

Certified Mail # 7020 0640 0002 0340 3177

July 14, 2022

Custer-Gallatin National Forest

PO Box 130

Bozeman, MT 59715

RE: COMMENTS ON THE PROPOSED RED LODGE MOUNTAIN FUELS PROJECT ON
THE BEARTOOTH RANGER DISTRICT

Hello,

Native Ecosystems Council and the Alliance for the Wild Rockies would like to provide the following comments and concerns in regards to the proposed Red Lodge Mountain Fuels Project to be implemented on the Beartooth Ranger District.

1. Please include an action alternative that promotes wildlife, including elk, wolverine, grizzly bears, lynx, and songbirds, including those associated with old growth and snags.

The scoping letter indicates that the proposed Red Lodge Mountain Fuels Project will protect structures, including at the ski area and in Red Lodge, from fire. Please note that this is a controversial claim, and as such, the agency needs to provide other alternatives that do not require the sacrifice of wildlife habitat for questionable benefits. Also, for a fuels alternative, please provide the body of current science that supports the claims that these treatments, including new roads and fuel breaks, will significantly reduce the risk of human structures to fire.

What this project will actually do is increase the fire risk to the ski area, and do nothing to reduce fire risk to Red Lodge. Please address this concern, and show why it is not a valid issue given that the proposed fuel treatments will require severe impacts on wildlife, including the grizzly bear, lynx, wolverine, and elk.

2. Please include large-scale maps that can be printed out to include all the important information for the Red Lodge Mountain Project; these maps should define all the proposed treatment types.

To enhance public review of the proposed project, we would like to have the upcoming National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analysis provide easily-read and easily-printed out maps of the proposed treatments, with all the proposed treatment types actually identified, including burning. The maps provided with the scoping document included a lot of unnecessary information which limited the quality of information regarding proposed units. This also made it very difficult to print out a readable map of all the units. Please make the maps “user friendly” for everyone.

3. Please include a complete analysis of all planned and ongoing projects within the Red Lodge Mountain project area, including the planned Greater Red Lodge Area Vegetation and Habitat Management Project, which is also proposed within the Red Lodge Mountain Project Area.

The proposed project includes many planned harvest units and some roads for the Greater Red Lodge Area Vegetation and Habitat Management Project. Please include an assessment of direct impacts to wildlife that addresses these previously-planned units and roads, as well as time lines for both projects.

4. Please address specifically as to how fuels are being managed in the Red Lodge Mountain Project Area, including previously-planned treatments, to demonstrate to the public that there is a scientifically-based method for designing fuels treatments to achieve a specific level of effectiveness.

Every logging project the agency designs is supposedly to reduce fires. However, there are never any actual criteria as to what percentage of the landscape needs to have fuels reduced to achieve what level of fire prevention. Please provide a range of fuels alternatives that provide different levels of claimed effectiveness for fire protection, including for the ski area and the town of Red Lodge. If fuels treatments are expected to protect human structures, surely there are different levels of treatments to achieve different levels of protection. And since the greater the level of fuels treatments, the greater will be the impact on wildlife. The agency needs to provide a range of alternatives to show how these 2 factors are being balanced out and/or considered by the agency. This is important since we are identifying a public issue of maintaining wildlife, including the threatened grizzly bear and Canada lynx, the proposed wolverine, and an economically-important species, elk and mule deer.

5. Please provide an assessment of project impacts on an economically-important species, elk, in the project area as well as the cumulative effects area that includes the state lands and the entire project area for the Great Red Lodge Area Vegetation and Habitat Management Project.

Please implement the recommendations regarding the current best science for elk that were developed in a collaborative report with the Forest Service and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks in 2013. Please identify the current and planned levels of hiding cover, and define what the habitat effectiveness will be before, during and after all projects are implemented in the project and cumulative effects area, including adjacent State lands. Please provide a measure and map of elk security as defined by the Hillis Paradigm, for the current and planned levels in the project and cumulative effects area. Please provide the information needed to address the current level of elk vulnerability in this hunting district, such as bull/cow ratios over the last dozen or more years.

Please map and define the current acreage of all current elk, mule deer and moose winter range, and measure how all projects in the project area and cumulative effects area will affect these big game populations based on the level of winter range being provided. As for mule deer winter range, please define how

prescribed burning maintains or improves a key winter forage species for these deer, which is sagebrush as well as some conifer use. What level of reduction of winter ranges for these big game species is considered tolerable for the current population, and how is this being determined?

6. Please provide an assessment of how all projects in the project and cumulative effects area will impact songbirds associated with old growth forests as defined by Region 1 criteria as per Green et al. (1991).

