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Ben Burr, Executive Director
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May 16, 2023

Lolo National Forest Supervisor's Office
Attn: Amanda Milburn
24 Fort Missoula Rd
Missoula, MT 59804

Dear Ms. Milburn,

BlueRibbon Coalition (BRC) is writing to provide feedback for the Lolo National Forest Wilderness and Wild and Scenic Eligibility Report. BRC is a national non-profit organization that champions responsible recreation and encourages a strong conservation ethic and individual stewardship. We champion responsible use of public lands and waters for the benefit of all recreationists by educating and empowering our members to secure, protect, and expand shared outdoor recreation access and use by working collaboratively with natural resource managers and other recreationists. Our members use motorized and non-motorized means of recreation, including OHVs, horses, mountain bikes, and hiking to enjoy federally managed lands throughout the United States, including those of the Bureau of Land Management. Many of our members and supporters live in Montana or travel across the country to visit Montana and use motorized vehicles to access USFS managed lands throughout Montana. BRC members visit the Bighorn area for motorized recreation, sightseeing, photography, hunting, wildlife and nature study, camping, water sports, and other similar pursuits. We would like to add our support to any comment submitted by any other individuals or organizations that advocate for motorized use and increased recreation access overall. BRC members and supporters have concrete, definite, and immediate plans to continue such activities in the future.

Wilderness

The U.S. Forest Service must use best available science when conducting these reports. There is considerable concern by users that mapping is incorrect. If the USFS is not going to start with an accurate baseline then the eligibility reports should not be recommended. The recommended Wilderness from the 1986 plan should be removed. Congress has not designated these areas as Wilderness within this timeframe so it should not be managed as such anymore. BRC does not support any of the recommended Wilderness and because of the inaccurate mapping none of this area is truly eligible to be designated as Wilderness.

Wildfire

Poorly managed forests and wildfires are the result of wilderness management land use. Habitat loss is the largest threat to endangered and threatened species. One wildfire could cause an entire species to go extinct. We support the Forest Service in properly managing the forests to prevent wildfires that could cause harm to the species. However, restrictive management prevents active forest fire prevention treatments. One of the best things that can be done to protect species and prevent extinction is to actively manage forests to prevent wildfires and that cannot happen with increased wilderness and wild and scenic management. In order to adequately manage the forest roads are a critical component. Roads not only provide access to carry-out forest management projects but also act as a natural fire barrier. Riparian areas are already protected throughout the Lolo.

Wilderness and areas with restrictive management without many anthropogenic disturbances are not conducive to many species vitality. Wilderness already makes up a large portion of the area. BRC strongly encourages any plan revisions to strongly consider removing any wilderness characteristic areas, eligible Wilderness and pursue forest fire mitigation projects that will ultimately help protect endangered and threatened species.

According to the Endangered Species Act a species may be listed as endangered or threatened if "The present or threatened destruction, modification, or curtailment of its habitat or range; " It is apparent the destruction, modification and curtailment of the certain species have come through restrictions, mismanagement and wilderness management practices.

Furthermore, sediments from runoff after wildfires and from impaired tributaries and poorly maintained roads can fill lakes and streambeds This leads to obstructed natural stream flows which adversely affect navigation, recreational use, and valuable aquatic habitat.

Organized Events

Many of our members hold organized events that include organized rides in this area. A significant portion of the education mission of organizations like ours and the fundraising that supports organizations like ours comes from these organized events, and we see the continuation of these events as an integral expression of protected rights including freedom of speech and freedom of assembly. We believe these events are protected by the First Amendment and believe they are crucial to clubs and organizations and would be inhibited by the eligibility of Wilderness and Wild and Scenic rivers..

Economic Benefits

Local communities rely on motorized recreation for economic opportunities. There has been a surge of use throughout the nation on public lands as well as in Montana. Local groups have worked hard to put the area on the map so that they could reap the economic benefits. Closing roads due to these designations and because mapping was not accurate and there were not correctly inventoried roads, would greatly hinder economic opportunity. Many local organizations and businesses recognize the influx of traffic and believe that any user conflict can be mitigated through better signage and education.

