fragile alpine terrain and wildlife of the Gallatin Crest need the protection of wilderness designation.

As the population of the surrounding area grows, people need a variety of recreational opportunities. Hyalite Canyon and the Gallatin Canyon receive heavy use in multiple forms. There are plenty of opportunities for motorized and mechanized use in lower elevation areas. The Gallatin Crest deserves wilderness designation and people deserve a place to find the wilderness and solitude when they choose to seek it out. Alternative B's recommended wilderness area stops too far to the south of Hyalite Peak and should be extended to Hyalite Peak as recommended in Alt. C. It is an obvious continuation of the crest, and has the same fragile alpine terrain and same great wildlife habitat as the rest of the recommended wilderness. Alternative C provides a far better boundary for the Recommended Wilderness Area as it also includes a portion of the Big Creek watershed with its very wild nature and excellent wildlife habitat.

Buffalo Horn Backcountry Area: This area is recognized as one of the most valuable wildlife habitats in the Greater Yellowstone Area as well as an important connecting corridor for wildlife including Grizzly Bears. It is hard to imagine that the best management of this area is to include motorized and mechanized uses. I believe that the best alternative for this area is Alt. D and wilderness protection for the sake of the wildlife. If this is not to be, then Alternative C and the management recommendations of the Gallatin Forest Partnership best insure the protection of the wildlife resources while allowing for multiple recreational uses.

Madison Geographic Area: The Lee Metcalf Wilderness is a wonderful legacy that has been preserved for the future. Every time I hike in any of the sections of the wilderness I look forward to and welcome the sight of the wilderness boundary sign and all that it stands for: quiet, solitude, land relatively untouched by the hand of humans, beautiful country, and the adventure that wilderness offers. I encourage you to recommend expanding this wilderness to include the adjacent areas of the Cowboy Heaven, Lionhead, and Taylor Hilgard Recommended Wilderness Areas.

Bridger Mountains: I commend the Forest for recognizing the Key Linkage Area of the west Bridgers. I encourage you to accept Alternative C for this area and in the West Bridger Backcountry Area adopt management strategies to prevent loss of wildlife habitat value and to minimize conflicts between wildlife and the increased use by recreationists. Wildlife should be monitored and when needed establish seasonal closures of motorized and mechanized uses to secure wildlife habitat and connectivity.

Crazy Mountains: This island range is a special place with its raw rugged beauty, wild country, grand scenery, and easily accessible lakes. I am pleased to see a goal in the plan is to "work with willing landowners and partners to consolidate ownership and acquire access in the Crazy Mountains Geographic Area". I encourage you to protect the wilderness values of the Crazy Mountains while working to consolidate ownership and allow no more motorized travel than currently exists. The erosion from motorized vehicles on the first mile of the Trespass Creek trail is appalling. Private landowners would never allow others to come onto their property with motor bikes or other vehicles and do damage to their land and trails like that. We should not accept that level of resource damage on our public lands either.

Pryor Mountains: This is a historic motorized use area and over 100 miles of road are available to motorized use, and thus are also available to mountain biking. A very sufficient amount! The Forest Plan aims to balance uses but a birdwatcher like me has trouble enjoying the Pryors since there is so much noise from the vehicular traffic. The Pryors are recognized for their unique value for bird habitat and biodiversity. The area hosts bird species found almost nowhere else in the state, such as Blue-gray Gnatcatcher and Gray Flycatcher. A section of Bear Canyon has been designated as an Important Bird Area by Montana Audubon through a global initiative by BirdLife International. I strongly urge the Forest to recommend the four wilderness areas proposed in Alternative D to protect the unique and fragile nature of the ecosystem and to provide a balance of quiet, primitive recreation opportunities. A minimal network of trails could be allowed within the wildernesses to provide hikers a chance to escape from the noise of the motorized corridors.

Absaroka Beartooth Mountains: The A-B Wilderness is an absolute treasure and is valued and visited by people from all over the United States. We can thank those that have come before us for their foresight in the protection of this special place. To further protect the wilderness character of the area, the wilderness should be expanded to include adjacent tracts of similar value and natural qualities. The recommended wilderness areas in Alternative D should be adopted as RWAs, specifically the Chico, Emigrant Peak, Dome Mountain, East Rosebud to Stillwater, Red Lodge Creek, and West Fork Rock Creek Recommended Wilderness Areas.

Other Comments: I have enjoyed mountain biking all my life and spent most of my childhood riding snowmobiles. These sports are highly popular, incredibly fun, and they deserve to have areas where they can be pursued. However, just because bikes and machines are being built now that can go faster and further, we cannot sacrifice areas and allow resource damage to provide for all activities. Mountain bikes and motor bikes do not belong on fragile high elevation terrain and steep slopes where tail dragging and spinning out causes serious trail erosion. Nor should they be allowed in areas where disturbance to sensitive wildlife is a problem. Lower elevation front country and areas such as the Bangtails where there are already numerous logging roads provide quality biking opportunities without major resource damage. All recommended wilderness should be managed just like designated wilderness and not allow mountain biking and motorized uses.

Thanks once again for this opportunity to comment on the Draft Custer Gallatin Forest Plan. Ultimately the plan should aim in every way to protect the wildlife, wilderness values, and natural resources of the Forest for generations to come.