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Ben Burr, Executive Director
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Todd Butler, District Ranger
Hell Canyon Ranger District, Black Hills National Forest
1019 N 5th St
Custer, SD 57730

Dear District Ranger Butler:

BlueRibbon Coalition (BRC) is writing to provide comments on the Roby Forest Management Project. 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 U.S. Forest Service. Many of our members and supporters live in South Dakota or travel across the country to visit South Dakota and use motorized vehicles to access National Forest System lands throughout the state, including the Black Hills. BRC members visit these areas 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.

Support for Active Management

BRC supports the Roby Forest Management Project and encourages the Forest Service to complete the Environmental Assessment and issue a decision on the schedule the District has laid out. The project area covers 49,431 acres west of Custer, of which 46,844 acres are National Forest System land, and the proposed action includes commercial harvest on up to 9,677 acres, shaded fuel breaks along main roads and ownership boundaries on up to 2,289 acres, and prescribed burning on up to 46,073 acres. The EA documents high fuel loading, intermixed ownership, and overstocked ponderosa pine stands in a landscape where the Forest Service needs to be able to stop a fire at defined operational boundaries. Thinning, regeneration harvest, and fuel breaks along the roads that people use to enter and leave the forest are a proportionate response to those conditions.

We appreciate that the project is proceeding as an authorized emergency action under Section 40807 of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act and Secretary's Memorandum 1078-006, and we understand that the EA therefore analyzes only the proposed action and no action. Because the agency has narrowed the alternatives, we ask that the Forest Service address the concerns below by modifying the proposed action itself. Executive Order 14225 (Immediate Expansion of American Timber Production) and Executive Order 13855 (Promoting Active Management of America's Forests, Rangelands, and Other Federal Lands to Improve Conditions and Reduce Wildfire Risk) both direct agencies to increase active management and timber production, and this project does so. Timber harvest from the project will also stimulate the local economy, providing jobs and revenue in Custer and Pennington Counties, and BRC supports comments made by local residents and members who approve of the project for that benefit.

Wildfire and Public Health

Habitat loss is the largest threat to wildlife, and wildfire is the largest threat to habitat. We support the Forest Service in properly managing the forest to prevent wildfires that harm wildlife, watersheds, and communities. Many conservation groups actively litigate forest projects that help mitigate fire, and the best protection for habitat is active management carried out without delay. Roads are a critical component of that management. They provide access to carry out projects, give firefighters and the public a route in and out, and the shaded fuel breaks the project proposes along them only work if the roads remain usable. Our members are among the people who use these roads to reach the forest in the first place.

The project would burn up to 46,073 acres in blocks of tens to a few hundred acres. We support the design criteria for burn plans, test burns, and smoke monitoring. If a prescribed burn escapes or a wildfire starts in or near a burn block, it should be treated as a wildfire and suppressed with urgency rather than managed to meet burn objectives. Smoke from wildfire carries serious public health risks,

and the short-term smoke from planned burning conducted in compliance with the Clean Air Act is the lesser exposure.

Opposition to Road Closures and Removal from the Motor Vehicle Use Map

The project area contains about 218 miles of roads, 19 miles of motorized trails, and the Antelope Springs motorized trailhead. BRC supports the road work that accompanies the timber program: reconstruction of up to 20 miles of National Forest System road and maintenance on up to 196 miles, which will improve sight distance, drainage, and drivability on roads that serve recreation as well as log trucks. BRC strongly opposes the proposal to close up to 16 miles of system road, remove it from the Motor Vehicle Use Map (MVUM), and reduce the mileage open to public motorized use from approximately 118 miles to between 102 and 108 miles. The EA offers one sentence of justification, that open road density “is associated with” human-caused wildfire, and it gives no density figure, no citation, no road-by-road finding, and no analysis of the recreation access that would be lost. We ask the Forest Service to drop the closures from this project.

