

From: [Frank Szollosi](#)
To: [Daugherty, Sara - FS, ID](#)
Cc: [Erickson, Mary - FS, MT](#); [Hecker, Ronald - FS, MT](#)
Subject: Re: [External Email]MWF letter seeking additional 30 days on Otter Creek RR EA
Date: Monday, January 23, 2023 8:39:24 AM
Attachments: [image001.png](#)
[image002.png](#)
[image003.png](#)
[image004.png](#)
[20221212.South Otter Project \(2\).docx](#)

Apologies, Sara, attached, thank you! Hope it can be attached to ours in a way that is publicly available...

On Mon, Jan 23, 2023 at 9:37 AM Daugherty, Sara - FS, ID <sara.daugherty@usda.gov> wrote:

Hi Frank, I don't see the attachment you speak of on my end. Can you send it again?

Thanks,



Sara Daugherty
Montana-Dakotas NEPA Strike Team Leader (detail)
Forest Service

Northern Region

Ecosystem Planning

p: (teleworking - please email for phone contact info)

sara.daugherty@usda.gov

www.fs.fed.us



Caring for the land and serving people

From: Frank Szollosi <frank@mtwf.org>
Sent: Thursday, January 19, 2023 5:50 PM
To: Erickson, Mary -FS <mary.erickson@usda.gov>
Cc: Daugherty, Sara -FS, Kooskia, ID <sara.daugherty@usda.gov>; Hecker, Ronald -FS <ronald.hecker@usda.gov>
Subject: Re: [External Email]MWF letter seeking additional 30 days on Otter Creek RR EA

Mary, Sara and Ronald,

Happy New Year. Please find attached additional comments from Montana Wildlife Federation on behalf of our members Nancy Schultz and Clint Nagel - they also represent the view of MWF affiliate Gallatin Wildlife Association. Thank you for including them in our file on the South Otter project.

Frank Szollosi

On Thu, Nov 17, 2022 at 4:37 PM Erickson, Mary -FS <mary.erickson@usda.gov> wrote:

Frank, thank you for your letter. I'm sorry that we weren't able to talk in person. At this time, I am not able to extend the 30-day comment period for the South Otter Environmental Assessment and do not anticipate the need for an additional comment period.

Please allow me to provide a little more of my rationale.

As you mentioned, the South Otter project public scoping began January 13, 2021. Several documents were made available on the project website that included a description of the proposed action, proposed treatments and strategies, and several maps. A letter was mailed to 99 individuals/entities notifying them of the proposed action. This information remains on the project webpage to this day. A contact for the project as well as the contact for the Responsible Official has been available online as well. Scoping is required for all Forest Service proposed actions, however, there is no prescribed method for how this must be accomplished. We designed our methods of public engagement based on the nature of the project and commensurate with the level of interest that we heard. The District Ranger hosted a field trip with members of a Forest collaborative on their request and reached out to the Tribes and Commissioners.

You are correct that this proposed action is analyzed as an EA under provisions 36 CFR 218 subparts A and B. A 30-day comment period is required and that cannot be extended (36 CFR 218.25(a)(1)(iv)). The 30-day comment period for the South Otter EA began the day after the legal notice was published on October 26 in the Billings Gazette and concludes on November 25th.

It is important to note that the Forest Service allows comments anytime, including outside

designated comment periods. Objection eligibility can be met by submitting comments and meeting the requirements at 36 CFR 218.25(a)(3) during scoping beginning in January 2021 and as you did with your letter during the EA 30-day comment period. We would also encourage you to provide further specific comments and concerns within this 30-day comment period, if you would like. With the comments we receive, we will work to consider and address all comments and will put out a Final EA and Draft Decision for an objection period early in 2023. This will provide MWF another formal chance for engagement.

I would also like to provide a couple clarifications to your comments on the proposed action. There will be no new permanent system roads constructed. Temporary roads would be constructed, (following design features) to access commercial harvest units and would be obliterated after use. While this is a landscape scale restoration project that spans a number of years, it is designed in compliance with the guidance in our new Forest Plan, the culmination of a 6-year public process and collaborative work with State wildlife agencies.

I look forward to addressing your concerns as we move forward with this project.

Thank you again for your interest in the South Otter project.

