

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 6/4/2019 3:31:40 AM

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Organization:

Title:

Comments: June 2, 2019

Dear Ms. Erickson,

I was born in Bozeman in 1950. Both my parents were attending Montana State College on the GI bill, after having met while working in Yellowstone Park. From them, I grew up with a reverence and deep appreciation for the incomparable natural beauty and abundant wildlife that exist in this part of the world-so much so that my husband and I decided to return here in the 1980s to raise our two boys. The wages were low, but the surrounding environment enriched our family beyond any measure.

Our family spends a great deal of time in our local national forest throughout all seasons, enjoying hiking, backpacking, cross-country skiing, fly-fishing, camping, birdwatching, and wildlife viewing. We greatly value the gifts of clean air, wild streams, beautiful mountain vistas, communing with wildlife, and most important, the quiet solitude provided by these special places. The days and nights spent in unspoiled nature offer a spiritual solace unmatched by any church I have attended. Yet, over time, we have become concerned about the rapid and accelerating changes taking place in and around our forests and the intensifying pressures on these cherished natural resources.

First, there is the issue of surging population growth in the Gallatin Valley and in the Big Sky area, which has greatly increased pressure on the national forest. Unfortunately, projections indicate that our growth rate is likely to increase substantially in the future. Second, climate change is seriously and negatively impacting every aspect of our natural resources. We are experiencing more frequent and more severe wildfires; more frequent droughts of longer duration; earlier spring runoff, higher stream temperatures, and lower summer water flows; and more severe insect and disease infestations, and significant losses of key food sources (such as whitebark pine). All of these changes lead to intense stresses on our outstanding, world-class fish and wildlife populations.

Given these serious challenges to our natural environment, it is imperative to adopt policy and planning measures that enhance ecological health and minimize disruption, harm, and habitat destruction. Wilderness, by its definition, has the qualities that most support these goals. To that end, I strongly support Alternative D.

It is easy to forget that the treasures in our backyard are not just locally prized. The Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem is the largest intact temperate ecosystem in the world. It is a one-of-a-kind region with amazingly diverse and abundant wildlife resources. The Porcupine-Buffalo Horn Wilderness Study Area is arguably even richer in wildlife populations than many areas of Yellowstone National Park. The Gallatin Range alone provides critical habitat for grizzly bears, wolves, lynx, bighorn sheep, elk, and wolverines. It supports 23 animal species listed as endangered, threatened, or sensitive in Montana, including some of the last vestiges of rapidly diminishing native trout populations. On top of this, the Gallatin is home to the largest petrified forest in the world. As we read in the news about the devastation of the global environment and the plight of plummeting wildlife populations worldwide, this place has growing international importance and therefore provides a unique conservation opportunity.

The national forest is required to conserve at-risk species. The best way to do this is to afford them the protections that only wilderness can provide. Motorized and mechanized use disrupts successful reproduction, disturbs critical birthing areas, and interferes with seasonal migration. The "backcountry" status offered by Alternatives B, C, and E lacks these protections, relying on "monitoring" in lieu of legal safeguards. The extensive degradation that is already apparent in the PBH WSA proves that the Forest Service has inadequate resources to protect these invaluable wildlife populations. The same is true for areas designated as "recreation emphasis areas." Moreover, permitting such uses would mean that areas that are now WSAs would be barred from any future designation as wilderness by Congress. This critical habitat is simply too important to abandon to intensive, intrusive multiple use.

The Gallatin Range is an essential part of a vast wildlife migration corridor that links the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem to the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem and ultimately to the Yukon. These connections are crucial for maintaining species genetic health and will be essential for future adaptation to climate change.

Therefore, wilderness designation is critically important for the entire Gallatin Range, especially the areas adjacent to Yellowstone Park and those in the northern end of the range that lead to the Bridger Range and further north. Alternative D provides most of this secure migration path, but it should be amended to secure and consolidate the northernmost and southernmost sections as wilderness.

It is important to note that of the 3,000-plus miles of trails in the CGNF, more than two-thirds are open to motorists and mountain bikes. In fact, motorized uses have greatly proliferated since 1977 when the Montana Wilderness Study Act was enacted. Carving out huge areas for further motorized and mechanized use is unconscionable, especially since millions of taxpayer dollars were used to buy 37,000 acres in the Gallatin Range for the specific purpose of protecting its extraordinary resources as wilderness. This attempt to placate commercial users is unacceptable, given the history of the land exchanges and good-faith purchases made by conservation groups. In that process, enormous sacrifices were made in the Madison Range, resulting in the sprawling commercial mess that is Big Sky, which isolates wildlife populations in two key habitat areas in that range and regularly fouls the waters of the Gallatin River. Again, only Alternative D maintains the integrity of the agreement with conservationists to protect the Wilderness Study Area.

Several other areas deserve wilderness protection aside from those acres designated in Alternative D. Tens of thousands of acres in the Bridger Range qualify for wilderness, yet were largely overlooked. This range provides a crucial wildlife migration corridor, which should be afforded the protections of wilderness. In addition, the Crazies were entirely passed over, despite the fact that this geologically unique range sustains sizable elk and moose populations and also functions as an important wildlife corridor. I realize that much of the lower elevation slopes are privately held in checkerboard pattern, but much of the upper elevations (peaks and lakes) could be protected as wilderness while the Forest Service continues to consolidate public holdings. I urge you to reconsider the plans for these mountain ranges.

Another very important point: I have been informed by wildlife experts that the new forest plan is proposing to reduce the list of sensitive species from the current 29 species to 2 species. I find this outrageous given the increasing threats to our public forest lands. If we fail to responsibly manage for the sustainable health of these species in the present, it will lead to management crises in the future, when it will be much more difficult to recover losses. This is a shortsighted and irresponsible decision that must be reconsidered.

I am well aware that the Custer Gallatin National Forest is required to "balance" uses and that there are competing interests for the natural resources within its boundaries. Nonetheless, it is so very critically important to consider the imperiled state of our environment at this time in human history. Everything is changing, and it is changing fast-much faster than anyone predicted. We cannot afford to simply divvy up our last remaining parcels of wilderness in order to satisfy commercial and political interests. Humans make the decisions that impact all the life in our national forests. And it is easy to forget through our everyday encounters with our next-door national forest that it happens to hold some of the richest, most unique wildlife resources in the world. I strongly urge you to consider the "big picture," both in terms of this most extraordinary place and in terms of the environmentally challenging future that lies ahead. We must act responsibly and do all we can to protect our priceless resources, as our planet faces unprecedented threats to all life.

Thank you for considering my comments.

Jennifer Swearingen