

Voices: Historical trail rights must be part of Crazy Mountains solution

The Crazy Mountains of Montana are a rare jewel. Many of us who have lived here our whole lives understand the value of these natural resources and the need to preserve them. The Crazies are home to sensitive species wolverine and Canadian Lynx, as well as mountain goats, bear, elk, mule deer, and white tail deer.

The tributaries that flow from these mountains into the mighty Yellowstone River contain the Yellowstone Cutthroat trout, a native species experiencing population declines. There is only one place in the world that has these fish and that is right here in Yellowstone country. These mountains offer the public everything from hunting (putting meat on our tables), fishing, and firewood to heat our homes to just being able to head into the mountains for tranquility and solitude.

Unfortunately, the Crazies are slowly shrinking for the public, which in turn makes its resources subject to privatization. That is evident as we continue to trade off some of the most beautiful sections of land to bordering landowners who have commercial outfitting businesses and to those who have illegally locked gates and other access obstructions, in an attempt to stop us, the public, from using our historical trails.

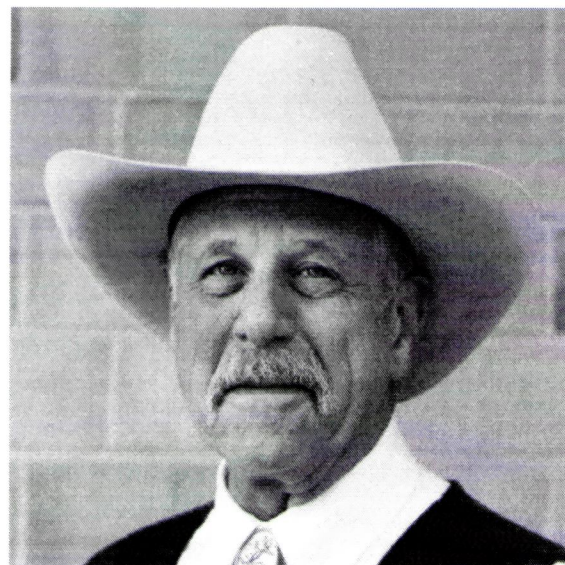
In February of 2020, Friends of the Crazy Mountains, and our coalition group, was invited to a meeting hosted by Western Land Group, Inc. and Western Skies Strategies, paid consultants of Yellowstone Club and Montana Stockgrowers, respectively. Yellowstone Club, through its consultant, was appointed by the Forest Service to help negotiate a plan for east side Crazy Mountain access issues in exchange for consideration of a land swap to increase the Club's private skiing terrain.

During the course of this meeting, our coalition voiced support for portions of the proposal, but we also voiced concerns pertaining to destruction of wildlife habitat, sacrificing lands that contain prime habitat along the Sweet Grass, as well as losing Historical Trail #122 and East Trunk Trail #115/136. Our concerns and easily implemented alternatives were not even considered.

The Forest Service has long held the position that these trails are public. In 2006, Crazy Mountain landowners sued the Forest Service challenging that position after release of the 2006 Gallatin Forest Travel Plan. A federal Judge ruled for the Forest Service, which serves the public.

By hiring a Congressional lobbyist who registered on March 1, 2020, Yellowstone Club signaled this proposal on the East Crazies is going to be pursued Legislatively and not Administratively, which means the NEPA process and public comment period would be bypassed.

Are we willing to surrender long-standing and wildlife friendly access points on the Upper Sweet Grass and East Trunk, in exchange for the unnecessary destruction of wildlife habitat? Yellowstone Club is willing to build a new 22-mile trail through some of the most secluded wildlife habitat in the Crazy Mountains and sell that as a compromise for losing the reasonable Sweet Grass Access and some lower mountain public sections.



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This 22-mile trail will also exclude many user groups, such as the young and elderly, because the new location is in much steeper and more rugged terrain than the existing #122 and #115 trails.

This proposal, at best, is simply fancy window dressing and behind the curtain, the Forest Service is fleecing away our public lands.

The Crazies are on a path for commercialization at the expense of the public and wildlife. For example, the pending South Land Exchange involves three luxury resorts. The writing is on the mountain, recreation is replacing our long- fought efforts of conservation.

STOP!! Do not let the Forest Service keep relinquishing our historical trail rights. Once these historical trails are gone, they are extinguished forever. Demand the Forest Service stand up and defend the public's historic rights on these trails.

The pending lawsuit in federal court against the Forest Service on these trails should play out before any hasty decisions are made that will impact future use of these areas and trails. This case will set precedent for the future. We should not put the cart before the horse. What is to prevent a different landowner with inholdings to throw a gate up and lock the new trail in the future, again creating litigation at the public's expense?

At this point, please send in your comments to Senators Tester and Daines and Representative Gianforte asking this proposal be submitted Administratively, as the public needs to have a voice. The existing proposal, if adopted, will forever alter the primitive character of the Crazy Mountains.

Asking the public landowner to give up their historical trail rights would be like asking the private landowner to give up their historical water rights without a fight. They would not and neither should we!

Brad Wilson is Founder of Friends of Friends of the Crazy Mountains. His family has over 100 years of historic use on the public trail system in the Crazy Mountains.