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September 10, 2025

We strongly object to the Tyler's Kitchen project as presented. The purpose and need for this project are not well justified. It is based on the false claim of a wildfire emergency in the project area. In fact, this area has been heavily logged and roaded. Nor is it close to any urban areas.

We note that while the project is being proposed under emergency wildfire regulations it cites heavily to Forest Plan regulations for wildlife and water protection. Thus, this Project is directly linked to the Lolo National Forest Plan.

There are several significant inaccuracies and missing current information in the Project File including the Wildlife Report. For example, the Section 7 consultation is not complete. Table 8 on page 37 of the EA and the Draft FONSI state that there is a "May Affect, Likely to Adversely Affect" determination for grizzly bear. The project documents also state that Section 7 consultation with the USFWS is "ongoing." Issuing the Project for public comment prior to completion of Section 7 consultation and issuance of a Biological Opinion is inappropriate.

These must be corrected in a Supplemental EA.



Figure 1. Montana FWPs 2022.

This project will harm habitat for the threatened bull trout and grizzly bear.

Inaccuracy #1-

The Wildlife Report inaccurately claims there have been no confirmed observations of grizzly bears in the project area and the vicinity. Grizzly bears have been verified including a female with three cubs within the Project Area at Gillespie Creek (see below from Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks 2022). A male grizzly bear has denned two years in a row in the

Welcome Creek area and has a home range throughout the northern Sapphire and John Long Mountains. A pair of siblings were also within the project area vicinity on their way from the Sapphires to the NCDE.

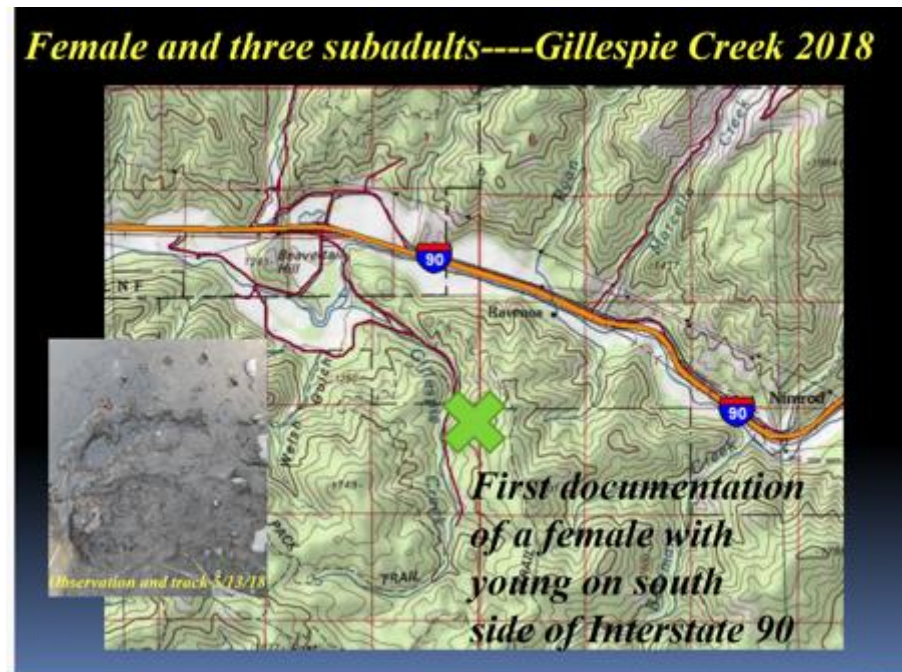


Figure 2. Montana FWPs 2022.

