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First name: Doug

Last name: Ferrell

Organization: The Cube Iron Cataract Coalition

Title: Secretary

Comments: To the Lolo Forest Planning Team,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Lolo Forest Plan Revision process. We are members of the Steering Committee of the Cube Iron Cataract Coalition (CICC). The CICC was founded in January of 2018 to engage in stewardship projects in the CIC area, and to advocate for permanent protection for this special wild area. Please visit our website at <https://cubeironcataractcoalition.wordpress.com/>

Over the years the CICC has done a good deal of stewardship work, published newsletters once or twice a year, and hosted many guided hikes as well as local events, including banquets, bonfire parties and presentations by a number of speakers. We have a list of some 220 supporters who receive newsletters and info from us, and support our efforts.

We have made presentations to a variety of local and regional groups including the Elks, the Thompson Falls Chamber of Commerce, the Thompson Falls Women's Club, the Thompson Falls Town Council, the Trout Creek Improvement Association and the Sanders County Commissioners. We have been well received and all these groups have thanked us for our work. An endorsement from the Thompson Falls Chamber of Commerce is attached with this message.

We created, printed and have distributed over 5000 copies of a hiking map and brochure, which is available locally for free. It can be viewed on our website and we will send you a copy via snail mail.

The CICC area that we are advocating for includes, starting from the east, the Sundance Ridge RA, the Cube Iron RA, the Deep Creek RA and the Cataract RA. This mostly connected wild country spills into the Kootenai National Forest, into an area they also call the Cataract RA. This represents a very large area of premier wild country. It is our goal to protect this area in its present wild condition, for the benefit of future generations of wildlife and humans.

The area is spectacularly beautiful, with many mountain lakes, high peaks and ridgeline trails. Cube Iron Mountain represents an interesting geological formation of cube shaped rocks with angular shelves and ledges. Fires burned major parts of the area in 2021, but new growth is coming in. No doubt the planning team has access to inventories of the extensive stands of White Bark Pine in the area. Some of these stands burned in the 2021 fire, and many are struggling with the twin challenges of drought and pine beetles, but there are numerous large and healthy trees in the area, that grow highly valuable cones every year.

We understand the Lolo planning team is working on a careful analysis of regional wildlife habitat connectivity issues, and we look forward to reviewing this information. It certainly seems apparent that the CICC area provides important connectivity between the Cabinets, the Missions and the Bitterroots, including the large Bushnell and Hoodoo RAs.

What is remarkable is how accessible the Cube Iron area is from the communities of Thompson Falls and Trout Creek. From downtown Thompson Falls, the trailhead for the popular Four Lakes Trail is about a half hour drive. From Trout Creek you can drive SE along the Blue Slide road, then up Graves Creek forest road #367 all the way to the top of Vermillion Pass. From there you can see Canada and Idaho, and can hike the glorious ridge trail #528 and #529 in either direction, to a string of named and unnamed peaks.

We have reviewed the current Proposed Action with care. We appreciate the designation of Backcountry Non-Motorized for much of the area. We strongly believe the Cube Iron and Sundance areas deserve the more complete and durable protection of a Recommended Wilderness designation. As you are aware, this area was included in the famous 1988 Wilderness Bill that passed both houses of Congress with large majorities, but was left unsigned. The area was also included in the Kootenai and Lolo Accords. Now is finally the time to fully protect this deserving area.

We have discussed our proposal with representatives from the Thompson River Lumber company. We jointly developed the attached map with them, as the area proposed for a Recommended Wilderness designation. They told us they do not oppose and may possibly formally endorse this map and boundary.

We advocate for no new road closures in the CICC area, and specifically support maintaining the Graves Creek road as open to motorized vehicles year round.

We also support protection for other valuable wild country in the LNF. This includes:

GREAT BURN We support retaining the 1986 Recommended Wilderness designations for the Hoodoo RA, as shown in the proposed action. We also support Rec W status for the Ward Eagle and Meadow Creek areas.

LOLO PEAK We support retaining and expanding the South Fork Lolo Peak Rec W and expanding the Carlton Ridge RNA as shown in the Proposed Action.

BLACKFOOT We support retaining the Rec W areas along the Bob Marshall and Scapegoat Wilderness, as shown in the Proposed Action. We support all the recommendations of the BCSA collaboration, including Rec W for the Westfork Clearwater and Grizzly Basin areas.

We support active management for most of the areas of General Forest in the Lolo, and we support no net loss of acres suitable for timber management. Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Signed on behalf of the Cube Iron Cataract Coalition,

Mark Sheets, Chairman
Doug Ferrell, Secretary

Attachments are:
CICC Boundary Map

Letter from Thompson Falls Chamber of Commerce

This comment letter as a Word document