Mary



Mary C Erickson (she/her)
Forest Supervisor
Forest Service

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Caring for the land and serving people

From: Frank Szollosi <frank@mtwf.org>
Sent: Tuesday, November 15, 2022 10:57 AM
To: Erickson, Mary -FS <mary.erickson@usda.gov>
Subject: [External Email]MWF letter seeking additional 30 days on Otter Creek RR EA

[External Email]

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Mary,

Thanks for returning my call yesterday and relaying the information you did. Attached is our letter asking for an additional 30 day public comment period on the South Otter R&R EA. I'll try reaching you by phone to further discuss. Thank you very much.

Frank

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Frank Szollosi

executive director he/him

montana wildlife federation

established 1936

call or text me at 406-417-9909

engage on [facebook](#), [instagram](#) & [twitter](#)

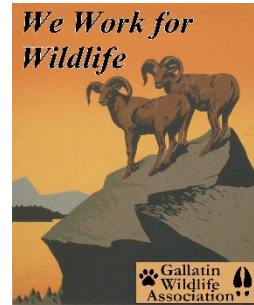
and at www.montanawildlife.org

or drop us a line at P.O. Box 1175 Helena, Montana 59624

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**GALLATIN WILDLIFE
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December 12, 2022

Ronald Hecker, District Ranger
Custer Gallatin National Forest, Ashland Ranger District
P.O. Box 168
Ashland, MT 59003
Email: Ronald.hecker@usda.gov sara.daugherty@usda.gov

Submitted via web portal:

<https://cara.fs2c.usda.gov/Public/CommentInput?Project=58396>

Re: Comments on the South Otter Area Landscape Restoration and Resiliency Project Environmental Assessment

Dear Ranger Hecker:

My name is Nancy Schultz, Secretary/Treasurer of the Gallatin Wildlife Association in Bozeman, MT. I want to thank you for the opportunity to submit these comments on the South Otter Area Landscape Restoration and Resiliency Project Environmental Assessment. Gallatin Wildlife Association (GWA) is a local, all volunteer wildlife conservation organization dedicated to the preservation and restoration of wildlife, fisheries, habitat and migration corridors in Southwest Montana and the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, using science-based decision making. We are a nonprofit 501 (c) (3) organization founded in 1976. GWA recognizes the intense pressures on our wildlife from habitat loss and climate change, and we advocate for science-based management of public lands for diverse public values, including but not limited to hunting and angling.

To begin with, our organization must also protest the short-time frame (30-day) that was set aside for public commenting. This was not near enough time for leadership to send in comments on an issue that is so intensive in size and scope as the South Otter project. Between those citizens who hunt, the passage of the Thanksgiving Holiday and other issues deserving of our time, we found this task too prohibitive in the timeframe given.

We also question the magnitude of this project in that an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) was not undertaken. With a project enveloping 318,000 acres, how is this not subject to an EIS? GWA has received very little if any notification of this project until the release of the Oct. 26 letter. Projects less intensive as this have received more diligence

and pronouncement than this project. We question the validity of this action in that it meets the standards established in NEPA.

South Otter Landscape Restoration and Resilience Project

As stated, the proposed project is to help restore and maintain the structure, function, composition and ecological connectivity of the forest landscape in order to increase resiliency to future natural disturbance events like wildfire, insects, and disease.

As we noted above, this project is quite extensive, encompassing 318,000 acres. Of those acres, 184,150 acres are designed for prescribed burning, 26,350 acres are for commercial harvest, 11,165 acres are for noncommercial harvest and close to 40,000 acres are for reforestation. We also question the hundreds of miles of road ways that are to be reconstructed, modified or upgraded. Further road building and reconstruction of those roads only adds to the habitat fragmentation of wildlife.

Wildland Urban Interface

Portions of the areas proposed for treatment are within the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) addressed by the Powder River and Rosebud Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPP's). We propose that the CGNF reevaluate the role and management of fire on federal lands and base it on the huge amount of science that has been released lately. The Wildland Urban Interface program needs to be eliminated as it is now implemented and rewritten to use the latest science, climate change, landowner responsibilities and a monitoring plan for forest health.

Lack of Environmental Analysis

This plan does not seem to have and adequate Environmental Analysis or EIS process. The South Otter proposal needs to go back to the planning team for proper development to meet NEPA requirements.

