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**Re: Flathead Wild and Scenic River Proposed Action for the Comprehensive River Management Plan**

February 07, 2025

Dear Anthony:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the recently updated Flathead Wild and Scenic River Proposed Action (PA) for the Comprehensive River Management Plan (CRMP). I submit these comments on behalf of The National Parks Conservation Association and our 1.6 million members and supporters nationwide. The future management of these rivers, particularly the North and Middle Forks that bound Glacier National Park, are of huge significance to our members and we believe that management direction should be protective of resources and have future generations in mind.

One thing we want to make clear right up front is that this CRMP is supposed to protect and enhance the Outstandingly Remarkable Values (ORVs) as identified in the original Wild and Scenic designation of the three forks of the Flathead, NOT to set a new baseline for them, which is seemingly what the PA does as currently written.

While the desired conditions (DC) included in the PA are adequate to protect the river resources, we encourage the FNF to go back to the original Wild and Scenic designation to be sure that the DC's are protective of and help to enhance those identified ORVs. There are however, many areas of concern for us, especially the changes and increases that we see from the original PA released in 2019 and the one just recently released. Given the amount of time that has passed and the comments that the Flathead National Forest (FNF) received on the original 2019 PA, we expected to see a much more robust plan that included current use numbers. We feel that the Draft Plan and Environmental Assessment (EA) need to do a much better job of justifying how the FNF has come to the proposals it is making and it needs to commit to hard limits of use, rather than trying to hide behind the idea that "capacities aren't limits", especially in light of increasing commercial use in the three river corridors, limits need to be set that are realistic and protective of the ORVs that are the basis for the Flathead River systems inclusion as a Wild & Scenic River system.

We would remind the FNF of the definition of user capacity as stated in the 1982 National Wild and Scenic Rivers System: Final Revised Guidelines for Eligibility, Classification and Management of River Areas is “the quantity of recreation use which an area can sustain without adverse impact on the outstandingly remarkable values and free-flowing character of the river area, quality of the recreation experience, and public health and safety”.<sup>1</sup> If the goal is to protect and enhance those ORV’s, then the capacities identified are the limit’s to recreation, as increases beyond them would cause adverse impacts to the resource.

#### System-wide concerns

A primary concern we have with the CRMP document and have had since 2019 (and highlighted in our comments then) and with the entire process so far, is a fundamental lack of adequate sharing of baseline and current situation data. For the public to assess whether the proposed triggers and thresholds are reasonable and appropriate, stakeholders first need to understand current conditions. The FNF has current data that shows both shoreline counts and float party encounters and yet does not include those numbers to compare, either to the proposed capacities for each fork/segment<sup>2</sup> or to compare current float user/shoreline user experiences to the proposed triggers and thresholds<sup>3</sup> in the 2025 PA.

The public simply cannot assess a proposed future number unless we have the current number as a baseline comparison. The average citizen trying to understand and comment on the CRMP doesn’t have easy and clear access to the necessary numbers. The current river-use status (and historical data if it exists) must be clearly laid out next to the proposed action numbers for purposes of comparison and analysis. Additionally, the probability/percentage method used to set triggers/thresholds for encounters per day is abstract and confusing. At the USFS 2018-19 public meetings a facilitator noted how confused the general public was by this methodology, suggesting that land managers should have simplified the methodology before soliciting further public comment. And yet, in the ensuing 5+ years, the FNF has not taken the opportunity to make these important triggers and thresholds information more understandable. “Encounters with no more than 4 parties per day during 60% of the days monitored, in 3 out of 5 years”<sup>4</sup> is abstract to the point of being meaningless, given that the public has no idea what days were monitored (maybe none?) and what years are being used. If you couple this with the fact that the public is not being provided current conditions, in comparable terms of parties per day

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<sup>1</sup> Federal Register, Vol. 47 No. 173, 39455 1982

<sup>2</sup> Table 3: Proposed Estimated User Capacity, pg. 17 Flathead River Wild and Scenic River System Proposed Action

<sup>3</sup> Table 5: Monitoring Plan, Indicators and Thresholds, pg. 21

<sup>4</sup> Table 5: North Fork Scenic/MU1 Triggers, pg. 22

during a percentage of the season, it's no wonder the general public doesn't understand. In short, there is no reasonable avenue for comparison, analysis or informed public comment, and even after being made aware of this in comments submitted during previous public scoping the FNF moved forward without providing more information. The CRMP must be clear and transparent to the average river user; hard numbers, not abstract probabilities, must be used to create triggers and thresholds, and there must be a reasonable comparison to current conditions. In fact, we've noticed in comparing 2019 to 2025 PA's that some of the easier to understand triggers/thresholds that are for shoreline encounters based on number of watercraft or parties per day, have been removed from several of the segments of river. The FNF must take steps to make these documents more transparent and easier to understand by including current conditions and use levels, and making those triggers and thresholds based on real numbers not abstract percentages.

We have additional concerns around the above numbers, triggers, etc. but will address them in segment specific comments or other respective location for discussion.

