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Comments: My response to the Southern Tenmile Recreation Plan focuses specifically on the proposed reroute of the Wheeler South trail above Francie's Cabin.

The Wheeler Trail is not a new recreational idea - it is a corridor with deep historical roots. First traveled in the 1870s as Judge John Wheeler's sheep route across the Tenmile, it was rebuilt in 1932, revived again in 1969 for the World Championship Pack Burro Race, and formally recognized as a National Recreation Trail in 1979. In other words, Wheeler has served as a durable route for more than a century.

Beyond its history, Wheeler has become an absolute gem of a mountain biking trail, treasured by the biking community for its narrow singletrack feel, alpine beauty, and rugged technical descent. Riders, runners, and hikers alike love that it has remained authentic - narrow, raw, rocky, and untouched - at a time when so many other trails in the county have been reworked. There are almost no other trails like it left in Summit County, and its character is precisely what makes it irreplaceable and iconic. Importantly, this section of Wheeler South is also in excellent condition: no ruts, extremely minimal widening, and far less degradation than many neighboring trails included in the STRAP. It is also an iconic stage in the Breck Epic, serving as the highly revered Stage 5 since 2009. In short, this trail already exemplifies sustainable recreation without the need for disruptive reroutes.

In addition to the local love of the trail, there is also a significant ecological concern. Digging up new trail and "restoring" the old one - which, in my local experience with the 360 trail, has meant needlessly disturbing intact environments - will invite opportunities for invasive species such as the chamomile daisy, musk thistle, and oxeye daisy to take over the fragile alpine environment. The 12,000-foot Wheeler Basin and south-facing hillside create a wildflower mecca each year. However, multiple studies show that soil disturbance is an easy opening for invasive plants. In mountains, both large-scale (e.g., roads) and small-scale (even gaps of just a few centimeters) disturbances have been demonstrated to promote invader establishment and facilitate range shifts (Lembrechts et al. 2016. Disturbance is the key to plant invasions in cold environments. PNAS, 113(49): 14061-14066).

Additionally, the Rocky Mountain Research Station has explicitly listed disturbance (both natural and human-caused) as a key factor that increases invasibility. According to a 2011 U.S. Forest Service White Paper, "exotic plant invasions are commonly exacerbated by disturbances such as wildfires, timber harvest, road building, burning, and grazing by livestock and native herbivores. The combined effects of multiple and interacting disturbances on populations of exotic plant species, especially in the face of projected climate change, are uncertain but potentially severe." (USDA Forest Service, RMRS-GTR-265, Rocky Mountain Research Station Invasive Species Visionary White Paper, 2011). Digging up a portion of trail and building a new section would certainly be considered such a disturbance, with long-lasting consequences for local plant communities.

In conclusion, proposing to dig up the old and create an entirely new alignment in fragile alpine soils ignores the love and legacy of Wheeler South, and invites ecological harm. Rather than destroy an iconic section of mountain biking trail and create fresh disturbance that will take decades to heal, I urge management to focus on maintaining and hardening this historic trail corridor to protect both cultural history and alpine ecosystems. The proposed "reroute" should be minimized to essential trail maintenance - or preferably eliminated entirely - and those funds reallocated to other areas in the project that taxpayers actually support. The public did not ask for this reroute, nor does the community want it.

I have attached photos, taken Sunday 9/14/25, of key trail sections. These are intended to highlight (a) the lack of erosion or "unsustainability" and/or (b) areas where minor maintenance could be completed.

Thank you,
Becky Walter