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Comments: Yellowstone to Uintas Connection

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Via Electronic Submission

District Ranger Joshua Connors

Madison Ranger District

Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest

Re: Comments on Draft Environmental Assessment South Tobacco Roots Vegetation Management Project (PALS #63754)

Dear District Ranger Connors,

We respectfully submit the following comments on the Draft Environmental Assessment (EA) and Biological Assessment (BA) for the South Tobacco Roots Vegetation Management Project.

These comments are submitted on behalf of Yellowstone to Uintas Connection (Y2U). Y2U is a 501c3 organization working to restore habitat in Idaho, Montana, Utah, Wyoming and the Regionally Significant Wildlife Corridor connecting the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem to the Uinta Mountains and Southern Rockies. These comments are also submitted on behalf of the Alliance for the Wild Rockies, Native Ecosystems Council, Center for Biological Diversity and the Council on Wildlife and Fish.

After careful review of the administrative record, including the Draft EA (April 2026) and BA (March 13, 2026), we conclude that the Forest Service has failed to fully comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), Endangered Species Act (ESA), National Forest Management Act (NFMA), Administrative Procedure Act (APA), Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA), and the 2001 Roadless Rule, as well as the 2009 Beaverhead-Deerlodge Forest Plan.

These deficiencies are particularly acute with respect to impacts on grizzly bear, Canada lynx, American wolverine, monarch butterfly, whitebark pine, bull trout, westslope cutthroat trout, and water quality.

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## I. NEPA VIOLATIONS

### A. Failure to Analyze a Reasonable Range of Alternatives

The EA considers only two alternatives: No Action and the Proposed Action. The agency asserts that additional alternatives were unnecessary because conflicts were resolved internally. This approach violates NEPA's requirement to rigorously explore and objectively evaluate reasonable alternatives.

The project proposes to do over 14,000 acres of treatment and new and temporary road construction, yet fails to analyze:

\*Reduced road density alternatives

\*Non-commercial or restoration-focused alternatives

\*Alternatives that avoid sensitive wildlife habitat

This artificially narrow range of alternatives undermines informed decision-making.

Emergency Action Determination: The Forest Service's reliance on an Emergency Action Determination, rather than a full Environmental Assessment, is concerning. This approach undermines the thorough evaluation required under NEPA. We urge the Forest Service to conduct a full EA to assess the potential impacts comprehensively.

We have analyzed the WUI in the BHDL as provided by the BHDL via a FOIA request. That represented the BHDL contained 44% WUI. We used the most recent model developed by the US Geological Survey and current building densities. (Ironically, this publication is found on the Forest Service website.) This model analysis resulted in a total area of WUI within the BHDL of 35,000 acres. This is 2% of the Forest, not the 44% the BHDL itself has delineated. Logging is not justified in the Forest when the problem is local governments issuing building permits adjacent to the Forest. That is a local government issue, and they should not be permitting new building in these areas, instead requiring home hardening of existing structures and surroundings.

Insufficient Comment Period: The 7-day comment period provided for this EA is inadequate and does not meet the minimum requirement of 30 days as stipulated by NEPA, limiting public participation in the decision-making process.

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#### B. Failure to Take a Hard Look at Wildlife Impacts

The EA relies heavily on design criteria rather than quantitative analysis. For wide-ranging species such as grizzly bear and lynx, the EA does not:

\*Quantify changes in road density

\*Model habitat fragmentation or displacement

\*Evaluate mortality risk associated with increased access

Given the scale of proposed road construction and vegetation removal, this omission constitutes a failure to take the required "hard look."

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#### C. Inadequate Cumulative Effects Analysis

The EA fails to adequately evaluate cumulative impacts from:

\*Past and ongoing timber projects

\*Road networks

\*Fire and post-fire management

\*Grazing and watershed degradation

This is particularly problematic for species dependent on landscape connectivity and for aquatic systems sensitive to cumulative sediment inputs.

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#### D. Insufficient Analysis of Aquatic Impacts

The EA does not quantify sediment delivery, stream temperature changes, or hydrologic alteration resulting from:

\*12.7 miles of temporary road construction

\*Timber harvest activities

\*Prescribed fire

While restoration actions are described, adverse effects are not meaningfully analyzed, in violation of NEPA's

disclosure requirements.

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## II. ESA VIOLATIONS

### A. Unsupported "Not Likely to Adversely Affect" Determinations

The BA concludes that the project is "not likely to adversely affect" grizzly bear, lynx, and wolverine, despite:

- \*Extensive habitat modification
- \*Increased road access
- \*Long-term disturbance (up to 10 years)

These conclusions lack adequate scientific support and do not reflect the scale of impacts.

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### B. Improper Reliance on Mitigation Measures

The BA relies heavily on design features and mitigation measures without demonstrating:

- \*Their effectiveness
- \*Their enforceability
- \*Their likelihood of success

Mitigation cannot substitute for a complete effects analysis under ESA Section 7.

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### C. Inadequate Analysis of Monarch Butterfly

The BA dismisses impacts to monarch butterfly based on low modeled occurrence, despite acknowledging suitable habitat exists. It fails to evaluate:

- \*Effects of prescribed fire
- \*Impacts to nectar and host plants
- \*Cumulative impacts on pollinators

This violates the requirement to use the best available scientific information.

