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First name: Hilary

Last name: Eisen

Organization: Wild Montana

Title: Federal Policy Director

Comments: Comments on behalf of Wild Montana are attached.

Dear Ranger Hernandez,

Please accept these comments on behalf of Wild Montana and our members in response to the public comment period for the Upper Bunk Fuels Reduction Project

Since 1958, Wild Montana has been uniting and mobilizing people across Montana, creating and growing a conservation movement around a shared love of wild public lands and waters. We work at the local level, building trust, fostering collaboration, and forging agreements for protecting the wild, enhancing public land access, and helping communities thrive. Wild Montana routinely engages in public land-use planning processes, as well as local projects such as habitat restoration and timber harvest proposals, recreational infrastructure planning, oil and gas lease sales, and land acquisitions. Wild Montana and our more than 100,000 supporters are invested in the ecological integrity and quiet recreation opportunities on public lands across Montana, as well as the impact of climate change on Montana's wild places.

Wild Montana members, supporters, and staff have been commenting on and otherwise engaging in Forest Service project design and planning since before the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) was enacted. We have a long history of submitting public comments under NEPA, including under the prior Forest Service NEPA regulations (36 CFR 220). We are extremely concerned about the myriad ways in which USDA's Department-wide NEPA regulations (7 CFR 1b) reduce or eliminate opportunities for public engagement, transparency, and robust environmental analysis in project decision making. Meanwhile, the Forest Service's move away from Gov Delivery, quarterly SOPA reports, and other previously standard means of public notification have put the onus on members of the public to actively seek out information about projects occurring on National Forest land. In addition, USDA Secretary Memorandum 1078-006 declaring an emergency situation determination for over 112 million acres of the National Forest System allows emergency NEPA review and consultation procedures for many pest- and wildfire-related projects, allows the agency to only consider a no action and proposed action for projects analyzed under an Environmental Assessment or Environmental Impact Statement, and exempts these "emergency" projects from the USFS objection process. Alone, each of these changes would be worrisome. Combined, the effect is to leave the public in the dark about management of their National Forests and exclude them from participating, with a resulting degradation of the quality of Forest Service projects. To this point, researchers recently quantified the substantive influence of public comment on environmental decisions under NEPA, finding "that public comment influences agency decisions and is a valuable tool for agencies to gather information and refine plans, which could lead to more sustainable outcomes for affected communities and the natural world."<sup>1</sup>

With respect to this particular project, we greatly appreciate that you have opted to solicit public comments on the Public Notification Document despite the new USDA NEPA procedures eliminating mandatory public comment periods for projects analyzed with categorical exclusions (or environmental assessments). In addition, we are pleased to see that the forest has invited the Kootenai Forest Stakeholders Collaborative and the Lincoln County FireSafe Council to collaborate on this project and encourage you to work with these collaboratives on additional public outreach, such as field trips or public meetings. Given that this comment period occurred in the midst of an ongoing government shutdown, the public has had limited means through which to obtain additional information about the project. Furthermore, to ensure transparency, we encourage the Forest Service to document its responses to comments in the project record.

We have several questions about the proposed project that we would like to see addressed before a decision is reached:

- \* How will the Forest Service ensure there is no unauthorized public use of temporary roads over the course of the project and after? Will access to the temporary road surface remain gated after the roads are rehabilitated, to restrict access by off-road vehicles?
- \* Has the Forest Service conducted the necessary field work to ensure the proposed vegetation treatments are appropriate for the proposed locations and will accomplish project objectives?
- \* Does the project area include habitat for threatened, endangered, or sensitive species? If so, what are the expected short and long-term impacts to these species and what steps will the agency take to limit or offset these impacts?
- \* How will this project impact recreation opportunities within the project area and how will impacts be mitigated? Are there opportunities to improve recreation opportunities alongside project implementation?
- \* What is the amount of board feet authorized for the overall project?
- \* What are the cumulative effects of past and reasonably foreseeable logging or road building projects within the project area and nearby areas?
- \* What monitoring plans and benchmarks are associated with this project to ensure the project actually improves forest health and resilience? Will monitoring include monitoring for the spread or establishment of noxious weeds? The Forest Service should monitor the intermediate and long-term effects of this project to determine if this course of action results in desired effects, in order to inform future work.
- \* What is the Forest Service's implementation plan and timeline for this project?
- \* What are the agency's restoration plans for the project area?
- \* How much will this project cost and are these costs expected to be covered by commercial receipts?

<sup>1</sup> Ashley Stava et al., Quantifying the Substantive Influence of Public Comment on United States Federal Environmental Decisions under NEPA, 20 ENV'T RSCH. 1, 6 (2025)

The Forest Service should incorporate new information gleaned, or additional issues addressed, as a result of public comment into its analysis. Furthermore, to the extent that the scope of this project changes after this initial scoping period, the public should be notified of changes and provided with another opportunity to provide feedback.

Thank you for your consideration of our comments. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Hilary Eisen