The closures are inconsistent with the Forest Plan, or at a minimum unsupported by it. The 2006 Black Hills Forest Plan, as amended, is the plan the EA says it follows, and Section 40807 of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (16 U.S.C. 6592c(b)(3)) requires an emergency action on National Forest System land to be consistent with it, as does 16 U.S.C. 1604(i). The Plan’s Goal 3 discussion states that forest roads will be maintained to facilitate commodity and amenity uses as well as administration and protection, that road density where timber is harvested will generally range between two and five miles per square mile, and that density “is not expected to change much” in areas managed for timber. Management Area 5.1, which covers 58 percent of the Roby project area, is described as having numerous open roads that provide commercial access and roaded recreation, with some roads available for year-round motorized use and motorized road travel allowed where designated. Objective 310 directs the Forest to maintain the road system. Goal 4 recognizes that the greatest demand and use of the Black Hills is driving for pleasure, and Objectives 416 and 421 set the Plan’s expectations for motorized trails and roads suitable for public use. Objective 421 provides for a Forest-wide road system of 5,200 miles in which 4,700 miles are suitable for public use and only 500 miles are closed to vehicles, and Objective 416 contemplates up to 700 miles per decade of motorized trail construction, improvement, or conversion from road to motorized trail. A project that closes 16 more miles in a single area moves against those targets. Standard 9106 allows obliteration of a road only when a project decision shows it is no longer needed for management or that resource damage cannot be mitigated. The EA contains no such finding for any of the 16 miles. By our arithmetic, 46,844 acres is about 73 square miles, so 218 total road miles is roughly 3.0 miles per square mile and 118 miles open to the public is roughly 1.6, both inside or below the range the Plan describes for timber

areas. If the Forest Service believes otherwise, the final EA should disclose its density calculation, including which roads it counts.

To the extent the Forest Service relies on the 1-mile-per-square-mile open road density objective for Management Area 5.4 winter range (December 15 through May 15), that is an objective and not a standard, it applies only in winter, and the Plan itself describes seasonal gating as the tool for it. The remedy for a winter concern is a seasonal closure, not permanent removal from the MVUM. The Plan also directs that when a facility cannot support year-round use, the Forest consider restricting use to acceptable seasons or conditions, and its travel direction calls for seasonal restrictions where there are unsafe conditions, unacceptable wildlife conflict, or a seasonal public or administrative need. The EA considers only permanent removal. BRC does not object to closures within the Fanny/Boles Research Natural Area to the extent the Plan requires them there.

The closures would also remove dispersed camping and game retrieval that the Plan ties to the MVUM. Under the Plan, motorized dispersed camping is allowed only as shown on the MVUM, and so is motorized off-road travel for game retrieval. A road removed from the MVUM takes the camping and retrieval corridor along it, and the EA says only that dispersed recreation is typical for the Black Hills. The final EA must analyze that loss.

Standard 9301 requires that, when planning and implementing resource management projects, the Forest protect or enhance Forest Development Trails and their associated Recreation Opportunity Spectrum experience, and the Plan's travel standards provide that changes to travel designations are made through project decisions and displayed on the MVUM, which means each change must be documented and open to public comment. The Travel Management Rule applies to these closures. Removing a road from the MVUM revises a designation, and 36 CFR 212.54 provides that revisions must be made in accordance with the public involvement requirements of 212.52, the coordination requirements of 212.53, and the criteria in 212.55. Section 212.55(a) requires the responsible official to consider effects on natural and cultural resources, public safety, provision of recreational opportunities, access needs, conflicts among uses, and the need for and availability of resources for maintenance and administration. The EA does not mention these criteria. Section 212.5(b) separately requires the Forest to identify the minimum road system through a science-based roads analysis and to consider unneeded roads for other uses, such as trails. We ask the Forest Service to identify which of the 16 miles appear in the Black Hills Travel Analysis Report, to release that report, and to explain how each road meets the 212.55 criteria. If the closures are not supported by the Travel Analysis Report, then the proposal departs from the Forest's own analysis and requires its own project-level review.

The emergency action authority does not support the closures. Section 40807 lists the actions it authorizes, including salvage, sanitation harvest, hazardous fuels removal, and removal of hazard trees

near roads and trails, and it does not list road closure or decommissioning. Its definition of an authorized emergency action turns on mitigating harm to life, property, or important resources. Roads support that purpose by providing initial-attack access and evacuation routes, and the EA itself acknowledges that closing roads by methods other than gates could delay wildfire suppression and lists facilitating suppression as part of the purpose and need. Executive Order 13855 likewise recognizes that policies reducing emergency responder access to federal land are counterproductive. If the Forest Service believes the closures are needed to mitigate a hazard, it should explain how, road by road. Otherwise they should be severed from the emergency action and considered, if at all, through the travel management process with full public notice.