We support the PA's closure of gravel bars to overnight camping but want to clarify if that includes the Blankenship area as well. That location has been an issue and concern for many years, and we feel it's important for the FNF to very clearly state that this area will be closed to overnight use and outline the necessary steps that the FNF will take to make sure that area is closed. Also, we would like to see what steps the FNF will be taking to enforce this closure, because regulations without education and enforcement are just words on paper.

#### Capacity Numbers:

In terms of the proposed capacities identified by the FNF <sup>5</sup> we would like better clarity as to how the FNF came to these numbers, it shouldn't be up to the public to try to guess how those numbers came about. The FNF needs to show its work on both how those capacities came about and how the triggers and thresholds were decided upon. Since the PA suggests that you have the information needed to provide a user capacity report<sup>6</sup>, one should have been included with the PA so that the public could better understand this process.

As for the numbers set, we would argue that they are too high to protect the ORV's as desired. Setting these capacities at the maximum level of use where ORV's will begin to see degradation is not the way to manage resources, these capacities should be set at a level that will be protective of the ORV's. That means that the FNF needs to back off of the high

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<sup>5</sup> Table 3, pg. 1

<sup>6</sup> PA, pg. 17

numbers that have been set and determine what is a protective level of use, not the maximum level of use possible.

These numbers are unreasonably high, are a large increase in current use and lack any kind of justification for why they were chosen. We believe that FNF does not have the data to show that this large increase in use will not negatively impact ORVs. From current river use numbers that were provided to us, and the use numbers from camera data, the FNF is proposing the below increases in use as part of this PA. Especially since long time river users are already suggesting that river use and crowding is too high, it is questionable whether there is the data to back these numbers up.

### Proposed Estimated User Capacity Comparison

Section	Limiting Attributes	Proposed User Capacity (persons/day) from Table 3 pg. 17 of proposed action	Existing Use (average/day during peak season) from Table 5 pg. 73 of draft CRMP (2024)	Percent Increase (calculated as proposed-existing/existing x 100)
North Fork Scenic - MU1	Recreation	180 people	66 people	172.7% increase or nearly tripling the existing use
North Fork Scenic - MU2	Recreation	450 people	45 people	900% increase or 10 times the existing use
North Fork Recreation	Recreation	330 people	63 people	423% increase or more than 5 times the existing use
Middle Fork Wild (headwaters to Bear Creek)	Recreation	170 people	Unknown	
Middle Fork Recreation- MU1	Wildlife	100 people	50 people	100% increase or double the existing use
Middle Fork Recreation - MU2	Recreation	1,100 people	885 people	24% increase
Middle Fork Recreation - MU3	Recreation	1,280 people	369 people	247% increase or nearly 3.5 times the existing use
South Fork Wild – MU1	Recreation	90 people	80 people	12.5% increase
South Fork Wild MU2	Recreation	30 people	15 people	100% increase or double the existing use
South Fork Recreation	Recreation	70 people	35 people	100% increase or double the existing use

Finally on the capacity issue, whatever protective number is set, it must be a hard limit, otherwise what is the point of identifying the level of use that the ORV's can sustain without degradation? If the point is to manage use to protect ORV's then there must be a hard stop at a level which use cannot go past. This is a plan designed not just for today, but for 20-30 years in the future, which means that it needs to be written to be enforceable that far into the future and having a hard line where recreational use cannot go any higher is a key need for that future.

Additionally, we worry that ongoing river flow changes due to climate change, lower stream flows will result in shorter floating seasons, and warmer water temps which will impact the fisheries, both of which are already occurring (in 2024 MT FWP imposed hoot-owl restrictions on the NFK for the first time ever). In other words, these numbers will result in daily allowances even higher in the future as the floating season becomes shorter. There is no way these increases in use numbers will not result in detrimental impacts to ORVs,

#### Triggers & Thresholds:

In the Oct 2018 River Monitoring and Trends slideshow (Colter Pence, et al) related that the Percent of Days Meeting Standards for Float Parties Encountered was already exceeding more than 10 parties/day on over 80% of days on the lower Middle Fork. Since that time commercial use and private float parties have increased, so if that threshold was being exceeded seven years ago, what is occurring now? How many other triggers and thresholds are already being met or exceeded? Recreational levels, particularly commercial levels, were a concern at that time, and this plan proposes to allow for increasing use, how is that going to protect ORV's on the river?

Beyond questioning the allowed increasing use as part of this plan, many of the indicators, triggers and thresholds that were proposed in 2019 have been dropped from this updated PA. We would recommend that the FNF bring those back, they include but are not limited to:

1. System-wide: indicators, triggers & thresholds around water-quality related to fisheries, botany and recreation.
2. Middle Fork Wild section: launches per day from Schafer Meadows, parties floating above Schafer, number of watercrafts launched per day at Schafer
3. Multiple segments: Access site congestion, shoreline encounters with float parties, campsite conditions & litter encounters

By including these as part of the CRMP, the FNF will have a much greater picture of the impacts of this decision and of the level of recreation and impacts happening across the different forks of the rivers system.

