



Sweet Grass COUNTY

Office of the County Commissioners

*Bill Wallace
Melanie Roe
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November 18, 2019

Mary Erickson, Forest Supervisor
PO Box 130
Bozeman, MT 59771

RE: Comments on South Crazy Mountain Land Exchange

Dear Ms. Erickson:

The Board of Sweet Grass County Commissioners appreciates the opportunity to submit comment on the proposed South Crazy Mountain Land Exchange.

Based on our review of the USDA information, it appears that the Forest Service has shown the Cottonwood Lowline Trail and Robinson Bench Road on Forest Service maps, but that these trails/roads cross private lands where there is no easement (at least in certain locations.) The private landowner is willing to grant road easements on three sections where there is no recorded easement, which will provide legal access all the way to the Rock Creek Trailhead.

Likewise, under this proposal, the Cottonwood Lowline Trail will be located primarily on public land, with an easement granted by a private landowner across one private section. These actions will address a longtime concern we have of Forest Service trails depicted on maps when no legal easements exist, causing trespass issues and hard feelings between private landowners and the public. No one, especially government, should encourage trespass. This proposal addresses one of the primary issues raised about the Crazies-that of checkerboarded ownership and access.

The Sweet Grass County growth policy recognizes the importance of private property rights and encourages sustainable use of natural resources. This proposal will better enable the Forest Service to manage consolidated lands and would allow the public to have a larger block of land in which to legally recreate, however it also replaces two sections of prime elk habitat with high alpine rocky glacial till that limits recreational opportunities.

We understand that Rock Lake is the largest lake in the Crazy Mountains and has been managed for Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout. Smeller Lake is likewise managed for cutthroat trout. We note that the two lakes involved have been stocked by Fish, Wildlife and Parks, and while we have read the concerns that the fishery is better in lower sections, that may be due, in part, to the stocking that is occurring in the lakes. Obviously, FWP believes it beneficial to stock the lakes and this provides the Forest Service with some control at the headwaters of these creeks. We do concur with the retention of the landowner's irrigation water rights, which are critical to agriculture's operations, while transferring recreation and stock rights to the Forest Service.

Finally, while it makes sense to us that the landowners want to exchange for lower sections that allow cohesive management and use of their properties that lie outside, as well as inside, the Forest Boundary and that the Forest Service would receive some of the higher elevation sections which would allow for limited backcountry experiences due to the extreme ruggedness of the higher mountain landscape. Furthermore, Sweet Grass County is always concerned about creating more wilderness which limits use and recreation.

In conclusion, we understand that this is a negotiated resolution between landowners and the Forest Service addressing checkerboarded lands, access and resource management for both private and public lands. We believe that these types of compromises are the best for all involved and hold the most hope for resolution of these situations that exist across Montana and other western states with checkerboarded private and public land.

Sincerely,



Bill Wallace



JV Moody



Melanie Roe

Board of Sweet Grass County Commissioners