



MONTANA STATE SENATE

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DURING THE SESSION

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Public Comment, Custer Gallatin Forest Plan Revision
To the Custer Gallatin Forest Plan Revision Team:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the draft forest plan and draft environmental impact statement (DEIS) for the Custer Gallatin National Forest Plan Revision Process.

As a senator representing District 26 in Billings, this forest holds special importance to my constituents and me. While other towns, like Bozeman, Cooke City, and Red Lodge may be more associated with the Custer Gallatin National Forest because of the forest's presence in the surrounding counties, the Custer Gallatin National Forest looms just as large in Billings' identity. Billings, "Montana's Trailhead" and the state's largest city, is defined by the combination of our cosmopolitan urban amenities - like a walkable brewery district, a symphony orchestra, and many art galleries - and our easy access to public lands - including the Beartooth and Pryor Mountains, each just an hour's drive from the heart of the city. Our ability to find solace, reflection, and renewal in the public lands surrounding a bustling city is a major reason why many of my constituents live and raise their families here, and one of the things I love most about my city. Protecting the incredible intact public lands that surround Billings and protecting our environment has always been a priority for me in the Montana State Legislature.

I know how important this forest plan revision is preserving some of our most beloved wild places. These places make possible the experiences of quiet solitude, reflection, and connection which are important for physical, mental, and emotional health. Wallace Stegner said, "We simply need that wild country available to us, even if we never do more than drive to its edge and look in." For these reasons I am asking the Planning Team to adopt recommended Wilderness protections for some of the Custer Gallatin's most iconic landscapes.

The Pryor Mountains are one of Montana's greatest treasures because of their beauty and rare combination of ecosystems. There is truly no other landscape on Earth like the Pryors. Soil disruption through inappropriate wheeled travel - like bikes and vehicles - physically interrupts these rare plant communities, and invasive and noxious weeds that are largely introduced and spread by these modes of transportation pose grave danger to some of the most pristine and sensitive areas of the Pryors.

I encourage the Planning Team to manage the four largely intact areas of the Pryor Mountains - Bear Canyon, Big Pryor, Punch Bowl, and Lost Water - as recommended Wilderness with no non-conforming uses. This will protect these four major areas, giving natural processes the time and space to reclaim any disruptions, and reduce the burden on the Forest Service to maintain any mechanized or motorized trails and associated impacts in these areas.

I also encourage the Forest Service to adopt a goal specifically associated with providing appropriate signage in the Pryors to ensure users know where they can and cannot traverse. These signs should not be limited only to motorized and mechanized recreation: providing appropriate quiet recreation trail head signs and markers along hiking and equestrian trails will ensure quiet recreationalists do not inadvertently trample sensitive plants as well. Minimizing loud and damaging recreation in areas where such activities are not appropriate respects the spiritual and cultural importance of the Pryors, their plants, and their animals to Montana's indigenous communities, particularly the Crow Tribe.

The Beartooth Mountains, including front country trails and the backcountry of the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness, are also deeply treasured, and a favorite destination for my constituents. While the designated Wilderness area itself protects much of the high-elevation lakes and plateaus, the lower elevation landscapes lack critical resource protections. Pressures on the AB will only continue to grow, both with increasing population in the surrounding communities seeking access and global warming that is altering natural processes before our eyes.

To protect the integrity of the entire Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, it is important to protect the wildlife habitat, forests, and landscapes that lie just outside the bounds of the designated Wilderness. That's why I also encourage the Planning Team to continue to manage the existing Republic Mountain, Line Plateau, and Burnt Mountain recommended Wilderness areas as such, with no non-conforming uses.

I also encourage the Planning Team to continue to manage the existing Red Lodge Creek/Hellroaring and Mystic Lake recommended Wilderness areas that help create managerial continuity. Likewise, I encourage the Planning Team to manage the Red Lodge Creek, East Rosebud to Stillwater and Woodbine proposed recommended Wilderness areas as such, with no non-conforming uses.

A little farther from Billings but no less important are the Crazy Mountains, one of the most iconic skylines in Montana. The Crazy Mountains hold special cultural, religious and historic significance to the Crow Nation, as the Tribe has repeatedly expressed to the Custer-Gallatin National Forest. I strongly encourage the Planning Team to manage these mountains for their highest values, protect the wild, primitive character of the Crazies, and support a nomination of the range for designation as a Traditional Cultural Landscape. Furthermore, these mountains must be managed in coordination with the Crow Tribe.

Thank you for your hard work and effort on this plan. Montana's public lands are some of our best resources, and we depend on dedicated, thoughtful federal agents to manage them for their highest value.

Sincerely,

Senator Margie MacDonald