#### River Segment Desired Conditions

##### North Fork (NFK) Scenic:

We question the proposal to manage the NFK scenic section as two different management units. The FNF has shown no rationale nor justification for why this is even being considered. That said, we believe that the NFK MU1 section should have a much lower capacity than what is proposed. We support the North Fork Preservation Associations comments on this, and support a daily capacity of closer to 90, due to limited parking at the border access site and limiting impacts to ORV's.

The proposed capacity for NFK MU2 is higher than the proposed capacity for the recreational section downstream and seems rather arbitrary. This section of the river runs along the Inside North Fork Road within Glacier National Park, a road that has been closed to motorized use for over 10 years, thereby allowing wildlife use to increase in this area. If anything, NFK MU2 should have a more conservative management plan than it currently does, the daily use of this section of river is low and should be kept that way to allow for greater wildlife security. On this section of river, the ORV's for wildlife, scenery and fisheries should be given precedent over recreation and should therefore be the limiting attributes for determining capacity.

On the topic of commercial use, the ongoing North and Middle Fork Flathead River Outfitter and Guide Permit Renewal (NMFOG Renewal) process treats this segment of river as one entity for permitting service days<sup>7</sup>, if this segment is divided into two different management units then permitted service days must not exceed the current 814 for this section of river. In fact, we would suggest that commercial permitting should be much lower for the NFK MU2 segment, and that no commercial use should be allowed on the NFK MU1 segment.

We also believe as part of this PA and the upcoming plan, that the FNF needs to both disclose the current level of and set a permitting process for livery/shuttle services on this segment of river. This would be a meaningful process for management of the full wild and scenic corridor and not just river use.

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<sup>7</sup> North and Middle Fork Flathead River Outfitter and Guide Permit Information, pg. 2-3, current permitted service days are 814

Finally, on the issue of triggers and thresholds, we would like to know why the “float encounters per day” trigger/threshold numbers went up from 3 in the 2019 PA to 4 in the 2025 PA? Just because it took this long to restart the planning effort does not mean that the river ORV’s can handle more use. We believe on this segment, and all other segments, that there should be no increase in triggers and thresholds from the 2019 to 2025 PA unless the FNF can clearly show that the increase will not negatively impact the ORV’s

#### NFK Recreational:

As mentioned above, the FNF needs to be clear about the management of overnight use at Blankenship Bridge, as well as overnight use at other river access sites. Overnight use at Great Northern Flats and Glacier Rim has been exceeding what appears to be the available dispersed sites that are located there. Along with overnight camping pressure, the ongoing river access use levels are exceeding parking capacity at Glacier Rim and Blankenship. The CRMP needs to address these use levels and the amount of time it takes to launch or load a boat at these locations. As we mentioned above, access site wait times need to be included in any monitoring plan (as they were in the 2019 PA).

We continue to be concerned about the level of use, and it’s impact on wildlife, either trying to access the river or cross it, and think that greater attention needs to be paid to the wildlife ORV in the NKF corridor.

Commercial use needs to be limited on this section to a much greater degree than it currently is. In fact, the PA doesn’t address commercial use on the NFK river at all. According to the NMFOG Renewal this section of the NFK has 459 permitted service days, but there is “variable” cap on pool service days, in the years 2015-2023 the actual commercial use days exceeded that number every year<sup>8</sup>. It is time for the FNF to cap the number of pool days in order to protect the ORV’s of the NFK. Having an unlimited number of pool days for potential use by outfitters will ultimately lead to greater crowding and use of the North Fork, especially as use on the other river segments increases. We do not oppose “pool days,” but we believe protections afforded by the act require a limit be placed on total “pool days” available. Getting out in front of that potential overcrowding is an important component of the CRMP, as it looks to plan for the future rather than the current condition.

#### Middle Fork (MFK) Wild

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<sup>8</sup> NMFOG Renewal, pg. 3-4, table 4: actual commercial use service days by river reach



While we agree with the stated desired condition that this segment is managed for “solitude and consistency with a primitive ROS”<sup>9</sup> we question if this is actually occurring. Given the lack of information around commercial permit numbers for rafting companies, and outfitter/guide/livery permits including number of trips/shuttles per permit, which is not addressed in the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex Outfitter/Guide Permit Reauthorization project (BMWC O/G) from 2024, we doubt the FNF has any idea how many parties/day are using the MFK Wild section. Add in the combination of flights into Schafer Meadows for private launches, and trips packed into Granite Creek, it is totally possible that the MFK Wild unit is already surpassing its shore user triggers. We believe this plan is the opportunity to set a future desired condition for the MFK Wild section that truly reflects a wilderness experience. Therefore, the FNF needs to include limits on the number of commercial permits for this segment of river, limits on flights into the Schafer airstrip for daily river launches and a limit on the number of rafting pack trips into Granite Creek. Also, there should be triggers that address campsite conditions, float user experience, launches per day at Shafer Meadows and float parties above Shafer Meadows, as the 2019 PA contained<sup>10</sup>.

