March 5, 2018

To: Custer Gallatin Forest Plan Revision #50185

Re: Comments regarding Forest Plan

From: Kenneth D Hapner

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 I have read the Proposed Action-Revised Forest Plan document and frankly find it to be overwhelming in length and content. In spite of that drawback, I will attempt to make several comments regarding the future management and stewardship of the Custer Gallatin National Forest. First, some information about myself and my interest in the Forest and its health. I have lived in Bozeman since 1969 and am now retired. During these years, I have spent many enjoyable excursions into the surrounding forest areas including the Bridger, Gallatin, Crazy, Absaroka and Madison ranges. I continue to ski, snowshoe and hike regularly in these areas. I own some property and a small cabin in the Crazy Mountains (Smith Creek) and have traversed the range by foot, east to west twice and have visited most of the mountain lakes found there. I believe that all these mostly undisturbed natural systems are incredibly important to mankind’s future and the society that we create. These treasures should be regarded as priceless and obligatory components of man’s continued successful existence on the planet and they should be managed with utmost intelligence, science and attention to their natural character and long-term sustainability. Political and moneyed influence should be disregarded where possible.

 The 30-year Forest plan must be flexibly broad, adaptable and has to account for continuing or anticipated challenges to its successful implementation and outcomes. The major threats to the long-term protection of the Forest and its resources, in my mind, are 1) destructive overuse from increased population and over-zealous resource utilization and 2) climate change and consequent impact on wildlife, vegetation, ecosystems and water resources. Advanced technology allowing even deeper penetration into fragile terrain should also be anticipated and planned for. These sources of real and potential harm to the Forest should be ever present in the mind-set of those professionals in charge of the development and implementation of the Plan. Key words are protective management and sustainability. In keeping with the spirit and philosophy of Forest management expressed above, a more detailed list of my particular interests is listed below.

1. Bridger/Bangtail and Crazy Mountains GA: The Crazy Mountains are a dramatic island range that possesses unique geological and scenic features. The high jagged peaks, ridges, cirques, streams, lakes and waterfalls surrounded by mostly solitude are clearly spectacular. The range is near the fastest growing community in Montana and is experiencing increased usage that may overwhelm the areas natural beauty and resilience. The higher regions of the Crazy range are clearly of pristine wilderness character and should be managed accordingly. Plans should be developed for the eventual designation and inclusion of the qualifying portions within the Wilderness system. The Middle Fork Canyon National Landmark and Big Timber Creek should be included. Likely eventual increased demands on water resources could be more effectively met. Efforts should continue to unravel the land ownership puzzle to allow broad wilderness character management. Present work on the Porcupine Lowline Trail regarding public access is a positive step.
2. Madison, Henry’s Lake and Gallatin Mountains GA: The area in the GA I am most concerned and worried about is the Hyalite-Porcupine-Buffalo Horn Wilderness Study Area (HPBHWSA). I have visited most of the region between Hyalite Peak in the north and Yellowstone Park to the south. This is a truly unique corridor of beautiful mostly untouched land extending 36 miles from YNP to Hyalite Canyon near Bozeman. The Gallatin Crest Trail should receive national recognition. I have lead many summer hikes to Windy Pass, Eaglehead and Sentinel mountains and Hyalite Peak. I have hiked up Daly Creek in YNP and out via Teepee Creek or over Daly Pass and down through Buffalo Horn. The point I would like to make is that one cannot distinguish between YNP and the southern end of the Gallatin Crest where it meets the Park boundary. The high rolling alpine hills, the beauty and solitude extend unhindered both north and south. All of the high country extending from the park boundary to Hyalite Canyon is really a continuation of the character and beauty of YNP and I think it should be managed as wilderness and non-motorized back-country recreation. This entire area is in danger of being “loved to death” and must be protectively managed in order to preserve its beauty and resources for future generations. It is certain that there will be increased impact from the rapidly growing surrounding communities. In effect, the area from Hyalite Peak to Daly Pass should be regarded as Yellowstone Park North! I do not take time to recite the myriad of resources, particularly wildlife and water, clearly stated in the CG Revised Forest Plan, that similarly require long-term protective management. Fifteen to 30 years is a long time and undoubtedly more pressures will evolve toward destructive uses on these (and other) natural primitive lands and the CGNFP should deploy appropriate foresight to mitigate them.
3. Other wild areas in the CGNF: Where possible, wild areas separating established wilderness should be listed as designated wilderness study areas in order to promote connectivity in the broadest geographical and ecological sense. For example, Cowboy Heaven, connecting Spanish Peaks and Bear Trap units of the Lee Metcalf wilderness area should be listed as potential wilderness. Similarly, all 22,800 acres in the Lionhead corridor connecting Yellowstone Park and the Centennials should be conserved. Sawtooth and Tayor Hilgard areas also represent wilderness quality primitive country and should be listed as above. I recall the immense visual and emotional impact when standing on Windy pass and looking down onto the vast expanse of Big Creek valley and the Yellowstone River visible in the distance. The scenic impact is overwhelming, especially when one is surrounded by acres of blooming flowers in the high alpine meadows. This Big Creek expanse should be given recommended wilderness status in conjunction with the expanded HPBH area. It is truly exceptional.

The Pryor Mountains is a unique island range that exhibits a number of special characteristics. Their isolated location, climatology, geology and ecology impart unique characteristics not found elsewhere in the CGNF. They have historic and on going cultural connections to the Crow and other native American tribes. In addition to recommended wilderness for Lost Water Canyon Punch Bowl, Big Pryor and Bear Canyon should be also included as potential wilderness and managed accordingly. Although unfamiliar with several additional areas recommended for special management by the Forest Service, including Cook Mountain, King Mountain and Tongue River Breaks, I applaud the sensitivity and attention to these places and recommend they be managed as recommended wilderness in the interim. The Desired Condition for all these unlisted areas should be to insure “Natural processes play their role and human use leaves little permanent or long-lasting evidence”. This DC can be best achieved by managing the areas as Recommended Wilderness.

I thank the Custer Gallatin Forest for the opportunity to offer an input to the emerging 2018 Forest Plan.

Kenneth D Hapner