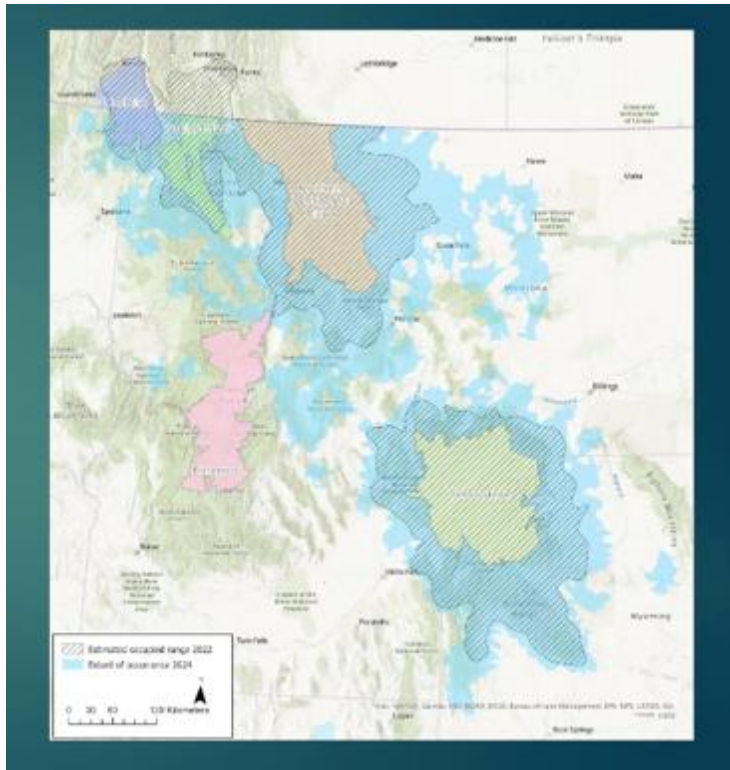


Figure 3. USFWS Occupied and May Be Present for Grizzly Bear 2024.

Inaccuracy #2-

The Wildlife Report has no analysis of impacts on habitat connectivity for grizzly bears even though the newest SSA and the Proposed Rule find connectivity is vital to long-term grizzly bear survival and recovery. The Project Wildlife Report does not include any reference to the Sells, et al. (2023) paper on grizzly bear connectivity for females and males. The area in the John Long and Sapphire Mountains is shown to have moderate to high value for grizzly bear connectivity and the map shows yet another verified observation within the Project Area (see map below).

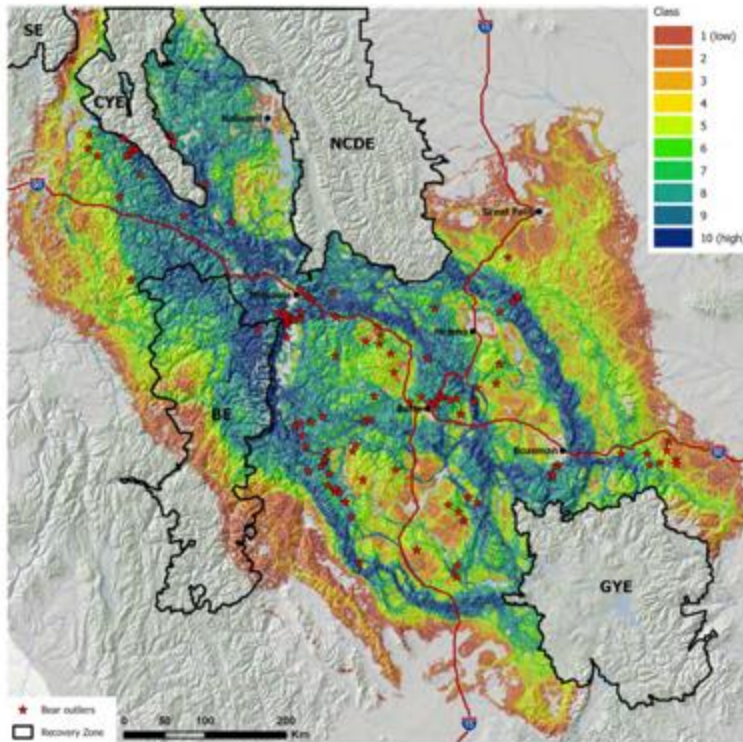


Figure 4. Sells, et al. 2023.

Other studies have also shown the John Long/Northern Sapphire as part of connectivity between the NCDE-GYE and NCDE-BE (Walker and Craighead 1997; Peck et al. 2019).

The EA states that cover will be reduced for 20 years. This is a significant impact on grizzly bears that increases mortality risk and reduces the ability of the landscape to serve as connective habitat.

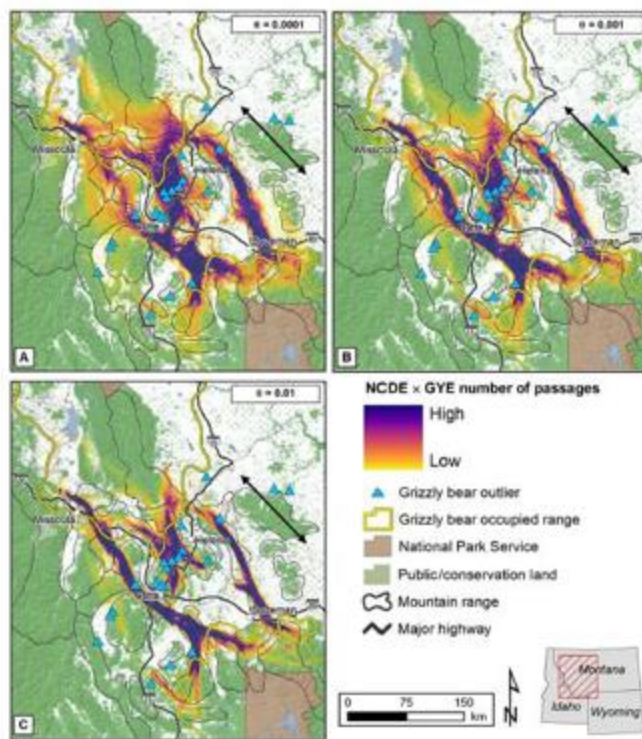


Figure 5. Peck et al. 2019.