Please summarize and map all existing old growth as per Green et al. (1991) in the project and cumulative effects area, and define how all projects planned in this landscape by the Forest Service will affect birds associated with old growth. This includes at least 15 bird species associated with old growth forests. The current best science indicates that 20-25% old growth is needed for maintaining populations of these associated species. Does this level of old growth occur in the project and cumulative effects area. If not, why don't significant adverse impacts already exist for western forest birds associated with old growth? How will this project address this public issue of maintaining old growth for western forest birds? Please include an action alternative that provides this level of old growth at suitable elevations for forest birds.

7. Please provide an assessment of how all projects in the project and cumulative effects area will impact songbirds associated with forested snag habitat.

There are at least 20 western forest bird species that use snags, largely snags located within forest habitat. Please assess how the proposed forest thinning and clearcutting will affect the local distribution of these species. Also, please define how the agency will balance out the goal of fuels reduction with the requirement of these forest birds for not only forested snags, but for wildfire that creates snag forests. What level of forested snag habitat is required at the project area level to maintain these species in the affected landscape, and if this is not implemented for the project, how will significant adverse impacts be avoided for western forest birds? We would request that the agency not state that snags will be left in

harvest units to address viability of these 20 species of western forest birds, and they require snags within forests, not within harvest units.

8. Please provide a thorough analysis to the public as to all the long-term requirements that will be needed in order to maintain the proposed reduced levels of fuels on roughly 2000 acres in the project area.

We assume that since the agency believes it is essential to reduce fuels on roughly 2000 acres, or a third of the landscape surrounding the Red Lodge ski area, that the agency plans to maintain these low levels of fuels over time. The agency needs to define specifically how this will be done over the long-term. What will be the future treatments in all the proposed harvest units in the future? If these areas will require endless, perpetual treatments, this needs to be assessed as per cumulative effects on wildlife. This includes the required road densities, as well as what is likely a permanent removal of habitat for western forest birds, and relatively permanent disturbances to other wildlife, including the grizzly bear, lynx, and wolverine. The complete impacts of implementing a fuels reduction program need to be fully defined to the public, not just the initial treatments, and how such a program will still maintain wildlife. It appears that the agency is deciding to exclude wildlife management from this project area, and this decision needs to be fully defined to the public.

harvest units to address viability of these 20 species of western forest birds, and they require snags within forests, not within harvest units.

8. Please provide a thorough analysis to the public as to all the long-term requirements that will be needed in order to maintain the proposed reduced levels of fuels on roughly 2000 acres in the project area.

We assume that since the agency believes it is essential to reduce fuels on roughly 2000 acres, or a third of the landscape surrounding the Red Lodge ski area, that the agency plans to maintain these low levels of fuels over time. The agency needs to define specifically how this will be done over the long-term. What will be the future treatments in all the proposed harvest units in the future? If these areas will require endless, perpetual treatments, this needs to be assessed as per cumulative effects on wildlife. This includes the required road densities, as well as what is likely a permanent removal of habitat for western forest birds, and relatively permanent disturbances to other wildlife, including the grizzly bear, lynx, and wolverine. The complete impacts of implementing a fuels reduction program need to be fully defined to the public, not just the initial treatments, and how such a program will still maintain wildlife. It appears that the agency is deciding to exclude wildlife management from this project area, and this decision needs to be fully defined to the public.

9. Please provide a thorough assessment and description of how all current roads, including temporary roads in the project and cumulative effects area, as well as the "fuel breaks," will affect wildlife security and mortality risks.

The Red Lodge Mountain Project includes many new miles of temporary roads, as well as an undisclosed mileage of fuel breaks, which at a minimum can be defined as motorized trails, that will have to be maintained as open trails in perpetuity if they are to function as fuel breaks. The total miles of fuel breaks need to be identified, and their effect on wildlife along with roads and other motorized trails, on wildlife, from the grizzly bear, lynx and wolverine to elk need to be defined to

the public. If the agency is going to claim that the fuel breaks and temporary roads will have no motorized use after project completion, the basis for this claim needs to be provided. If there is no illegal motorized use occurring on agency roads in this landscape, this needs to be substantiated. We note that Region 1 developed Interim guidelines for management of threatened and sensitive wildlife species in 1991. These recommendations include maintaining no more than a mile of motorized access per section for the lynx and wolverine. The current best science recommends no more than a mile of motorized routes for the grizzly bear, and 60% of the landscape as security. It is unclear that these habitat recommendations can be met in the Red Lodge Mountain project or cumulative effects area, especially without washing out impacts by including roadless lands. For elk, optimal habitat has no more than about a mile of active motorized routes per section, while over 2 miles per section of active motorized routes significantly reduces elk use. Again, it does not appear that maintaining elk habitat can be achieved with the current proposal.

Please include an action alternative that provides recommended levels of active motorized routes to wildlife in the Red Lodge Mountain Project Area; this alternative needs to include the level that would occur during and after project completion, including estimated levels of illegal motorized use on temporary roads and on fuel breaks.