This PA should also clarify that packing out of human waste is required, rather than only within 200’ of shore. Since there is already heavy use by trail users in this area, where it’s possible to pack out waste, it should be done, thereby reducing the amount of human waste on shore. The use of a fire pan or blanket, or already established rock fire ring, should also be required; the establishment of new rock fire rings along the MFK Wild segment, whether by boating parties or pack/backpacking parties, should be prohibited.

#### MFK Recreational MU1

We are glad to see one river segment that recognizes that there are other limiting ORV’s than just recreation, we worry about the ability to enforce the goat lick on river closure and the ban on dogs. Unless the FNF is going to have staff at the launch to enforce the dog ban, a major education effort will be needed, and we don’t see the FNF having the resources to do so.

We have major concerns around the desired conditions statement for *Recreation On Shore and Development* (for this segment and other MFK segments) where it states “high use and congestion occur at developed facilities during peak summer”<sup>11</sup>, does the FNF think that this should really be a desired condition? Why would the FNF work towards high use and

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<sup>9</sup> PA, pg. 11 – Middle Fork Wild

<sup>10</sup> 2019 PA, pg. 32-33, Table 14

<sup>11</sup> PA, pg. 12-13

congestion at developed facilities? The FNF needs to clarify why this is a DC, or it should rewrite this to be an actual desired condition to work towards.

As with so many other segments of river, we encourage the FNF to go back to the triggers and thresholds that were identified in the 2019 PA including the identified Access Site Congestion.

#### MFK Recreational MU2/MU3

We have major concerns with the proposed commercial use that FNF is proposing for these segments. Besides the fact that proposed actions for the section are unreasonable, the fact that current use for each segment is not identified, either in terms of authorized service days (ASD) or with priority use pool days (PPD) (instead the use levels are combined), there isn't a clear level of use being identified for each segment. We would suggest that the current commercial use needs to be separated out into the specific segments, so that the public can see and understand what is actually being proposed. We also believe that the ORV's of wildlife and fisheries should be included as limiting attributes on this section of river and that the upcoming draft plan needs to include user capacities, triggers and thresholds that are protective of these resources as well.

We believe that now is the time to limit commercial use on these segments of river and that the commercial permit numbers (authorized service days + priority use pool days) need to be far more conservative than proposed. Since it's not clear how many of the ASD's are used on MFKR MU2 vs those used on MFKR MU3, the FNF needs to clearly state how many of those 35,713 are being use on each segment; then the FNF needs to identify how many of the PPD's are being used on this segment; only then should the FNF begin to discuss what total outfitter and guide service days should be permitted on this segment of river, rather than arbitrarily deciding that 86,000/50,000 (136,000 service days total) is a reasonable number for the respective segments, this is almost double what the FNF identifies as the 5-year average of 71,889 for these segments.

We believe this is also an opportunity for the FNF to set limits on the number of PPD's an individual company is allowed to use, since the NMFK OG Renewal doesn't identify how many ASD's each commercial user receives, we can only assume that those ASD's are divided evenly; however, those PPD's are not allocated evenly, allowing for one company to flood the river with commercial raft trips during peak season. According to information provided by an FNF staff person, Pursuit utilized more service days in 2023 than the combined ASD's on an annual basis.

2023						
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	Pursuit	Great Northern Guides	Montana Raft Company	Wild River Adventures	Totals	Percent of Total
Fishing, Day Use	1,660	605	462	239	<b>2,966</b>	4%
Fishing, Overnight	352	6	4	68	<b>430</b>	1%
Float, Half Day	34,375	8,440	13,276	6,476	<b>62,567</b>	87%
Float, Full Day	2,264	283	838	877	<b>4,262</b>	6%
Float, Overnight	485	84	493	310	<b>1,372</b>	2%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>39,136</b>	<b>9,418</b>	<b>15,073</b>	<b>7,970</b>	<b>71,597</b>	100%

Not only should there be a cap on the number of ASD's and PPD's allowed on these segments of river, there should be a limit on the number of PPD's that any given company is allowed to utilize, otherwise it appears that the FNF is allowing one company to corner the river market at the detriment to both other commercial users and private boaters. The FNF should also look at capping the number of commercial launches at Moccasin per day, since this is the most heavily used river access point, this would allow for greater private boater access; or alternatively, name one day a week where commercial use isn't allowed, to allow for great access for private boaters; ultimately the FNF needs to get more creative in its management of the river, private and commercial users.

In addition to these limits, the FNF has acknowledged that the 2021 ASD's + PPD's allocated to the Outfitters was specific to 2021 and was primarily an emergency reaction to increased visitor pressure from COVID-19 and Glacier NP's newly enacted ticketed entry vehicle reservations which forced pressure onto the FNF. This count must not be utilized for a 5-year average to determine commercial use days. When the CRMP was first drafted in 2019, MFK capacity was already a concern, with closer to 58,000 commercial user-days. Rolling the average higher when there was little to no constraint in the past 5 years is neither good science nor stewardship. The average actual use for the combined MFKR MU2-MU3 reach should be the average of 2018, 2019, 2020, 2022, and 2023, or 61,796 Service days. This number should then be used to set a reasonable capacity on commercial use (ASD's + PPD's) for MFKR MU2 & MU3. We would call on the FNF to show how they reached both the proposed outfitter and guide service days for these two sections of river and how the proposed capacities were reached, in other words, show us the math.

