

SENATOR JOHN ESP

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Custer Gallatin Forest Supervisor
Mary Erickson
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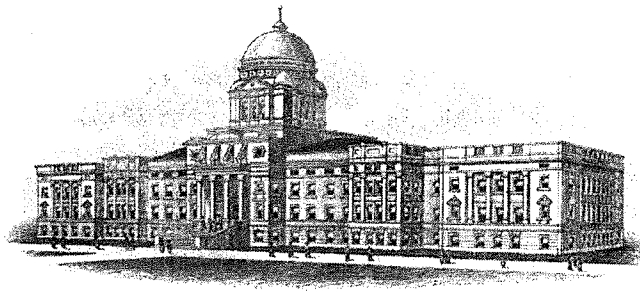
RE: East Crazy Inspiration Divide Land Exchange
Project 63115

Dear Ms. Erickson:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the East Crazy Inspiration Divide Land Exchange. My family settled in this area in the 1880s, and as a life-long resident of Sweet Grass County, I write in support of the land exchange. This land exchange is the culmination of years of work by a dedicated group of people in trying to find solutions to the issues of private property interests, public access, checkerboarded lands and resource management in the East Crazies. Getting the participation of 6 different landowners, each of whom brings something integral to the exchange, is very unique.

Listed below are a few of the reasons I support the exchange:

1. This exchange consolidates 20 sections of public land, and eliminates some of the checkerboarded ownership in both public and private hands. The consolidation of lands, be they public or private, reduces a lot of the inherent conflicts in access, boundaries, resource management decisions, noxious weed control, conservation of habitat, ranching operations and wild lands.
2. The exchange recognizes private property rights, too often just given lip service, by acknowledging it has no written or adjudicated easements to Sweet Grass Canyon, and that the landowners have allowed access across their private lands, but by permission, for decades. This exchange proposes a new public trail, located primarily on public land post-exchange, which trail will be paid for by the private party not at taxpayer expense. The public will gain dedicated access, as well as continuation of the permissive access as long as private property is respected.
3. The Custer Gallatin National Forest recently adopted a new Forest Plan. In that revision, The Custer Gallatin National Forest determined that significant portions of the East Crazies should be in a backcountry designation and an area in the southeastern portion of the range is now recommended wilderness. The new proposed access route, which provides for non-motorized and non-mechanized access, is the access compatible with those designations.



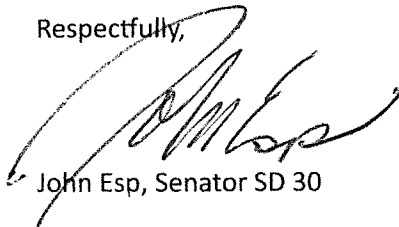
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4. The exchange results in a net gain of public land acreage by more than 20% of the total exchanged lands. I know that some complain the private interests get "lower" lands (although there really are no low lands in the Crazies), but to do any exchange in this area any other way would not accomplish the goals of consolidating lands and eliminating checkerboarding, facilitating management of property or reducing access conflicts. I also suspect some of the perceived values of the lower lands are overstated by opponents who have never been there.
5. Switchback Ranch has committed to a conservation easement on Crazy Peak and no residential development there. The private landowners in Sweet Grass Canyon already have their land in a voluntary citizen initiated zoning district (the only one in the County) that restricts divisions under 160 acres. The East Crazy Mountain landowners are not landowners interested in subdivision, but multi-generational ranches who wish to continue their historic family operations and steward the land.
6. The proposed exchange provides for wildlife connectivity and provides opportunities for the Crow and others who seek the high mountains for quiet recreation and spiritual purposes. It also opens up hunting opportunities that do not presently exist.
7. Yellowstone Club is paying for a trail and offering Smeller Lake in the exchange, both benefits to the public. Yellowstone Club is not acquiring anything in the East Crazies in this exchange.
8. Finally, by choosing to address these issues through collaboration and compromise rather than litigation, the Forest Service demonstrates that it wishes to be a partner with private landowners in solving some of these unique challenges.

Respectfully,



John Esp, Senator SD 30