10. Please address how the project will impact wolverine prey species, as the snowshoe hare, and carrion on big game winter ranges, as well as displacement effects of roads and motorized trails.

The proposed project and cumulative reductions of big game winter ranges, including moose, mule deer and elk, need to be assessment as to forage availability for the proposed wolverine. This species is highly dependent upon winter carrion on big game winter ranges, as well as spring ranges, for winter survival. What would the level of reduced carrion availability for wolverine be in regards to direct and cumulative impacts in the project and cumulative effects area, for wolverine? What level of reduction would be considered a significant effect? Also, what level of reductions in snowshoe hares and red squirrels is

expected in the project and cumulative effects area, and again, how is the level of significance on wolverine going to be measured. If fuels reduction is going to be a permanent activity in this landscape, what does that imply for wolverine persistence? How can this loss of habitat be mitigated? And as we noted previously, the wolverine is sensitive to motorized routes. What project designs will address this effect? Please include an alternative where the recommended level of no more than one mile per section of active motorized routes is going to be met.

11. Please define the current distribution, acreage, and abundance of whitebark pine in the Red Lodge Mountain Project Area, including maps, and define how the project will have no significant adverse impacts on this tree species.

There is current science that indicates that a variety of logging treatments in whitebark pine have failed to create regeneration of this species for up to and over 40 years. There is also science to indicate that thinning of whitebark pine stands increases, not decreases, the risk to pine beetles. So we are interested in how this species, which is proposed for listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) is going to be impacted by the Red Lodge Mountain Project. If logging and burning treatments are going to be claimed as promotion of this species, we request that the relevant research be provided.

12. Please provide a thorough summary of the current grizzly bear use in the Red Lodge Mountain Project and cumulative effects area, and define how conservation of this threatened species will be promoted with the proposed land management activities.

The current best science recommends no more than a mile of motorized routes per section in grizzly bear habitat. It is also recommended that there be at least 60% of a given landscape that provides core security habitat, with each core area being at least 2500 acres. Please define how these recommendations will or will not be met in the Red Lodge Mountain Project and cumulative effects area, and if these recommendations will not be met, what mitigation is planned to avoid

significant habitat losses for this species? Also address how the project, including both roads and fuel breaks and associated illegal motorized use as well as foot traffic by hunters, will impact the mortality risk to local grizzly bears. If long-term risks of mortality to the grizzly bear are expected, how will this affect the population of bears in this landscape and within the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem?

Please include an action alternative that meets these recommendations and thus promote the conservation of this threatened species in currently-occupied habitat. We request that security areas be well distributed across this landscape, and not relegated to sterile high elevation areas, including those that are steep and have been severely impacted by fire. The security areas should be consistent with known grizzly bear use in the project and cumulative effects area.

13. Please define the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) for the Red Lodge Mountain Project Area by the required definitions.

There are specific requirements for delineating the WUI. Please map this area(s) correctly for the Red Lodge Mountain Project Area.

14. If the agency is going to remap lynx habitat for the landscape that includes the Red Mountain Fuels Project, this remapping requires public involvement, which to date has not been done.

The past re-mapping for lynx habitat in the landscape of the Red Mountain Fuels Project, including the previously-evaluated Greater Red Lodge Area Vegetation and Habitat Management Project, has never been through public involvement. Until this public involvement requirement of the NEPA is completed, any management of lynx habitat in this landscape is a violation of the NEPA. We also request that in this public involvement, public comments and review are essential so that the current best science can be addressed.

We also note that the Northern Rockies Lynx Management Direction (Lynx Amendment) including the 6% allowance of lynx habitat loss in the WUI, is not only extremely outdated as per the current best science, but has never been validated with any monitoring as to effectiveness. This lack of effectiveness monitoring, which is a violation of the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) is noted in the 2018 Species Status Assessment for lynx completed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Until this direction is verified as maintaining and conserving lynx, it should not be applied to lynx habitat, especially lynx critical habitat as occurs in the Red Lodge Mountain project and cumulative effects area. Between the outdated management direction provided in the Lynx Amendment, and the remapping of lynx habitat in the Red Lodge Mountain landscape by the Forest Service, lynx persistence in this landscape is in jeopardy, which is a significant adverse impact that requires an environmental impact statement (EIS).

Regards,



Sara Johnson, Director, Native Ecosystems Council, PO Box 125, Willow Creek, MT 59760; phone 406-579-3286. sjohnsonkoa@yahoo.com.



Mike Garrity, Director, Alliance for the Wild Rockies, PO Box 505, Helena, MT 59624; phone 406-459-5936; wildrockies@gmail.com.



Jason Christensen, Director, Yellowstone to Uintas Connection, PO Box 363, Paris, ID 83261, jason@yellowstoneuintas.org