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Last name: Thompson

Organization:

Title:

Comments: A hard copy of the attached letter will be send to the Custer Gallatin Forest Supervisor

Dear Mary, Tuesday, December 20, 2022

The Sweet Grass County Conservation District works on a variety of conservation projects, including watershed planning, resource management efforts, the 310 law, rangeland resources, sustainable forest practices, and education of landowners on voluntary incentives for rangeland improvements and conservation. Our conservation efforts provide multiple benefits to our local landowners as we continue to work collaboratively with our agency partners including the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and Montana Department of Natural Resources & Conservation. The Conservation District has worked with many, if not all, of the Crazy Mountain east side landowners over the year on various rangeland, water, and conservation projects. These landowners are multi-generational landowners who employ sustainable practices to enhance their operations and recognize the importance of land stewardship on livestock, wildlife, water quality, fire mitigation and agricultural production. We strongly support the proposed land exchange for the following reasons:

- This exchange creates contiguous blocks of both public and private land, thus improving the ability of the federal land manager and the private property owner to manage and protect resources on their own properties, without the difficulty caused by checkerboarded land patterns.
- The exchange will create a 20-section area of public land between Big Timber Canyon and Sweet Grass canyon, opening land for public recreational use, natural resource management, and wildlife connectivity.
- The exchange will open up some hunting opportunities in the East Crazies that do not presently exist, and the addition of Smeller Lake provides a beautiful area for fishing and recreation, as well as resource management.
- Access into Sweet Grass Canyon is via a private road and the landowners have long required permission to cross their private property. The Forest Service acknowledges it has no written easements to the area. The exchange indicates that the private landowners intend to continue allowing permissive seasonal access, as long as people are respectful of private property. Thus, there is no loss of this access, except by bad actors. However, this exchange also affords a guaranteed public access route between Big Timber and Sweet Grass Canyon, on a foot and horse trail to be paid for by the private party, not at taxpayer expense.
- We are encouraged that the Forest Service and landowners are pursuing cooperative solutions like this that can be a win-win for all interests.
- This new public trail would afford great opportunities for a day hike and recreation anywhere in the 20-section block, or for the opportunity for a multi-day hike on a 40-mile connected loop through the mountains. With this access, very little of the east side of the Crazy Mountains from Big Timber Creek to the north of the range will have checkerboarded sections that cannot otherwise be accessed by the public.
- The exchange transfers 4135 acres of public land to private individuals while transferring 6430 acres of private land to public, resulting in a net gain of 2295 acres of public land.
- The landowners in the Sweet Grass drainage have voluntarily put their properties into the East Crazy Mountain zoning district, which restricts subdivision. These are not landowners interested in subdivision or rampant development, but in continuing the operations engaged in by their families for generations.
- The Custer Gallatin National Forest has recently engaged in a multi-year Forest Plan revision. That revision designated much of the East Crazies as "backcountry" with some wilderness in the Southeast part of the range. Non-mechanized and non-motorized access is in keeping with these designations and respects the pristine character of the Crazies.
- The exchange represents a unique 5-year effort by Landowners and a working group of diverse interests to hear concerns from the access, wildlife, and environmental communities. Some representatives of groups were not interested in trying to find compromise and chose not to participate, but a core group kept at it. This land exchange would be impossible if even one landowner backs out, so the cooperation is unprecedented.
- As a conservation organization, we are all dependent on private landowners to help protect what many of us cherish: open spaces, wildlife, resource sustainability and habitat management. We applaud the Forest Service, landowners and those working on this proposal, who have been willing to put in the time to see this proposal come to fruition and we encourage the Forest Service to adopt Alternative B, the proposed land exchange. On behalf of the Board of Supervisors, we strongly encourage your approval of this well-reasoned, collaborative effort to find an equitable and beneficial opportunity and effective solution.