

26 April 2025

Mike Thom
Gardiner Ranger District
805 Scott St. W
Gardiner, MT 59030

Dear District Ranger Thom,

I apologize for the day-late arrival of my updated comments on the Cooke City Fuels and Forest Health Project (CCF & FHP). There has been some confusion about the closing date for this round of public comment, and with final exams bearing down on us at MSU I did not catch the revised deadline. I would like to reiterate and briefly expand upon the comments I made in my letter of 10 August 2024. In that letter I argued that while I support many of the goals of the fuels reduction project, I object to the application of fire suppression and forest thinning to the south side of the Bannock Trail, particularly the Silver Gate portion of the area. My love of this fragile, special area began in 1976, my first summer working in Yellowstone National Park, and has been enhanced over the 22 years I have owned land and a cabin (116) on the Bannock. I am a long-standing member of the Beartooth Alliance and fully support the 15 points of concern covering the entire Soda Butte Valley raised by Chair Lara Belice in her initial August 5th letter and the bulleted items in her update on April 25, 2025. Moreover, I currently serve an elected member, and Vice President, of the Sewer Board for Cooke Pass, Cooke City, and Silver Gate. although here I speak as a private citizen.

The Environmental Assessment of the revised CCF & FHP addresses some of the concerns raised by project critics, including the removal of logging from many residences on the south side of the Bannock Trail. Regrettably, though, the plan still includes treatments and logging in units 37a, 37b, 98a, and 98b south of the Wessell's property, and land directly behind cabins owned by the Nelsons, Barretts, and me. Harvesting trees on the steep terrain would increase the dangers of property and road damage via falling rocks, mudslides and avalanches (as amply documented by Heidi Barrett with pictures). I know this forested area from decades of hiking, fly fishing on Soda Butte Creek, and working on and around my cabin. The proposed project will open the area in question to increased sun and air, turning a wet, mossy, densely vegetated, nutrient rich ecosystem into a drier, warmer, windier forest—even more prone to the ravages of wildfires. If logging needs to proceed, it would make far more sense to begin the process east of the Moose Meadow area, beyond the Hansen's cabin, where cabins and other structures would not be endangered until you get to Cooke City.

The recorded history of this forest ecosystem suggests its natural state is well equipped to protect itself from the fires that promise to increase in frequency as the climate continues to warm. Moreover, tree removal would threaten to negatively impact the abundant fauna currently living along the trail. I urge you to please reconsider your plans for this section of the Bannock and remove units 37a, 37b, 98a, and 98b from any treatments or logging. Particularly for the south side of the Silver Gate portion of the trail, you are offering the public a solution in search of a problem.

Sincerely yours,

William F. Grover