As we've mentioned above, this PA needs to address other triggers/thresholds than just float user experience, the 2019 PA included access site congestion (solely in need of monitoring), and campsite conditions, we would also flag from our 2019 comments (appendix A) this plan should include shore user experience on this section of river as well.

In addition, in order to be able to prohibit parking on the gravel bars and the increased use that the PA is proposing, some level in increase in parking at Paola/Moccasin/WGLAC/Blankenship access sites will probably be necessary. We would support a reasonable increase in parking, so long as it was accompanied by an increase in enforcement of the prohibition of gravel bar parking, and illegal roadside parking.

#### South Fork (SFK) Wild 1& 2

As with the MFK Wild section above, it is difficult to grasp the current level of use from private pack trips, outfitter dropped trips and commercially guided trips, since this PA and the BMWOC O/G does not address guided trips or outfitter float drops. This CRMP is an opportunity to address this type of use and set desired conditions that are conservative and consistent with the wild character of this segment. While the PA identifies “numbers of types of outfitters and service permits are managed the maintain the wilderness character including solitude”<sup>12</sup>, the PA does not identify those numbers, nor does the BMWOC O/G renewal.

We also believe that fisheries needs to be included as a limiting attribute, given the impacts that have been noted on the SFK Bull Trout fisheries, including diminishing Redd counts and increasing scarring of fish. In fact, the MT Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission recently (November 2024) voted to change fishing regulations on the SFK, in an attempt to minimize impacts on the fishery. This plan needs to take those changes into account, through limiting the number of outfitter/guides angling days and potentially limiting the number of parties/watercraft on these sections of river. As well as mentioned above, helping to support creel surveys and greater study of angling use and impacts.

As was also identified for the MFK Wild segment, the requirement to haul out human waste should be instituted on the SFK Wild segments as well. This requirement will alleviate the growing use of the river and bring regulations in line with the rest of the Flathead river system, and many other Wild & Scenic Rivers across the region.

#### SFK R

As with all the segments, the FNF should include the indicators/triggers/thresholds that it had identified in the 2019 PA in this newly released PA. Particularly for this segment, the parking congestion/site access congestion should be monitored for use.

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<sup>12</sup> PA, pg. 15

While we recognize that the SFK below Hungry Horse Dam is not part of the Wild & Scenic designation, it should be included and address as part of this plan, since many of the impacts to fisheries and wildlife also extend to this area. As well, parties launched from this section of river usually then flow into the MFKR MU3 and therefore impact float and shore user experience and contribute to both river crowding and parking/access site crowding. By not including this section of the river, the FNF is potentially missing impacts that could be mitigated as part of this plan.

#### Proposed Management Actions

We support the inclusion of the mandatory, unlimited and free permit system, though the devil is in the details, and to only require it on three segments initially is not helpful. Waiting another 2-3 years to implement this on some of the most heavily used segments of river means that the information the FNF is looking to better understand will actually be meaningless. If the FNF is only going to implement this permit system on three forks initially, then it should be the busiest segments and the ones with the most potential for conflicts between users (MFKR MU2 & MU3, and NFK Rec). If the goal of this permit system is to understand patterns and levels of use then the FNF needs to implement it on segments that are visited enough to supply those patterns and that have a variety of users (stand up paddle boards, kayaks, rafts, anglers, inner tubes, etc.), not just pack rafters and wilderness rafters. We believe that implementation of this type of permit on the busiest segments, which should require some kind of educational component on things like responsible river use, waste disposal, leave no trace and river etiquette, would better allow the FNF to evaluate the impacts of this system/education and adapt it as necessary (people who are using the wilderness segments of the MFK and SFK likely already know this information).

This being said, if the FNF moves to implement this permit system on the less used segments of river, it should include the NFK MU1 segment as well. That way all three forks are seeing some kind of permit/monitoring, since the users on the Wild sections of river (SFK and MFK) will be different than those that use the more accessible (and accessible by vehicle) NFK segment.

We ask for clarification on Livery services across the three forks of the river. There is no information included in terms of permits, use, numbers, limits on access, etc. This is important information for the public to know in order to make recommendations about their inclusion in the PA. That being said the statement in the PA regarding livery services

“...as a tool to address parking congestion and avoid reaching triggers and thresholds”<sup>13</sup> is contradictory in the fact that allowing shuttles could actually drive up use on the rivers and cause triggers and thresholds to be met quicker. Currently, in many locations river access is limited by the availability of parking spaces, if shuttle/livery services are allowed, they could easily increase the number of people utilizing segments of river, thereby pushing use beyond indicators, capacities, triggers and thresholds. The CRMP needs to include a system for permitting livery services and monitoring them to ensure that they are not impacting ORV’s and driving use up.

