

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 6/4/2019 1:46:17 PM

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Comments:

These comments are submitted on behalf of the Nine Quarter Circle Ranch. Located up the Taylor Fork drainage, our ranch has been a guest ranch since 1912 and in the Kelsey family since 1946. Our ranch strives to share a special piece of Montana and western culture with our guests every summer. In the heart of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem and surrounded by public land, we strive to be good stewards of the land we own in this valley and the land we lease from the Forest Service.

Grazing Allotments

As lessees on public land, maintaining our allotments for our horse herd is a main priority. We rely on these grazing permits to sustain our herd and our business through the summer season. We agree with the statement in the DEIS in 3.14.1 that rangeland management is an important component of the multiple use mandate the Forest Service must manage public lands with. We appreciate that the plan indicates a vision for continuing existing allotments.

Bison Management

The conversation for and against moving bison into the Taylor Fork continues. We understand that the Taylor Fork is within the bison's tolerance zone and that there is a desire to move the animals into the Taylor Fork valley. We remain opposed to the transporting or hazing of bison into the Taylor Fork valley. A significant amount of the land within the predicted bison habitat identified in the Taylor Fork is our private land. The attached map provided by Dr. Clayton Marlow's study identifies the predicted bison habitat, and 100% of our land lies within the predicted habitat. We continue to have concerns about the safety of our guests and private property damage should bison be introduced into this area, and conversations to date do not sufficiently address these concerns. Winters in this area are harsh, and it is natural that the bison will move to the valley bottom during winter. Our land, however, is in the valley bottom, and we have concerns over the animal's destruction of our fences and property. However, we continue to be willing to work with federal and state agencies on this issue.

Page 596 of the DEIS suggests that there is a need to alleviate bison/livestock conflicts the Forest Service may consider changing permits from cow/calf pairs to horses or steers. While this might alleviate the conflict of brucellosis (and the conflict that might be inflicted upon bison), it does not eliminate the danger livestock face from bison. The only experience we have with bison in the Taylor Fork is them competing with our horses at our hay feeder and ultimately goring our horses. This continues to be a concern of ours should bison enter the Taylor Fork. Should the day come to pass when bison are living in the Taylor Fork drainage, we would like a plan in place to deal with these conflicts.

Outfitting and Guiding

We recognize that the Forest Plan does not extensively touch on outfitting and guiding, but we would like to raise some concerns over the lack of flexibility of user days. For example, we have a certain number of Overnight Stock Use days, and we have very limited hunting days. The impact on the land is similar, but we cannot use these days interchangeably. If and when the Forest Service evaluates user days, we encourage the agency to consider adding more flexibility into the process.

Gallatin Forest Partnership

We endorse the Gallatin Forest Partnership's agreement, and encourage the agency to choose Alternative C for the Madison and Gallatin designated areas. The Gallatin Forest Partnership built off of decades of work and were able to come together to find a solution that could work for the most parties.

For the Henrys Lake Mountains, we encourage the Forest Service to choose Alternative D. The Forest Service made a good decision in the 1987 plan to recommend the Lionhead as Recommended Wilderness but complicated the area by continuing to allow mountain biking. We not only encourage the agency to continue to recommend the area as Wilderness, and we encourage the agency to manage it as such by only allowing foot and horse traffic on the trails. We encourage this approach to be taken across the forest.