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Organization:

Title:

Comments: To whom it may concern,

I am writing to express my support for Alternative E in the draft EIS for the latest Custer Gallatin National Forest Plan Revision. As a Montana Native and an Eagle Scout I can tell you I enjoy camping, understand the importance of resource conservation, and can appreciate a quiet, serene experience while enjoying our national forests. However, I am also an avid member of the motorized recreation community in our forests.

In the 25+ years that I have been able to experience these lands I have noticed a continuing trend: the areas available for motorized recreation (both summer and winter) have continued to be reduced, while areas available only to foot traffic (hikers, skiers, snowshoers, etc.) increase due to restrictions in one form or another. As Montanans I feel we are good stewards of the land and can manage it effectively without locking down every inch and continuing to exclude certain groups in favor of others' special interests. After years of fighting for control amongst user groups, I feel that shifting focus away from closures and outright wilderness and focusing more on balanced uses is more than overdue. The greater number of "recreational emphasis areas" and "backcountry areas" afforded in Alternative E best fits this approach. In my experience off-road organizations and clubs are better at cleaning up after themselves in the forest, and those users spend greater amounts of money per capita on food, fuel, lodging, and other services that support local economies. Alternative E also favors livestock in bison/livestock interaction situations. Ranching is a major industry in our state, and I feel Forest Service plans should take that into account until more is done legislatively to define bison wildlife classification, allowed habitat, control practices, and livestock. For these reasons I support Alternative E with its overall reduction in restrictions and focus on more sensible use as decided by input from local users.

Per the "Montana Wilderness Study Act of 1977," Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs) are to be managed to "...maintain their presently existing wilderness character and potential for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System." It has been ruled that historical uses of the land continue at levels equal to those in 1977 until a final determination is made on the wilderness status of those areas. The practice by the Forest Service has shifted in recent years to not just maintain wilderness character, but to enhance it. This has led to motorized recreation closures in areas that have historically allowed such use. One example is with the management of the Hyalite-Porcupine-Buffalo Horn Wilderness Study Area. As recent as the winter of 2006-2007, snowmobile travel was allowed in the Hyalite area from Hyalite Reservoir to the south and west. Following that winter season, snowmobile travel was no longer allowed in this area as a way to enhance the wilderness character. I feel actions like this are an abuse of what WSAs were originally intended to be. This, coupled with the snail's pace that congress has historically taken in making decisions on WSA status recommendations, has taken things to a point that I feel designating new WSAs is no longer an effective means of land management for all. For these reasons I cannot support Alternatives C or D. They would designate new WSA areas and explicitly limit historically allowed mechanized recreation use in them.

I've stated some of my ideas on Alternatives C, D, and E. That leaves A and B. If Alternative E is my first preference, Alternative A would be my second choice. Simply because its recreation opportunities continue with the practices I've known and grown accustomed to over the years. However, it still allows for some closures I'm not fond of per the previous paragraph. Alternative B seems to be an attempt at some type of great compromise, but its increase in recommended wilderness acres and proactive bison support are not things I agree with.

Thank you for your time in considering my comment.