We understand the need for party size restrictions and appreciate the decision to treat the NFK Scenic section differently, we are concerned that a party size of 50 for river use on recreational segments and for shore party size on the NFK is too high. The FNF should take a closer look at how many parties actually are that size, and if this limit is just allowing for greater commercial use, to the detriment of private boaters. Also, there should be consideration given to limiting the number of watercraft in a party, for both shore user experience and wildlife concerns; a party of five going by in one boat has a very different impact than a party of five going by on five different boats.

We support the proposed management actions identified here:

1. Drones – though this should clarify that in the case of fires or other emergencies, private use of drones on any segment of river is not allowed. For both safety and privacy reasons.
2. Temporary Education, Outfitting and Guiding permit – This sounds good on paper, but on nine total river segments allowing for 450 underserved participants per year, compared to at least 136,000 commercial service days on just two segments of one river (no commercial service days were provided for the other seven segments) is insulting. If this education permit process is to be something the Flathead NF and outfitters want to be proud of, and actually serve those communities it is purported to, it needs to be a significantly more meaningful number than this.
3. Noise – we fully support the noise level restrictions that the PA is proposing, though feel that it should be clearer as to why this is being proposed. We find with the proliferation of portable, personal speakers finding places where you can go and enjoy the sound of nature and not someone else’s music, is getting more and more difficult. We would say these should apply to the MFKR MU3

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<sup>13</sup> PA, pg. 19, Table 4

section as well, so as not to impact the homes that line the river through the canyon.

4. We appreciate the proposal to establish an agreement between FNF, NPS and BNSF to proactively address spill potential and prevention and would ask that this is clarified in the draft plan. What does this mean? Set anchors in the corridor? Staging equipment at priority access sites?
5. We support the prohibition on camping on both sides of the river from Belton Bridge to McDonald creek and only ask if it should be a great distance?
6. We support the installation of a sign at the Mid Creek takeout to warn parties of the Meadow Creek Gorge, so long as that sign matches the design of other Forest Service signs.
7. **Include:** we would suggest that the FNF clarify that all food storage orders for wildlife (esp. grizzly bears) must be followed on all three forks of the river system and include education on these orders as part of the mandatory permit system.

#### Monitoring/Triggers/Thresholds

Fisheries – on the SFK we are already seeing declines and impacts to the bull trout, the main causes of these are climate change & angling, the CRMP can only control angler days & outfitter permits and needs to do a better job of that. That includes the need to manage adaptively & creatively; work with MT FWP to implement Creel Surveys on all three forks, and look into ideas like the APP that Trout Unlimited is using on the Bighorn that allows for angler reported info (size class, numbers of fish caught, numbers in each size class, etc.).

Triggers/Thresholds – as mentioned above we do wonder how many of these have been met/exceeded already? And have concerns about changes between the 2019 & 2025 proposed actions. Some of the triggers and thresholds have increased between the two PA's, but without any justification for doing so...just because it's taken years to get a new PA out, doesn't mean these should change nor that the river can handle increased use.

NEED: Wildlife monitoring triggers and thresholds: The PA states, "Wildlife displacement, food conditioning, or habituation to human presence is minimized through floater education."<sup>14</sup> but there are no Indicators that focus on Wildlife and their impact from human presence, nor any Management Action to be taken to protect the Wildlife ORV.

Individual wildlife are undeniably displaced by human presence, as evidenced by the presence of beavers, otters, osprey, deer and bears in the fall/winter/spring seasons, and

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<sup>14</sup> PA, pg. 8

absence in the heavier summer use months. Wildlife displacement is absolutely a factor of current river management on busy user days and increasing commercial and private user days will have a detrimental impact on Wildlife. This PA should set out management actions, indicators and triggers/thresholds for wildlife impacts and coordinate on monitoring/implementation with MT FWP, FNF and NPS.

At this time we would reference and include our support for the comments submitted by American Rivers, the North Fork Preservation Association, and the Glacier Two-Medicine Alliance. We look forward to continuing to engage in this process and help create a CRMP that protects and enhances the ORV's of the three forks of the Flathead and creates a vision for the future management of these invaluable rivers.

Sincerely,

Sarah Lundstrum  
Glacier Senior Program Manager, National Parks Conservation Association  
Whitefish, MT

Appendix A: 2019 NPCA comments

Mr. Chip Weber, Supervisor  
Mr. Chris Prew, Project Leader  
Flathead National Forest  
650 Wolfpack Way  
Kalispell, MT 59901

**Re: Flathead Wild and Scenic River  
Proposed Action for the Comprehensive River Management Plan**

September 13, 2019

Dear Chip;

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Flathead Wild and Scenic River Proposed Action for the Comprehensive River Management Plan (CRMP). On behalf of The National Parks Conservation Association and our 1.2 million members and supporters nationwide, the future management of these rivers, particularly the North and Middle Forks that bound Glacier National Park, are of huge significance and management direction should be protective of resources and have future generations in mind.



In general, we feel that the desired conditions identified are sufficient. There are several areas of concern for us however, and we feel that the Environmental Assessment needs to do a much better job of addressing these deficiencies. We will identify these shortcomings below as “river system-wide” issues or “segment specific” issues.