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### D. Inadequate Analysis of Whitebark Pine

The BA concludes the project is likely to adversely affect whitebark pine but relies on a programmatic analysis rather than project-specific effects. It does not:

- \*Quantify expected mortality
- \*Evaluate regeneration success
- \*Analyze cumulative decline of the species

Impacts on Canada Lynx:

The proposed treatments for the Project area could adversely affect Canada Lynx and their habitat, particularly due to the reduction of suitable snowshoe hare habitat. Maintaining a minimum percentage of mature undisturbed forest is crucial for lynx viability.

The proposed activities for the Project could lead to fragmentation of lynx habitat, disrupting movement and access to critical areas. We recommend a detailed analysis of habitat connectivity and the potential cumulative impacts on lynx populations.

In our comments on the EA, our objection and supporting documents on the BHDL Lynx Plan Amendment, we

analyzed the lynx habitat using the current model (Olson et al 2021) and the Montana Natural Heritage Model and the project and adjacent areas contain suitable lynx habitat. If lynx have not been observed, the BHDL should explain why this is the case. As we explain in our recent report, the NRLMD has not been validated. Its entire basis is scientifically flawed due to the omission of most uses of the Forest (logging, road density, motorized recreation, mining) being explained away. It is necessary for the BHDL to analyze these factors and the current state of lynx habitat (mature forest, regenerating forest of different ages, road density, security habitat) and compare to the habitat parameters described in Kosterman 2014, 2018, and Holbrook 2018 and 2019)

#### Impacts on Grizzly Bears:

Grizzly bears are known to be transient in the project area. The proposed activities for the Project could disrupt their movement patterns and access to foraging areas, particularly during the critical spring and summer months.

The construction of temporary roads for the Project may decrease secure habitat availability for Grizzly Bears during project implementation. Although the project includes measures for decommissioning these roads, the short-term impacts on bear populations must be thoroughly assessed.

#### Impacts on Wolverines:

Wolverines utilize a variety of habitats and have significant mobility. While the proposed actions for the Project are unlikely to create permanent barriers, the temporary disturbances from logging and road construction could still affect their movement and foraging behavior.

The Draft EA for the Project should evaluate the potential cumulative impacts on Wolverine populations, particularly regarding habitat connectivity and the effects of increased human activity in the area.

#### Impacts on Bull Trout and Westslope Cutthroat Trout:

According to the BA, Bull trout do not occupy the project area. The BA/EA did not disclose whether there was habitat for bull trout in the project or cumulative effects area.

Habitat Quality: The proposed activities, including timber harvest and road construction, may increase sediment delivery to streams. Increased sediment can degrade water quality and habitat conditions for Bull Trout and Westslope Cutthroat Trout, particularly in spawning and rearing areas.

Temperature Changes: Vegetation removal can lead to increased water temperatures due to reduced shading from trees. These species require cold, clean water for survival, and elevated temperatures can be detrimental to their populations.

Cumulative Effects: The overall increase in human activity due to logging operations, road use, and recreational activities can lead to habitat degradation and increased competition with non-native species.

Restoration Efforts: While some proposed actions aim to restore aquatic habitats, the benefits of these efforts may not outweigh the immediate negative impacts from other project activities during implementation.

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### III. NFMA AND FOREST PLAN VIOLATIONS

#### A. Failure to Demonstrate Compliance with Grizzly Bear Standards

The BA acknowledges changes to secure habitat baseline but does not demonstrate compliance with Forest Plan thresholds. Temporary roads may remain for up to 10 years, yet their impacts are not fully analyzed.

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## B. Improper Application of Lynx Habitat Exemptions

The EA states that lynx standards do not apply within the WUI. This assertion conflicts with NFMA, which requires site-specific compliance with Forest Plan standards.

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## C. Failure to Meet Aquatic Resource Standards

The project occurs within a designated Fish Key Watershed but lacks:

- \*Watershed-scale analysis
- \*Demonstration of compliance with riparian protections
- \*Adequate sediment and temperature analysis

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## IV. 2001 ROADLESS RULE VIOLATIONS

The project includes activities within an Inventoried Roadless Area, including burning and associated mechanized activity. The EA fails to:

- \*Analyze impacts to roadless character
- \*Demonstrate compliance with narrow regulatory exceptions

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## V. HFRA AND EMERGENCY AUTHORITY MISUSE

The Forest Service relies on Secretarial Memo 1078-006 to:

- \*Limit alternatives
- \*Eliminate the objection process

However, emergency designation does not waive compliance with NEPA, ESA, or NFMA. The agency's reliance on this authority improperly constrains environmental analysis and public participation.

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## VI. APA VIOLATIONS

The deficiencies described above render the EA and BA arbitrary and capricious because the agency:

- \*Failed to consider important aspects of the problem
- \*Relied on unsupported conclusions
- \*Did not adequately connect data to findings

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## CONCLUSION

We appreciate the opportunity to comment on the Draft EA for the South Tobacco Vegetation Management Project. We urge the Forest Service to address these concerns to ensure the protection of critical habitats, comply with NEPA requirements, and foster sustainable forest management practices. For these reasons, Yellowstone to Uintas Connection et al respectfully requests that the Forest Service:

1. Withdraw the Draft EA and BA
2. Prepare a revised analysis that complies with NEPA, ESA, NFMA, and other applicable laws
3. Fully evaluate alternatives, cumulative impacts, and species-specific effects

Sincerely,

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