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Comments: I would like to express my support for the Dry Riverside Project. This project is a well thought out forestry management project that will result in the creation of beneficial wild habitat.

I have recreated and hunted in the exact project area for over 20 years. Over that duration I have witnessed drastic changes in the overall health of the ecosystem. Many of the proposed treatment areas are past logging units that 20 years ago provided beneficial wildlife habitat. However, after 20 years of regrowth and no active management or thinning taking place we have seen the forest canopy close back in to a point where there is no longer enough sunlight making it through to the forest floor to grow beneficial shrubs and forbs that our ungulate populations are dependent on.

The Spring 2023 elk count conducted by Montana FWP recorded 67 elk total in the non-wilderness portion of the South Fork River Drainage (i.e. the project area). This is down from elk counts in excess of 500 in the 1980's and the current elk population is at a documented 100 year low. Additionally, the elk calf recruitment over the last 15 years in the South Fork River drainage is down to 13.8 calves per 100 cows. Historically, the recruitment has averaged in excess of 25 calves per 100 cows. (see attached "Southfork Flathead (HD 150 and HD 140) Elk Survey Memo") Poor body condition and fat content can lead to lower pregnancy rates and poor forage quality can lead to higher winter mortality. The habitat health in the South Fork River drainage is currently poor, but could be significantly improved through beneficial projects like Dry Riverside.

The South Fork of the Flathead River is on the brink of an ecological disaster from an ungulate standpoint unless beneficial forestry management projects like Dry Riverside can be approved and implemented. Without active management efforts, meaningful ungulate populations in the South Fork will be lost. Additionally, the South Fork River drainage is also home to all of Montana's large carnivore species. Existence of Grizzly Bears, Wolves and Lynx within the South Fork River Drainage has largely been responsible for the more conservative approach to forestry management that has taken place over the last 20-30 years in the South Fork River drainage. However, an unintended consequence of a lack of timber management has been crashing ungulate populations as documented by Montana FWP spring elk counts. Without active forestry intervention ungulate populations will continue to fall and as a result species of concern like Grizzly Bears, Wolves and Lynx who are dependent on healthy ungulate populations will be detrimentally impacted.

The do-nothing forestry management practices of the last 20-30 year are proving to be detrimental to all wildlife species on the landscape. Additionally, unhealthy fuels buildup has led to an increase in wildfire intensity that requires additional fire suppression resources. The Ridge Fire just to the north of this proposed treatment area resulted in a \$21 Million burden to taxpayers. If Dry Riverside is approved and implemented, it will result in a landscape that is more defensible from a wildfire standpoint and mitigate the potential for the area becoming a wildfire mitigation liability to taxpayers.

Thank you for your time, please approve the Dry Riverside Project.