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Please consider the following my personal comments in response to the Forest Service Draft Environmental Assessment (DEA) of the Redstone to McClure Pass segment of the Carbondale to Crested Butte (CCB) Trail. While I appreciate the time and energy of the Forest Service staff in the production of this study, it is with much regret that I find the assessment an insufficient study in several ways.

Pitkin County’s Carbondale to Crested Butte Trail plan is an ecological death by a thousand cuts. In an era of dwindling wildlife populations, shrinking wild spaces, and ominous climate change, the proposed trail approach is obsolete. The time has come to reevaluate a plan long in the cards. I have admittedly been opposed to this trail from its inception almost two decades ago when Pitkin County first sued my family for a trail easement through our property. The family property is in the hands of new owners, but I remain steadfast in my opposition. Thirty-five years tucked away in my piece of mountain paradise has given me an intuitive link to the natural world around me that is both a gift and a curse. I see eighty-three miles of trail traveling in and out of habitat and across bridges and streams coming with a monumental cost – financial, environmental, and ecological.

The White River National Forest is in the final days of accepting comments on their Draft Environmental Analysis of the Redstone to McClure Pass segment – 7.5 miles in all. The segmented approach to trail construction that Pitkin County is undertaking is clearly a tactic designed to fool the public into missing the total thousand cuts of the full 83-mile trail plan. Of this seven-mile plus segment, a full four and a half miles is planned to leave the highway right-of-way and encroach on intact wild spaces. Decades of peer- reviewed science tells us that each segment of this trail, including the one at hand, will involve species loss, habitat and river/stream degradation, and a whole lot of financial resources and carbon emissions in the process. The isolation and subsequent consideration of this one mere segment is simply deceiving – as though the trail plan could end there. Given the development of this segment at a cost of many millions of taxpayer monies, Pitkin County and the trail aficionados will relish the added incentive to connect Redstone to Carbondale. And so on. Asking for comments on one segment of the trail does not allow for an informed public nor valid input. It is the totality of impacts that must be considered for an educated public response.

Over these many years, as it became apparent that Pitkin County was not giving up on this trail plan, I have been forced to compromise my oppositional stance to support a highway alignment, not because I think it removes all impacts, but in hopes it could lessen them and provide a compromise. A highway alignment negates the impacts of numerous proposed bridges as well as off highway habitat encroachment and fragmentation. How surprising it was to find out that, according to the recently released White River National Forest Draft Environmental Assessment, that option has been scrapped. One of the excuses is that a highway alignment offers a compromised human experience – another antiquated consideration that does not align with the ecological and environmental challenges before us. Intact habitat not only serves our dwindling wildlife; such undisturbed areas act as carbon sinks that benefit all of us with carbon sequestration. As well, the first segment of the CCB trail from Carbondale to the KOA does not appear to deter use and enjoyment with its highway alignment. The highway alignment is indeed an option and would allow for trail placement where impact is already significant. That is the only alignment that Pitkin County should be considering. I find it disturbing that the Forest Service DEA did not evaluate all viable options for a trail alignment.

There is no shortage of recreational opportunities that presently compromise plant and animal species and fragment habitat. When and where will it stop? The Draft EA simply does not paint a complete portrayal of the impacts. Missing are the impacts of accompanying parking lots for trail users. Their development and placement along the Crystal River will have significant effects on aquatic species and river habitats and cannot be developed and experience subsequent use without stream degradation. Also missing are the statistics that demonstrate the significant decline in Mule Deer, Elk, numerous bird populations, and countless other animal, plant, and aquatic species in our area. Elk populations in the Roaring Fork Watershed have experienced a 50 percent reduction since 2000. Local bird populations have experienced significant declines and die offs in recent years. Recreational trails and accompanying human disturbance have long been documented by peer-reviewed science to result in ongoing loss of countless plant and animal species, and Colorado Parks and Wildlife has stated that outdoor recreation has become the largest indirect impact to our area’s wildlife populations. The EA neglects to consider the expected usage in real numbers or speak to the inevitable bandit trails and inadequacy of seasonal closures. The increasing demand for more recreational trails to be established, as well as the frequent use and expansion of unofficial trails, which further fragment and diminish the quality of remaining wildlife habitat and create disturbances to wildlife on a year-round basis, do not align with the reality of the present climate crisis and resultant ecological repercussions of recreation. The Draft Environmental Analysis is inferior in its analysis of countless impacts to the segment at hand and the totality of impacts posed by trail build out. Clearly additional environmental studies need to be performed.

When we know better, we do better, and the safeguarding of any native places and the community of creatures it supports must be of utmost importance. Our human existence depends on it! Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Respectfully submitted, Edie Engstrom