

# Ravalli County Collaborative

Ravalli County Montana

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HAMILTON, MT 59840

May 10, 2022

Bitterroot National Forest  
Stevensville Ranger District Front Desk  
88 Main Steet, Stevensville, MT 59870

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Stevensville Ranger District

Ref: Bitterroot Front Project Scoping

The Ravalli County Collaborative (RCC) has received and reviewed the scoping announcement for the Bitterroot Front Project and hereby provides the following comments.

The Ravalli County Collaborative is a diverse group of volunteers appointed by the Board of Ravalli County Commissioners whose adopted mission is to promote the wise use and management of public natural resources by local, state, and federal agencies within Ravalli County. The RCC employs a collaborative forum for reviewing and developing natural resource actions and policies that affect our community.

The RCC has been engaged with the Bitterroot National Forest (BNF) since 2020 on a potentially large-scale management project the length of the Bitterroot Range in Ravalli County otherwise known as the Bitterroot Front. This continuing analysis has focused on how natural resources, access, recreational activities, and infrastructure should be managed on the Bitterroot Front, with a particular emphasis on fire risk mitigation. Please include the four RCC comment letters previously provided to the BNF on the Bitterroot Front Project into the current scoping record.

The RCC believes that a landscape-level management strategy is warranted along the Bitterroot Front to address the potential for loss of life, catastrophic wildfire and subsequent damage to private property. The 2020 Montana Forest Action Plan, convened by the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, documented the highest wildfire risk areas in Ravalli County. Wildfire damage potential is very high in these areas because of forest fuel loads, rapid suburban development adjacent to BNF lands, and climate changes.

Because wildfire does not recognize property lines, the RCC believes management of the Bitterroot Front must include strategies and actions that are beneficial on both public land and private property. Collaboration and coordination between state and federal land managers, Montana state

natural resource agencies, Ravalli County, various non-governmental organizations, and interested citizens will be essential. Frequent and open communications to inform the public of management actions will promote public support.

Beyond the immediate need to address catastrophic wildfire, a new comprehensive management strategy for the Bitterroot Front offers additional opportunities to provide:

- Healthy ecosystems
- Improvements in wildlife habitat
- Watershed management
- Protection of scenic resources
- Well designed and maintained recreational access
- Forest products

The Bitterroot Front project will complement and maintain the integrity and character of special management areas on BNF lands. Minimizing unusually large and hot wildfires on lower elevation forested slopes will benefit designated wilderness, natural research areas, inventoried roadless areas, and wilderness study areas.

In summary, the RCC believes that aggressive but well-designed management actions on BNF, state and private forested lands along the Bitterroot Front is necessary and timely. The Bitterroot Front requires a management approach where it is understood that no one group has all the answers. Multiple perspectives and much dialogue is necessary to build and implement a comprehensive management strategy.

The Ravalli County Collaborative intends to stay engaged on the development and implementation of the Bitterroot Front Project and will provide comments on the upcoming project proposal.

Sincerely,

Steve Schmidt



Co-Chair

Wayne Rusk



Co-Chair