Comments on the Proposed Action for the Flathead Comprehensive River Management Plan #56536 – February 2025

As a river ecologist and landowner in the North Fork, the Flathead River is an important part of my life in many ways. I am supportive of protecting our river system and agree with a number of the proposed protections. However, I have a number of concerns, most which involve the proposed Monitoring Plan, Indicators, Triggers, and Threshold levels. Please see my specific comments below.

First, The Wild and Scenic River status must protect rivers for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations, protecting the free-flowing condition, water quality and outstanding remarkable values. This includes not only the user experience, but protecting their immediate environments and fish and wildlife values. However, most of the plan seems focused on recreation concerns as the limiting factor.

- The proposed management plan should better address protecting the ecology of the river and clearly articulate what type of schedule will be followed for monitoring activities that will indicate if the river ecosystem is at risk.
    - Please note that if river users are good stewards, higher use of the resource is not detrimental to the ecology
- If the ecology and function of the river is not protected than the river will not maintain it's current conditions, nor support fish and wildlife populations.
- Efforts to protect the river should focus on enforcing proper uses and behaviors of the river users, rather than focusing primarily on some arbitrary user number thresholds. If people use the river inappropriately few could do a lot of damage. Conversely, many users acting appropriately can leave no trace of their use of the river corridor.
- I am a river ecologist and have spent my career studying rivers and river floodplains. I am disappointed the river ecologists have not been included in this process. Engaging academics that have spent their careers better understanding river ecology would strengthen the proposed action to actually support maintain ecological integrity of the system.
- Monitoring should be planned to asses current and future stressors that could negatively impact the system, including climate change.

<u>Proposed Estimated User Capacity</u>

The proposed estimated user capacities seem reasonable; however, I doubt that proposed Indicators, Triggers and Thresholds appropriately match the proposed capacities, see details below.

<u>Proposed Management Actions</u>

I fully support many of the proposed actions that will protect the integrity and ecology of river, e.g. prohibiting camping/parking on gravel bars, requiring solid human waste containment, fire pans, not allowing drones, having noise restrictions, etc.

<u>Monitoring Plan, Indicators, Triggers and Thresholds</u>

The monitoring plan needs a lot of improvement and I am very concerned that if some of the proposed Indicators, Triggers, and Thresholds are adopted, that in the future user limitations may be put in place prematurely, limiting the ability for the user to even have an experience in the first place. My focus is on North Fork Scenic/MU1, as this is where my family almost exclusively recreates.

- Fisheries could decline due to external factors like climate change, what will be the management response to declining populations?
- Water quality monitoring should include other emerging contaminants, toxic pollutants, or other stressors that may arise in the future
- Elevated *E. coli* concentrations are not necessarily from human waste, but can be from animals. *E. coli* would need to be tested for source determination. If *e. coli* is found to be from humans it could likely occur from uninformed user groups, not necessarily from too many users. A clear linkage of action in response to finding elevated *E. coli* needs to be articulated.
- The use of float encounters at a metric is problematic
    - Encounter rates can vary hugely based on the time that parties depart, how often people stop on the river, where they launch from, etc
    - Furthermore, the term "party" is very ambiguous. This could be 4 individual kayaks or 4 flotillas of rafts with 20 people, effectively having the number of users range from 4 to 80.
- Using a count of "boats" passing set points is very problematic and ambiguous as well.
    - The term boat could cover anything from an individual kayak to a full raft, resulting in a huge amount of variation in perceived usage of the river based on simple "boat" counts
    - My family will often take another family with us down the river, which usually results in 3 "boats" – 2 kayaks and a raft. The current proposed boat count allowed to pass Ford is 10, which mean our group alone with account for almost 30% of the allowable usage of the river, which is ridiculously low
- I believe that the proposed Indictors, Triggers and Thresholds for NF MU1 are too low and do not match up with estimated user capacities
    - Encounters with no more than 4 float parties per day, during 60% of the days monitored, in 3 out of every 5 years, is too low. To have a user experience we need to be able to float the river. Over a 25 mile stretch of river it should be acceptable to pass by more than 4 other parties, especially if you are doing a shorter day float with multiple stops and multiple parties of overnight floaters overtake you
    - No more than 10 boats passing the Ford monitoring station is not reasonable at all, it is way too low, especially when many of those "boats" are going to be single or double kayaks. I think that the Trigger should be more like 30 boats passing Ford, especially because there is higher use from Ford to Polebridge. Is the monitoring station going to track boats floating past and launching from Ford?
    - The proposed user capacity for NF MU1 is 180 people.
        - How does 10 boats passing Ford get anywhere near 180 people? If 10 kayaks pass Ford that would only be 10-20 people. The proposed triggers should not prematurely restrict river access, especially when monitoring data could be collected in such a way (with the proposed metrics) that the triggers and thresholds are reached when the actual user capacity is still well below the proposed 180 people
- Table 5 includes 23 rows, only the first six of which reflect river values of fisheries and water quality. The remaining 18 rows all focus on float encounters and number of boats, making this seem like the main concern of the management plan
- I am concerned with how Indictors and Thresholds will be monitored, measured and calculated
    - At the public meeting I was given different answers about how the 60% and 80% thresholds would be calculated