- **219.14 Decision document and planning records:** We would like to see the documentation of how the best available scientific information was used to inform planning, the plan components and other plan content, including the plan monitoring program.
- **219.10 Multiple Uses:** As stated, the plan must provide for ecosystem services and multiple uses recreation, timber, wildlife. I object that timber, being one of the multiple uses is identified as a use that positively affects the forest vegetation and that a reduction of hazardous or fuels contributes to forest health. The reduction of hazardous fuels does not have a strong basis in scientific fire research.
- The Forest Service needs to look at the science of logging to create healthy forests and ask; does logging reduce hazardous fuels? This should be looked at through the lens of climate change and the best available science. The CGNF needs to clarify what conditions are driving forest fires. The Forest Service should promote helping landowners fire proof their residences that are in or near forest service lands, not removing vegetation in the CGNF.
- **219.8 Sustainability:** A developed plan...must provide for ecological sustainability.

- Ecosystem integrity...must contain standards or guidelines to maintain or restore the ecological integrity of terrestrial ecosystems ...in the plan area, including...connectivity taking into account.
- The EA should consider the contribution of the plan area to ecological condition within the broader landscape influenced by the plan area.
- The EA needs to address conditions on the broader landscape that may influence the sustainability of resources.
- A proper EA must contain and analysis of system drivers...climate change, disturbance regimes.

The South Otter Project EA fails to disclose the project's impacts concerning climate change and drought.

NEPA Requires the Forest Service to Disclose the Climate Impacts of Proposed Actions. The Montana Climate Assessment, which is data driven, gives a great deal of guidance.

2017 MONTANA CLIMATE ASSESSMENT montanaclimate.org

- This assessment states that Montana's average temperatures are increasing, mountain snowpacks are declining, large wildfires are more frequent, and all that is expected to continue in the coming decades, according to a study of climate change within Montana
- Cathy Whitlock, a Montana State University professor and one of the authors, said the assessment is meant to help Montanans "plan, make wise decisions and become more resilient" in the face of climate change.
- Agricultural growing seasons are longer than they were in 1950, with 12 more frost-free days each year, according to the report. Even fewer days of frost are expected in the future, but the report also predicts there will be more days that surpass 90 degrees, which creates challenges for farmers and ranchers as water demand from crops and livestock increases.
- The Forest Service needs to carefully address the impacts of climate change to our public lands. Please analyze the effects of the temperature trajectory on native vegetation and what will replace native vegetation with warmer temperatures. Our precipitation changes may not be as great as temperature changes, but soil moisture will decrease with the temperature increases. Snow cover is not predicted to last as long, what may be the effect? July and August are predicted to be hotter and drier in particular, this trend should be reflected in all plans.
- Whitlock C., Cross W., Maxwell B., Silverman N., Wade A.A. 2017. Executive Summary.

Montana Climate Assessment. Bozeman and Missoula MT: Montana State University

<http://montanaclimate.org/sites/default/files/thumbnails/image/2017-Montana>

Drought:

According to the U S Drought Monitor, entering in the last report in August, the area has been abnormally dry, moderate drought or extreme drought. This raises a question for me about the amount of commercial treatment, prescribed fire and timber stand improvement and how the vegetation can regenerate.

We could point to several examples across the west, where years even decades after fire had occurred on the landscape, regeneration did not take place. There is scientific evidence that on some landscapes, this is a possibility. **Regeneration is not a given.** Our concern in this observation and applying it to the South Otter project is to question the use of fire on so many acres in a known semi-arid landscape. Fire will have a huge impact on the area especially for wildlife and if regeneration does not take place. Such action could lead to other possibilities such as landscapes being infested with noxious weeds such as Cheatgrass.

EPA and NOAA data shows that climate change must be a causative factor in future forest service vegetative treatments, or any of the other descriptors that are used to give the forest service authorization for treatments.

Timber Industry and Jobs

According to a Headwaters Economics report, Powder River County has zero timber jobs. GWA fails to see how this project supports a strong timber economy. With zero jobs going to the local economy, could this be just another make work project? The South Otter project does not adequately evaluate the environmental impacts, climate change, wildlife, forest regeneration and many other impacts that this project will impose on a fragile ecosystem. Instead, we see this as a project which will enable and exacerbate an already fragmented wildland for wildlife.

Please do not go forward with South Otter until a more complete analysis is undertaken.

Thank you for accepting my comments on behalf of the Gallatin Wildlife Association.

Sincerely,

Nancy Schultz, Secretary/Treasurer
Gallatin Wildlife Association
420 N 10th Ave
Bozeman, MT 59715
nancyanaconda@msn.com

and

Clinton Nagel, President
Gallatin Wildlife Association