Users with Disabilities

We recommend that the USFS use this planning process to finally begin to reverse its decades-long systematic discrimination against those with mobility impairment-related disabilities.

On his first day in office, President Joe Biden issued an “Executive Order On Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government.” This executive order established “an ambitious whole-of-government equity agenda” which focuses on addressing “entrenched disparities in our laws and public policies,” and mandates a “comprehensive approach to advancing equity for all, including people of color and others who have been historically underserved, marginalized, and adversely affected by persistent poverty and inequality.”

Under this executive order, “The term ‘equity’ means the consistent and systematic fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals, including individuals who belong to underserved communities that have been denied such treatment, such as ... persons with disabilities....” Historically, there has been no group more greatly marginalized and

excluded by public land management policies, and motorized travel management policies in particular, than people with disabilities. Outdoor enthusiasts with ambulatory disabilities frequently rely on motorized travel as their sole means to enjoy recreating on public lands. Not everyone has the ability to hike into a remote wilderness area, but many such people are still able to drive Jeeps, side-by-sides, and ATVs, which are restricted to the designated motorized route network.

Management policies focused on “minimizing” the environmental impacts of motorized recreation have resulted in a dramatic decrease in motorized recreation opportunities on public lands over the last 20 years which has disproportionately impacted people with disabilities. Wilderness focused environmental groups with extreme ableist biases have pushed for more and more areas to be closed to motorized recreation and reserved exclusively for hikers, mountain bikers, and other “human powered” and “quiet use” forms of recreation in which many people with disabilities are unable to participate.

Every time motorized routes or areas are closed, people with disabilities that require the use of motorized means to access public lands are barred from those areas forever. There has been little recourse for such people in the past because the Americans With Disabilities Act does not require public land management agencies to consider disproportionate effects on the disabled community, but only requires that they be given access to public lands on equal terms with everyone else. As a result, the USFS has historically failed to give any real consideration to the impacts of motorized route closures on the disabled community when developing travel management plans.

The Biden Administration’s focus on equity, however, changes the equation. While the ADA focuses only on equality of opportunity, equity inherently focuses on equality of outcome. Any policy that is facially neutral but disproportionately harms a disadvantaged or marginalized group is considered inequitable. The USFS is therefore required by this executive order and others mandating that federal agencies consider “environmental justice” in NEPA proceedings to consider whether any route closures in the Lolo National Forest would disproportionately harm disabled users’ ability to access public lands.

Any approach to travel management that presumes the superiority of non-motorized forms of recreation like hiking over motorized recreation, or that justifies closing motorized access on the basis that people can still hike on those routes, is inherently

discriminatory toward people with disabilities. Any large-scale closures of existing routes would unfairly and inequitably deprive people with disabilities of the ability to recreate in the area using the only means available to them. It is imperative that the USFS consider the access needs of disabled users in drafting the alternatives for this travel plan and ensure that people with disabilities who depend on motorized means do not lose access.

Conclusion

We would like to close by saying we support “shared use”. As long as overall visitation numbers are appropriate for the affected resources, motorized and non-motorized users can be compatible with one another so long as individual users understand designations and plan their activities accordingly. Indeed, motorized and nonmotorized recreation use often overlap as OHV’s often increase accessibility to non-motorized recreational activities such as hiking, camping, equestrian use, etc. We also hold that responsible recreational use of public lands can exist in harmony with ecosystem needs.

BRC would like to be considered an interested public for this project. Information can be sent to the following address and email address:

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P.O. Box 5449
Pocatello, ID 83202
brmedia@sharetrails.org

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of stylized initials 'BB' followed by a long horizontal flourish.

Ben Burr
Executive Director
BlueRibbon Coalition

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Simone Griffin' in a cursive script.

Simone Griffin
Policy Director
BlueRibbon Coalition