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Comments: Please see attached comments.

The Western Landowners Alliance advances policies and practices that sustain working lands, connected landscapes and native species.

December 23, 2022

Mary Erickson

Forest Supervisor, Custer Gallatin National Forest

United States Forest Service

P.O. Box 130

Bozeman, MT 59771

Dear Supervisor Erickson,

The Western Landowners Alliance (WLA) is a landowner-founded, landowner-led non-partisan organization that advances policies and practices that sustain working lands, connected landscapes and native species. We appreciate the opportunity to provide comments on the East Crazy Inspiration Divide Land Exchange.

We commend the United States Forest Service (USFS) for their persistence in facilitating a collaborative solution to this complex situation. The legacy of interspersed land ownership patterns throughout the West is an unavoidable, and sometimes conflict-inducing reality. While the public has rights associated with ownership of state and federal lands, these rights do not supersede those of private lands and resources. Private stewardship entails substantial financial investment, often made possible only through land-based enterprises such as farming, livestock grazing and commercial recreation. Negotiated access with willing landowners can be mutually beneficial, enabling improved public access while supporting the investments and economic activities that keep working lands intact, healthy and available to people and wildlife. Efforts to force public access, on the other hand, undermine property rights, private investment, economic viability of working lands and the management of natural resources. This, in turn, can drive land use and management decisions in a direction that ultimately are less favorable to both wildlife and the public with fragmentation becoming a potential outcome.

With this in mind, WLA submits the following comments:

1) Conflicts over public access are inevitable and rarely will all parties be entirely satisfied with the resolution regardless of the process. However, a negotiated resolution seeks to satisfy the various concerns of vested stakeholders to the greatest extent possible. We commend the USFS for pursuing a collaborative approach to solving a complex issue. In almost all cases, this is preferable, and should be supported. Failure to adopt this collaborative approach will likely result in continued conflict and potentially poor outcomes for all concerned.

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2) Public-private land trades to resolve checkerboarding and public land inholdings can help address access and management issues for all stakeholders and should be supported.

While the specifics of land exchanges remain subject to negotiation between closely involved parties, we support the collaborative process that led to this point and commend the leadership of the USFS for its commitment and hard work in facilitating this process.

Sincerely,

Lesli Allison
Executive Director
Western Landowners Alliance

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