#### River System-wide:

A primary concern we have with the CRMP document, and in fact the entire process so far, is a fundamental lack of adequate sharing of baseline and current situation data. For the public to assess whether the proposed triggers and thresholds are reasonable and appropriate, stakeholders first need to understand current conditions. It may be that on the Middle Fork Recreational Segment Management Unit 3 a trigger of 150 boats/day and threshold of 170 boats/day is reasonable, if we are currently seeing 120 boats/day; however, if the current situation is only 70 boats/day, then those 150/170 trigger numbers are far too high. The public simply cannot assess a proposed future number unless we have the current number as a baseline comparison. The average citizen trying to understand and comment on the CRMP doesn't have easy and clear access to the necessary numbers; instead, that data is buried deep within the project website. The current river-use status (and historical data if it exists) must be clearly laid out next to the proposed action numbers for purposes of comparison and analysis. Additionally, the probability/percentage method used to set triggers/thresholds for encounters per day is abstract and confusing. Even the facilitator at USFS public meetings noted how confused the general public was by this methodology, suggesting that land managers should have simplified the methodology before soliciting further public comment. “Encounters with no more than 3 parties per day during 60% of the peak use season” is abstract to the point of being meaningless, particularly when coupled with the fact that the public is not being provided current conditions in terms of parties per day during a percentage of the season. In short, there is no reasonable avenue for comparison, analysis or informed public comment. The CRMP must be clear and transparent to the average river user; hard numbers, not abstract probabilities, must be used to create triggers and thresholds, and there must be a reasonable comparison to current conditions. This must be rectified for future documents for the public to meaningfully engage in the process and to understand what decisions were made and why. As written, the document has rendered public comment meaningless by obfuscating current and future desired conditions.

On the topic of numbers and triggers/thresholds we further insist that the CRMP set reasonable and protective thresholds/triggers for the number of boats/parties that someone on shore (i.e., anglers, picnickers, etc.) can expect to see during a day. This is done for the North Fork Flathead Recreational Segment and must be expanded to include

all management segments on all three forks of the Flathead System. Visitor use is identified in all the segments' discussion on Outstanding Resources Values (ORV's), and activities that could potentially impact or degrade the ORV's as a limiting attribute.

We suggest that the CRMP should implement a free and unlimited permit system on all three forks of the Flathead in order to educate river users about proper river usage, leave no trace travel, waste disposal and river etiquette. This initial free permit system (which if necessary, over time could morph into a paid permit system) would require river users to visit a ranger station or visitors center to receive a permit for the river; at that time, they could also be educated about proper river use, waste disposal and more. This would also help in tracking overall river use, types of users, length of trip, and other data that would be beneficial to both the Park Service and Forest Service for long-term monitoring and decision making.

Additionally, the standard method (river ranger floats) for assessing river use is outdated and insufficient. Recent data from University of Montana researchers counting from shore has produced far more useful data in terms of daily use. While we understand that the rigor of this UM research cannot be sustained, the FNF should nevertheless find ways to replicate as closely as possible this new shore-based model. This may mean spot checks or partnership with private and educational entities, such as the FreeFlow program at Whitefish High School. The CRMP must require a shift in traditional data-gathering toward shore-based collection.

Finally, this is not a plan for today; it is a plan for the future. The CRMP must envision what sort of river experience will occur in 20-30 years and must anticipate and ensure the river experience we wish to leave for the next generation. The triggers and thresholds that are set must be realistic and conservative enough to ensure an enjoyable experience into the future. In a world of increasing visitation and competing uses, we argue that the proposed CRMP fails to set standards that will achieve a protective outcome as required by the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

#### North Fork Scenic Segment:

As we mentioned above but want to reiterate here as a segment-specific suggestion, the CRMP must set numerical triggers/thresholds for shore parties encountering boats/parties per day, as is included in the North Fork Recreational Segment. The trigger/threshold needs to be forward looking and take into consideration that many long-time river users believe the upper limit of visitor use has already been hit and needs to be lowered in some areas. Setting a trigger/threshold on "average number of watercrafts passing by a selected location per day during peak season" needs to be done, and it needs to be clear and

comparable to current use so the public can properly assess its merits. The trigger/threshold also must consider the current opinion of rivers users regarding today's existing crowding on the river.

The proposed triggers/thresholds are simply too high compared to current river use and the level of crowding that long-time river users believe is already happening. Lower numbers should be adopted, in accordance with the protective requirements of the Wild and Scenic River Act, and those numbers should be comparable, side by side and in the same form, with current use data. The proposed thresholds as currently written are not comparable to the current trends/data that are being collected, and the Forest needs to put greater work into making the current numbers and proposed triggers/thresholds comparable so that the public can understand what is being proposed.

Also, there have long been complaints about human waste and waste disposal at Sondreson Meadows. This CRMP is an opportunity to be proactive about these complaints. It's also an opportunity to get ahead of the potential for increasing problems as visitor use increases both on the river and throughout the Forest. We suggest that the CRMP evaluate the need for and installation of a pit toilet and garbage cans at Sondreson Meadows, and that the analysis evaluate how additional visitor infrastructure may impact future use and how any increased use might be mitigated (limited camp sites, etc.).

