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Organization:

Title:

Comments: Comments: Nez Perce-Clearwater Forest Plan

Dear Forest Planning Team,

How could I forget my first time in the Great Burn? Like so many others, I hiked up the trail to Heart Lake, passing through cedars and aspen, lush green understory and shady canopy, then crossed the outlet and - bam - there it was, Heart Lake pocketed in a steep green cirque. We continued on, climbing up to the top of the ridge to the Idaho/Montana divide, passing through the most glorious lupine and balsamroot peppered with larkspur. From the crest, with the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest to the west and the Lolo National Forest to the east, the northern Bitterroots continued ridge, upon ridge, upon ridge as far as the eye could see. Continuing south along the crest on the Stateline Trail, then passing past Pearl Lake on the way back to Heart, we were treated to mountain goat sightings.

Standing at the crest, straddling two forests, the connectivity between the Nez Perce-Clearwater and the Lolo National Forests is abundantly clear. What you do in Idaho, and what you decide for the Nez Perce-Clearwater will directly affect the heart of this wild place, and will directly affect management on the Lolo National Forest. Please continue to prohibit motorized and mechanized use in the Great Burn. Allowing these uses would essentially be allowing entry onto the Lolo National Forest where motorized and mechanized use is clearly not allowed.

I didn't know much about the Great Burn (Hoodoo Roadless Area) then, except that it was the kind of place that has the power to steal your heart. Since then, I've returned countless times, I've heard others' stories of this place, and I've learned what the land means to area wildlife.

In winter, the Great Burn provides important refuge for mountain goats and key denning areas for wolverines. Mountain goats thrive on high elevation, south facing slopes, and - more than most ungulates - are particularly sensitive to motorized disturbances such as snow machines. Similarly, wolverines require quiet denning areas to rear their young. Both species are known to winter in the Great Burn, and both easily disturbed by motorized intrusions. Allowing any form of motorized recreation near mountain goat or wolverine habitat unnecessarily puts these species at risk. Please continue to prohibit winter snowmobiling in the Great Burn, and take steps to mitigate illegal motorized encroachment into the area.

In the spring and summer, many years the Great Burn welcomes a pioneering grizzly bear or two that boldly crosses I-90 and momentarily reclaims the bears' lost Bitterroot range. The fact that grizzly bears make it to the Great Burn against all odds underscores the area's high wildlife connectivity value for multiple species. Especially as wildlife adapt to a changing climate, these core habitat connections will be increasingly important. Please manage the Great Burn as a non-motorized and non-mechanized Recommended Wilderness, thereby reducing disturbance from noise, speed, and human recreation, and helping ensure the Great Burn is prepared to welcome back grizzly bears when they return.

With few exceptions, nearly every bear that does make it into the Great Burn is shot as a presumed black bear. Clearly, hunter education is not effective enough. I would like to see the forest do all in its power to prohibit black bear hunting within the Great Burn (Hoodoo Roadless Area). Making the area off limits to black bear hunters would eliminate the risk of pioneering grizzly bears being shot before they have a chance to establish home territory. I would like to see the forest require appropriate food storage and to eliminate bear baiting on the forest,

especially in the Great Burn.

My three-year-old has already enjoyed the trails of the Great Burn. She's gotten her diaper changed under its cedar canopies, practiced walking alongside its streams, marveled at its flowers, and gazed at its stars. There are few places to build these kind of generational memories, and few places where you can return year-upon-year with certainty that it'll be just as wild as it was the time before. Now, it's up to you to determine whether it'll be there when we return, or whether you'll allow motors and machines to intrude on this special place.

As managers of the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest, the fate of one of the largest unprotected roadless areas in the lower-48 states is in your hands. The Great Burn exists as it does today - complete with mountain goats, wolverines (and maybe soon, grizzly bears) -- only because of the foresight of those who came before you. After the fires of 1910, managers left the land to its own free will. Forests recovered, elk abounded, moose thrived. Leaders before you purposefully made the Great Burn off limits to roads and logging trucks, valuing the place for wildlife and quiet recreation above resource extraction.

As I'm sure you'll hear in multitudes of comments, we all benefit from the prescient decisions of those who came before you, creating the conditions for solitude, awe, and wonder; refuge and homeland. Managers who came before you saw that there was something special about the Great Burn, and they worked to keep it that way. Today and for the decades to come, I implore you to do the same. There is no wilder place in the lower-48 states, and it's up to you to protect it.

Please do all you can to leave generations to come a legacy of a wild, motor free, mechanized free Great Burn.

Thank you,  
Kassia Randzio