    - I was told that river rangers would collect encounter data. However, there are only 4 river rangers across 3 forks of the Flathead, including 10 unique segments of the river system. 4 river rangers cannot begin to collect sufficient monitoring data from all reaches. Extrapolating encounter rates from fewer actual floats could greatly misrepresent actual encounter rates.
    - How the rangers float, whether they encounter parties multiple times, when they launch during the day, etc., could also skew encounter data
    - The time period over which the 60% thresholds or 80% triggers are calculated could also strongly skew results and interpretation of how the river should be managed. If the percentages are calculated season wide from June-September that will result in very different numbers. If someone interested in limiting river use decided to use a shorter time period it would be much easier to surpass the thresholds and triggers.
- It is not clear how the importance of each category will be weighted. For example, how much weight will be given to fisheries, water quality and recreation indicators, etc.
- There are no response actions proposed. We need to be informed of what the actions could be in response to the proposed indicators, triggers and thresholds
- The focus of the public meeting suggested that monitoring efforts would focus on the user experience metrics of float encounters and number of boat passing, along with *E. coli* monitoring, over anything else. To manage the river to protect ecological status these should not be the main criteria of focus.

Specific comments in response to Table 4: Proposed Management Actions:

- Table 4: Proposed Management Action: Permit System
    - If permits are implanted in any form this should not require the use of the internet. Permits should be completed at the put in and placed in boxes, like camp group slips. Many of us escape to the North Fork to be off the grid and disconnected from technology. We should not have to have internet access to enjoy and experience our natural resources.
- Table 4: Livery Service
    - This action mentions that livery service will be accommodated to "avoid reaching triggers and thresholds" yet the document does not describe what triggers and thresholds are being considered regarding parking.
- Table 4: Temporary education and outfitting permit
    - How will this increased use possibly result in triggers and thresholds being met even faster, resulting in reduced public use of the river?
- Table 4: Noise levels
    - I support noise level restrictions, however I am not sure that 60 dB makes sense. Not speaking over the noise of a dishwasher when children are present is not realistic. On the opposite end of things, a colleague of mine has observed a group running a generator all night to power a portable hot tub at the edge of the river. This level of noise is not ok in my opinion.
- Table 4: North Fork Scenic Segments
    - I agree that the Nork Fork should be split into multiple segments, however I am concerned that the split at Polebridge does not adequately reflect differences in upper river use. Different uses occur from the Border to Ford than Ford to Polebridge. A camera monitoring station at Ford will not necessarily represent traffic in the upper

reach because a lot of people often put in at Ford. The location of monitoring cameras could strongly influence perceived uses if data are extrapolated to other parts of the river.

Other comments/concerns:

- Differences in day use vs over-night use should be considered when any limitations to the number of users is considered. Over-night use requires enough camping space and camp sites leave a greater foot print that day floats.
- Public use should not be restricted in trade off for allowing commercial use
- Some landowners up the NF have been vocal about not wanting to view boat traffic on the river. Despite these people owning land along the river, they do not own the river. It is not ok that they are pushing to restrict the use of a public resources simply because they seem to think they own the river. There are locations where landowners are currently not respecting high water mark law and placing no trespassing signs (and even chairs and tables) below the low water mark.
- Different sections have different expectations for user experiences and the expectations for the South Fork experience should not be used to judge user experience expectations on the North Fork. At the public meeting I asked about the boat encounter metric and was answered by a staff member who gave an example of floaters camping on the S. Fork thinking that 6 rafts with one person is worse than one raft with 6 people. In reality you don't generally see one person per raft. However, I could see the S. Fork being more restrictive to protect the experience of the people hiking and camping along the river corridor, whereas in the N. Fork we are all driving to the put-in to launch.

In closing, I want to be able to continue floating North Fork MU1 (and other stretches as we can) with my husband and children, having the quality of life that we experience on the river. My main concern is that is overly restriction indicators, triggers and thresholds are proposed this could lead to premature restrictions in the river use. It would be awful for the North Fork to end up like the Smith River. Managers can say that nothing restrictive is going into place now, but it could easily move that way in the future. By responsibly recreating and having the proper monitoring and enforcement of conservation minded activities many people can continue to enjoy this river system without degrading the ecological integrity of the system.

Sincerely,

Rachel L. Malison, PhD