#### North Fork Recreational Segment:

As with the scenic segment the Forest needs to clarify its proposed triggers and thresholds so that they are comparable to current usage. That being said, we believe this segment of the river is already over-crowded and the proposed triggers/thresholds need to be lowered. The proposed threshold for average number of watercrafts passing by a selected location is double what is currently occurring on the river. This is unacceptable in a Wild and Scenic corridor; double the river use will make the river far more crowded and lead to user conflicts and degradation of visitor experience and ORVs. The CRMP also needs to consider the type of use occurring, including outfitter and private boater but also kayak, raft, paddleboards, fishing, etc. and set strong standards around use and user conflict.

A final note on the recreational segment, given the increasing use on the river and the belief of long-time river users that it's already reached capacity: the CRMP needs to look at limiting the "pool days" available to outfitting companies. Having an unlimited number of pool days for potential use by outfitters will ultimately lead to greater crowding and use of the North Fork, especially as use on the other river segments increases. We do not oppose "pool days," but we believe protections afforded by the act require a limit be placed on total

“pool days” available. Getting out in front of that potential overcrowding is an important component of the CRMP, as it looks to plan for the future rather than the current condition.

#### Middle Fork Recreational Segments 1-3:

We fully support the comments of Headwaters Montana around the issue of oil trains in the Middle Fork Corridor, particularly:

“Under “water quality and quantity”, the Proposed Action does not mention the publics’ growing concern regarding the rail transport of hazardous substances along the Middle Fork Flathead corridor. Water quality should be the highest ranked ORV, and potential threats to water quality should be identified. While rail transport of materials is subject to additional federal laws and regulations, including interstate commerce provisions, the potential adverse impact to the Middle Fork WSR from a derailment and release is very real and everyday, and an accidental release of hazardous and toxic substances into the Middle Fork Flathead under current operating conditions may be an inevitability. The CRMP needs to address this issue in a meaningful way.

The USFS and NPS are mandated to protect the ORVs of the Flathead wild, scenic and recreational river segments. It would seem appropriate for these federal agencies to bring together other relevant federal agencies to coordinate the development of a federal rail safety and derailment prevention plan that provides clear standards, guidelines and mandatory practices that would provide greater assurance of rail safety operation over current practices.

With respect to how this could be addressed in the EA, we would suggest under Desired Future Conditions for Middle Fork Management Units 1 and 2 that additional separate sections be added titled, “Rail Corridor”. A statement like the following could be included under these sections: “The Flathead Forest, Glacier National Park, and Federal Railroad Administration will cooperate in developing a federal rail safety and derailment prevention plan that addresses the significant risk of an accidental release of hazardous or toxic materials into the Middle Fork Flathead River that the public has identified as a major concern.”

Under “Indicators, Triggers and Thresholds” for both MU1 and MU2, add a water quality section. In tables 16 and 18 inform the public under “Indicator” that “a public rail safety prevention plan does not currently exist.” Leave the “Trigger” and “Threshold” sections blank. Under “Management Actions” state, “The FNF, GNP, and FRA will work cooperatively to develop a public process to help limit the risk of an accidental derailment and release of hazardous materials.” Under “Rationale”

state, “A single derailment and release of hazardous or toxic materials could have severe and long-lasting consequences for all ORVs associated with the Middle Fork Flathead River.”

Quite frankly, we think the FNF and GNP may choose to continue to ignore or not address this concern in the EA. For this reason, if the FNF and GNP will not include the hazardous material issue in the above format for evaluation in the EA, then we request that the EA contain a statement about hazardous material rail shipments through the Middle Fork WSR corridors (MU1 and 2) that explains the legal rationale and includes legal citations for the authority to exclude further consideration of the issue.”

As with the North Fork Recreational Segment we believe that there is a need to limit the number of “pool days” available to outfitters. The fact that actual service days is almost 20,000 higher than the permitted service days for outfitters shows both the popularity of the Middle Fork and the need to initiate limits. Given how crowded the Middle Fork can be on summer days, an unlimited number of pool days for outfitters is not sustainable into the future and is not in accordance with the legal protections mandated by the Wild and Scenic River Act. We recommend that the CRMP limit total pool days and institute a reasonable hard cap on them, allowing for some growth but at a sustainable level. There may be a need to look at historical data to find the growth trend in pool day requests, in order to project into the future a sustainable growth pattern that also caps use at some point.

We also believe it is time for the same triggers/thresholds to be placed on the Middle Fork as on the North Fork in terms of average number of watercrafts per day past a selected location. We are not sure what that number is, because FNF has not provided comparable data on current use, but the CRMP should look at setting triggers/thresholds that are reasonable and sustainable.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to comment on the CRMP, we are looking forward to continuing to engage in the future. Please contact me with any questions or for more information, [slundstrum@npca.org](mailto:slundstrum@npca.org) or 406-250-5346.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sarah Lundstrum', is placed over a light blue rectangular background.

Sarah Lundstrum  
Glacier Program Manager  
National Parks Conservation Association