In fact, a compilation of connectivity study results shows that the maximum overlap (4) covers the Project Area.

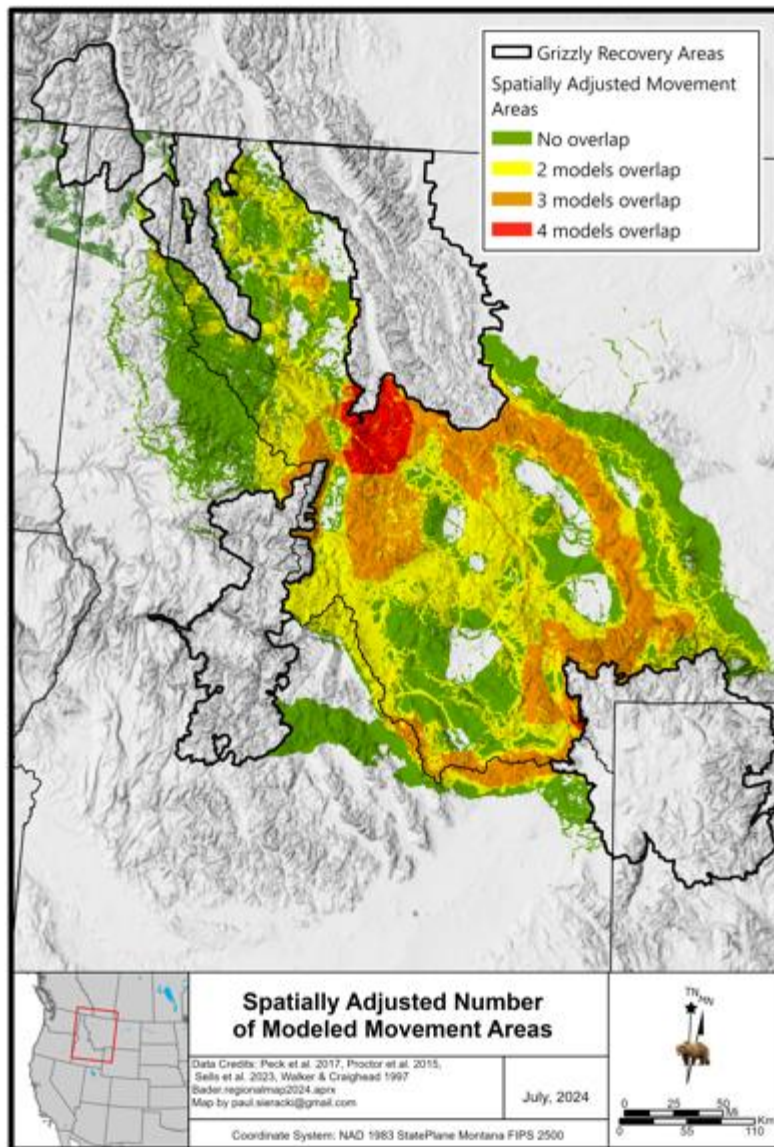


Figure 6. Bader and Sieracki 2024.

Inaccuracy #3-

The Wildlife Report cites to an outdated Species Status Assessment for Grizzly Bear (USFWS 2020). The SSA was updated in 2024, and the USFWS found that grizzly bear viability in the lower 48 states would be jeopardized by reduced standards and protections in connectivity areas between the recovery areas. The new SSA states:

“Further, the lack of regulatory mechanisms to address the threats of human-bear conflicts, human population growth, and potential reductions in connectivity further increases the risk of a possible reduction in the resiliency of the grizzly bear populations in the grizzly bear DPS within the foreseeable future.”

“However, there are no mortality thresholds in connectivity areas outside of the GYE and NCDE DMAs for grizzly bears, as discussed above under Mortality Limits. In addition, recent legislation in Montana and Idaho expanding hunting and trapping tools available for wolves and black bears could reduce the probability of natural connectivity between the GYE and NCDE populations, as discussed above in Mistaken-Identity Killings.”