Current policy favors access. Congress declared in the EXPLORE Act (Pub. L. 118-234, Section 111) that it is the policy of the Federal Government to foster and encourage recreation on Federal recreational lands, and Section 127(d) directs the Secretaries to “seek to create additional opportunities,” in accordance with existing law, for motorized and nonmotorized access on National Forest System lands. We recognize that the Act speaks in terms of policy and direction and does not itself prohibit a closure. It nevertheless weighs against a project that, in the same breath, adds timber revenue and removes up to 16 miles of public road. The Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act lists outdoor recreation first among the purposes for which the national forests are administered and requires due consideration of the relative values of the various resources (16 U.S.C. 528, 529). In addition, Executive Order 14408 (May 29, 2026) states that access to Federal lands benefits all American citizens and directs replacement of current off-road vehicle regulations with a system that provides more access. The Forest Service’s August 2026 notice of intent to revise the Travel Management Rule (91 Fed. Reg. 54,686) describes a national presumption that existing roads and trails are open unless closure is supported by specific, documented, and justifiable reasons, and a Region 6 interim guidance memorandum issued in June 2025 suspended travel management proposals that would decrease public access in NEPA projects. Those policies are not binding on this project, but they show the direction of the Department, and a closure supported by a single uncited sentence will not meet that standard. We ask whether Region 2 has issued comparable guidance.

If the Forest Service retains any closure, we ask that it do the following:

- List each road proposed for closure by number and length, state the specific soil, water, or wildlife concern for that road, and show its location against MVUM-designated dispersed camping and game retrieval corridors.
- Prefer seasonal closures, gates, and storage to permanent removal from the MVUM, and consider conversion of low-standard roads to motorized trails (as Forest Plan Objective 416 and 36 CFR 212.5(b)(2) contemplate) rather than ripping and seeding them.

- Evaluate user-created roads that connect system roads for addition to the system before closing them, and designate the 0.52 mile of new permanent road and the BLM-sale roads as open to the public in the decision where they provide access to areas with no current legal access. Under Plan Standard 9101, new roads are closed unless the project decision designates them open, so the decision must say so expressly.
- Reconcile the access figures. The recreation section reports 152 miles of roads open to street-legal vehicles only and four miles open to all motorized vehicles, while the effects section reports approximately 118 miles open to public motorized use, and total road miles of 218 with 47 closed year-round. The public cannot evaluate a reduction to 102 to 108 miles without knowing the baseline.
- Under Plan Standard 9301, protect access to and the setting of motorized trails 3508, 3509, 3530, 3531, 3532, 3533, 3534, and 3535. We support design criteria 13 and 14, which limit equipment crossings and call for appraising trail restoration after skidding or hauling across the trails, and ask that closures be temporary, signed, announced in advance, and ended promptly. We also support the commitment to divert snowmobile trails or choose alternate haul routes where they overlap.
- Provide a public comment opportunity under 36 CFR 212.52 on any revision to the MVUM.

Dispersed Camping

BRC believes that all users can and should be accommodated. Camping has grown immensely since 2019, and the number of people who use public land to camp grows every year. The Forest Service should provide as many dispersed camping opportunities as possible so that use is not concentrated in limited sites. Management strategies such as signage, education, and better waste facilities should be exhausted before restrictions or closures of any area or route that provides camping access. We are concerned that closing dispersed camping options will eventually lead to reservation systems, which disadvantage users who cannot plan far in advance. We support dispersed camping and believe it provides a valuable user experience that the Forest Service should protect. The roads proposed for closure are, in many cases, the way people reach those sites.

EXPLORE Act and Multiple Use

Congress directed federal land managers to expand and enhance outdoor recreation opportunities in the EXPLORE Act (Pub. L. 118-234). Public land management actions should not reduce route networks or restrict recreation unless absolutely necessary, and they should work to expand access consistent with that direction. The Roby Project is a good opportunity to meet the Act's goals by maintaining the route network alongside active forest management.

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 non-motorized recreation use often overlap as OHVs 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 BlueRibbon Coalition, 800 W Main St, Suite 1460, Boise, ID 83702, or to brc@blueribboncoalition.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ben Burr', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Ben Burr
Executive Director
BlueRibbon Coalition

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

Simone Griffin
Policy Director
BlueRibbon Coalition