Comments/Suggestions for the Pryor Mountains

Catherine Nelson 2.27.2018

First I want to thank all the staff at the U.S. Forest Service for your efforts and positive intentions to create a new and revised plan for the Custer Gallatin National Forest.

Having hiked in the Pryor Mountains and experienced how unique it is, I would like to comment and emphasize the importance of this relatively small but very precious island range. I am greatly concerned that it will be adequately protected with this new plan.

There are three federal agencies responsible for the management of the Pryors and surrounding lands. From what I have learned, there is inadequate interagency communication and planning as well as arbitrary boundaries. I would suggest that the new proposed plan set as goals and criteria, a clear written intention to engage and work with the other two agencies. This would help to better protect the area, the wildlife, the ecosystem, in a more coordinated way in the years ahead which is essential for the plant life and wildlife.

A second concern is the use of the term, “backcountry areas.”

I do not know exactly what this term means. What are the consequences of this classification instead of “recommended wilderness area? “ An RWA has an established historical definition, specific criteria, management policy, etc. in comparison to a vague term, “back country area.” Why even use the term? The Pryor Mountains need to be fully protected as any RWA would be. I hope your team will reconsider this term, “backcountry areas ,”which seems vague and weak and even confusing. I wonder how the other two agencies would understand such a term.

A third discrepancy has to do with trails versus roads. The plan at present does not permit any new trails which would be understandable especially if the Pryors are reclassified as a RWA. However the FS has authorized over a 100 miles of motorized routes which seems to be way out of proportion to the existence of a few miles of trails. Such a decision would be detrimental to an RWA. I suggest this apparent discrepancy be reviewed and hopefully revised.

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My last point is about the consequences of all these decisions in protecting this invaluable small and isolated mountain range in eastern MT. It serves as a critical migratory corridor for birds. It is a vital habitat for the wildlife and the plant life as you pointed out in your report and it is is very unique. It serves as a resource for water for the region and has great value for the ranchers and farmers especially with climate change.

I have read that BCNRA and BLM would like to see 50% of land in the Pryors classified as wilderness. However your present plan is to classify only 9% of the Pryors as wilderness. This low percentage suggests the USFS is missing the value of ecological, habitat, and water resource characteristics in the Pryors. Once again there is a strong need for interagency communication and planning.