“...additional data are needed to inform the effects of motorized access in potential connectivity areas that could facilitate natural recolonization of the BE.” (emphasis provided).

The Proposed Rule Maintaining Threatened Species Status for Grizzly Bears (USFWS 2025) states:

“In addition, there are no regulatory mechanisms to facilitate natural connectivity between grizzly bear populations, which could reduce the potential to improve long-term genetic health of small or isolated populations and natural recolonization of the unoccupied ecosystems. Therefore, without adequate conservation measures, human-caused mortality would continue to be a threat to the grizzly bear DPS.” (emphasis provided).

“Therefore, in the absence of measures to allow for connectivity, habitat fragmentation would continue to be a threat to the grizzly bear DPS.” (emphasis provided).

“The lack of mortality thresholds in connectivity areas may result in a contraction of estimated occupied range, which could decrease the likelihood of successful immigration. Therefore, in the absence of conservation measures, connectivity and genetic health would continue to be a threat to the grizzly bear DPS.” (emphasis provided).

“After evaluating threats to the species and assessing the cumulative effect of the threats under the Act’s section 4(a)(1) factors, we conclude that the grizzly bear DPS is at increased risk of extinction within the foreseeable future.” (emphasis provided).

“Further, the lack of regulatory mechanisms to address the threats of human-bear conflicts, human population growth, and potential reductions in connectivity further increases the risk of a possible reduction in the resiliency of the grizzly bear populations in the grizzly bear DPS within the foreseeable future.” (emphasis provided).

“...we determine that the grizzly bear DPS is likely to become in danger of extinction within the foreseeable future throughout all of its range.” (emphasis provided).

Inaccuracy #4-

The Forest Service is playing the game that it has minimal obligations to grizzly bears outside of the NCDE PCA and Zone 1. This is untrue. This area is within the Court injunction area still in effect that defines where grizzly bears reside in Montana (*Flathead-Lolo-Bitterroot Citizen Task Force et al. v. State of Montana* Case CV 23-101-M-DWM) and where full ESA protection applies. The Project Area is also within the May Be Present map prepared by USFWS (2024).

Inaccuracy #5-

220 NORTHWESTERN NATURALIST

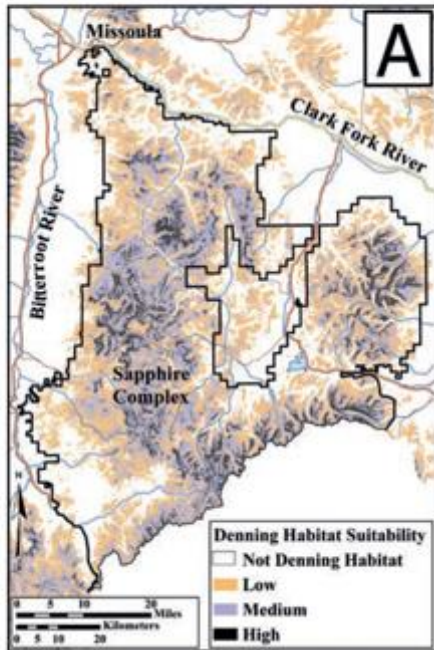


Figure 7. Bader and Sieracki 2022.

The Wildlife Report inaccurately claims all denning has been inside the NCDE PCA while there has been denning on Wisherd Ridge, Welcome Creek and near Miller Peak and in the Coeur d'Alene Mountains. The Wildlife Report also inaccurately claims there is no modeled denning habitat for the Lower Rock Creek GBAU. The Lolo NF refuses to cite to Bader and Sieracki (2022) a peer-reviewed scientific journal publication. As can be plainly seen in the graphic from the paper, there is a significant amount of modeled grizzly bear denning habitat in the Lower Rock GBAU and in fact, a grizzly bear has denned two years in a row in one of the high probability areas.

The EA also finds that there is a “Likely to Affect” determination for whitebark pine, a key food source for grizzly bears.

Inaccuracy #6-

The Wildlife Report and EA inaccurately state there will be no impacts on bull trout or critical habitat designated for the bull trout. Both Rock Creek and the Clark Fork River are designated critical habitat for bull trout. The south end of the Project Area borders a hydrologic divide and the entire Project Area drains into these two streams. The temporary roads and the amount of ground disturbance and cover removal lasting 20 years or more will produce sediment that reaches designated critical habitat.

The extensive existing road network in the Project Area and the amount of cover removal have heavily impacted this area. The focus for protection of water quality, retention of summer flows, bull trout, cutthroat trout and other native aquatic life should be an extensive road decommissioning project.

