

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 10/1/2019 11:00:00 AM

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Organization:

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Comments: Greetings Seth,

First of all, I want to thank you, all the employees involved, and the West Fork Volunteer Fire Department for hosting a well-organized and informative open house regarding the Mud Creek Project. Both my wife and I attended, as we have property along the West Fork of the Bitterroot, are very interested in what the USFS is planning, and very glad to have an opportunity to participate/comment.

Regarding comments, while it is difficult to get into too many specifics until a plan draft is circulated to the public, I do have some general issues and points that I hope will be considered. I do want to recognize one fact right up front. Most probably, none of what I have to offer will be new, as you have probably heard it before and realize it all too well from experience!! Regardless, I will attempt to organize them by category, though some overlap to a great degree.

Recreation- In many ways, probably the most complicated and challenging part of your effort. In general, I am most sensitive to potential conflicts of different user groups, both between themselves and collectively re impacts related to wildlife and habitat disturbance. I would hope that any additions or improvements to recreational opportunities USFS proposes, would try to avoid allowing too many methods of access at any one site. Of greatest concern is where and when vehicles such as ATV/UTV/snow mobile (which seem to be present in ever increasing numbers) use is permitted. These methods of access often do not go well on the same roads/trails where hiking and horses are allowed. Further, when considering wildlife, time periods such as winter snow/ice conditions, or in some areas during hunting seasons, the potential for increased/additional stress from motorized access should be taken into consideration. In my experience, the more people are allowed to do on the landscape, the greater the impact to wildlife in general, but most specifically species like deer, elk, etc.

No matter what recreational improvements are implemented, I believe a very important component will be the ability to enforce/patrol the added public use, in addition to servicing and maintaining the improvements. Budget and personnel are two vital factors that need to be secured before going too far with any project that may suffer due to lack of attention later.

Wildlife- When considering habitat improvements for wildlife, I believe it is important to identify what species are being emphasized, and what specific efforts are being employed, to effect what result. All too often the wildlife benefit card is included in resource management activities, but never really elaborated on in detail. Almost without exception, no matter what management activity is conducted, it results in a new set of "winners and losers" in the wildlife species world. Some impacts are short term, some much longer in duration. So, if it is prescribed fire for timber stand improvement and increased forage for elk (more of a grazer), then that should be spelled out. However, what that does for deer (more of a browser) or grouse, or Douglas squirrels, rodents etc. is another story.

Fire/Fuels & Silviculture- I put these together because I believe the two are similar. Granted, the WUI fuel issues are something that needs to be addressed specifically, but in general, don't good silvicultural practices affect timber conditions as related to fuel loading and fire potential? Timber management/harvest is a big tool, and when done properly, can address many concerns. The type of harvest method is always the question. Economics will usually dictate the method selected, and while helicopter logging might be of least impact on the ground, the costs involved vs the return on the timber will be prohibitive. I actually like some of the clear cuts, on a smaller scale (acres vs sections of forest) as I believe they set back succession on a greater scale and allow for a greater diversity of plants to grow and a longer list of wildlife species to benefit, before the tree canopy

overtakes the area and things begin to return to a more climax forest.

Fisheries/Hydrology & Soils- Combined these as well because to me, as goes the hydrology and soils/erosion, so goes the fisheries. While I see that sediment issues are identified in your outline, I can't help but think of the impacts of roads, culverts, timber harvest and potential erosion, etc. all at the same time (which is difficult for me to do, have to be sitting down to do all that thinking, or I might just pass out!). Limiting the number of additional roads is important, as well as improving all culverts/crossings and rip[shy] rapping road banks associated with them.

Another aspect to your contribution to fisheries management is our use of the resource and streams they inhabit. I am happy to see your cooperative efforts with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, as well as others, would encourage USFS to continue your permitting process for guides seeking to do business on the streams and rivers within the Bitterroot National Forest. And as far as the fishing regulations are concerned, given that West Slope Cutthroats are the species of emphasis, I would lobby for unlimited take of brown trout.

Transportation- Last but not least, and associated with all of the above I suspect. Kind of touched on this a bit before, but my hope would be for minimal to no new roads, decommissioning of roads that are no longer essential, and controlled/regulated use (gated, etc.) of some roads based on time of year, public access use needs (including agency patrol, etc.) and wildlife disturbance. I am wary of the term "temporary road," as that makes it sound like you can just construct a road and then take it out like it never existed, which I have rarely seen accomplished. But if it is needed, then I believe the cost of doing so should be borne by those necessitating the use (i.e. if it is for a timber sale/contract, they should be responsible for the cost of creating and decommissioning).

So, there you have it, more than I had expected to write, but then these issues are very important to me. I do appreciate the opportunity to submit these thoughts, and I look forward to following along as the Mud Creek Project process moves through the phases in the proposed timeline.

Sincerely,

John G. Mensik