Riparian Area Protection for Multiple Species

To protect riparian habitat throughout the Project Area for multiple species, the best available science shows no-cut buffer widths.

Table I. A summary of the specific conclusions and recommendations of six publications on the size of vegetated buffers needed for wildlife and wildlife habitat protection. All authors emphasized that different species of wildlife require different vegetated buffer widths.	
Ellis and Richards 2008	"While narrow buffers offer habitat benefits to many species, most wildlife—especially birds and larger mammals—depend upon riparian areas that are a minimum of 300 feet wide."
Fischer 2000	"If avian habitat is a management objective, managers should consider managing for riparian zones that are at least 100 m [328 feet] wide."
Fischer et al 2000	"Recommended widths for ecological concerns in buffer strips typically are much wider than those recommended for water quality concerns, often exceeding 100 m [328 feet] in width. These recommendations usually apply to either side of the channel in larger river systems and to total width along smaller streams where the canopy is continuous across the channel."
	"Management for long, continuous buffer strips rather than fragments of greater width should also be an important consideration."
Knutson and Naef 1997	The mean width of all wildlife studies reviewed indicate that 88 meters (287 feet) is required to protect wildlife habitat.
Schwab 2002	"Our research shows the average minimum distance between [bat] roost sites and perennial water to be 90 meters [295 feet]."
Wenger 1999	"While narrow buffers offer considerable habitat benefits to many species, protecting diverse terrestrial riparian wildlife communities requires some buffers of at least 100 m (~300 ft)."
	"[H]owever, 300 ft wide buffers are not practical on all streams in most areas. Therefore, minimum riparian buffer width should be based on water quality and aquatic habitat functions. . . . In addition, at least a few wide (300–1000 ft/~90–300 m) riparian corridors and large blocks of upland forest should be identified and targeted for preservation."

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The Montana Stream Protection Act prohibits clearcutting in Streamside Management Zones. The NRCS includes the following which states buffer widths apply to both occupied and unoccupied bull trout stream zones. The Endangered Species Act and impacts on bull trout critical habitat include "upland areas" that drain into designated critical habitat.

The United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service MT-CPA-186 (Bull Trout) July 2016 states:

HABITAT DETERMINATION SCREEN

Bull Trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*)

- "Buffer widths" on occupied and unoccupied stream zones incorporate the following on both sides of a stream: riparian management zone is a standardized 50-foot-wide no-ground disturbance buffer AND an additional 50-100 foot buffer with minimized ground disturbance; channel migration zone is a variable width no-ground disturbance buffer specific to the flood prone area of streams exhibiting both valley bottom characteristics and alluvial processes. The 50 foot RMZ buffer is then applied in addition to the CMZ. Buffer width is 50 foot from the perimeter for wetland management zone (see Appendix D, CM-3 and CM-4, respectively of the NRCS Biological Assessment Bull Trout May Affect, Likely to Adversely Affect, dated May 2013, revised July 2014 in Section II of the eFOTG).

"Unoccupied stream" are those streams with direct connectivity to occupied stream zones, including intermittent streams and those perennial streams where recent sampling (e.g., < 5 years) indicates the stream is not likely to be occupied or potentially occupied by bull trout; seasonal downstream direct connectivity is confirmed.

"Direct connectivity" of unoccupied stream zones includes intermittent and perennial streams, either upstream or downstream, with a direct connection to occupied stream zones or critical habitat within a 6th HUC. Direct connectivity is viewed in two ways: 1) no known barriers exist to prevent a fish from accessing an unoccupied stream zone; and 2) intermittent

or perennial streams, reservoirs, ponds, lakes with the potential to deliver sediment, nutrients, or contaminants to an occupied stream zone or critical habit.

Issues That Must Be Addressed in the Final EA and Biological Opinion

- The Project should be reconfigured to focus exclusively on road decommissioning and water quality restoration.
- The analysis and formal consultation with USFWS must include effects on grizzly bear connectivity habitat as well as residential occupancy by grizzly bears. This will result in another Likely to Adversely Affect determination. It must also consider impacts to bull trout occupied and unoccupied streams as per Department of Agriculture Department's Natural Resources Conservation Service MT-CPA-186 (Bull Trout) July 2016.
- The Biological Opinion must be completed prior to a Decision Notice and FONSI.
- All clearcut units must be removed.
- There should be no temporary roads.
- All roads open to the public must have no cut/no treatment areas up to 500m from either side of the road.
- All roads added to the system should be decommissioned and removed from the system.

Sincerely,

Patty Ames, President
Flathead-Lolo-Bitterroot Citizen Task Force