

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 7/20/2020 9:41:17 PM

First name: Mark

Last name: Good

Organization:

Title:

Comments: Dear Supervisor Avey and Regional Forester Marten,

Please accept the following objections on the Draft Record of Decision (DROD) and Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) for the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest (HLCNF). I have a long history and interest in the remaining wildlands of the HLCNF.

I engaged in the forest plan revision process during all available opportunities, including many public meetings.

Objection Focus: I am objecting to the decisions made for the Big Snowy Mountains, Middle Fork of the Judith Wilderness Study Area, and Tenderfoot/Deep Creek Roadless Area

Middle Fork Judith Wilderness Study Area

Objection 1.

The rationale used to drop the Middle Fork Judith as a Recommended Wilderness Area is not valid

No portion of the Middle Fork Judith Wilderness Study Area was recommended for Wilderness and the rationale provided was that "motorized trails and private inholdings accessed by open roads impact solitude." Yet, the approximately 62,000-acre area I proposed, and described in Alternative D, did not include any motorized trails. This boundary was proposed because it is a solid block of nonmotorized trails located in wilderness quality lands with boundaries specially drawn to comply with the existing travel management plan for motorized use.

When determining whether an area meets the wilderness criteria, what is important is not the sights and sounds outside of a Wilderness, Wilderness Study Area or Recommended Wilderness Area boundary, but the sights and sounds inside the proposed boundary. Sights and sounds outside of the boundary should only be considered if they are so pervasive and omnipresent that they severely diminish the wilderness experience. The Forest Service inventory manual does not suggest that sights and sounds outside the proposed wilderness boundary provide a rationale to disqualify an area for as a RWA. Roads often serve as Wilderness boundaries.

Since 1977, motorized use has increased on and off the Middle Fork Road, and both the wilderness character and fishery of the Middle Fork Canyon have been severely impacted. But aside from questions about how and why this has been allowed to occur and when the canyon will be restored to a more natural condition, the important point is that the portion of the WSA identified in Alternative D, has retained its wilderness character and the sights and sounds from the Middle Fork Road do not rise to the level of disqualifying the entire WSA for Recommended Wilderness.

The Middle Fork Judith was designated as a Wilderness Study Area in 1977 because of its high wilderness characteristics and rating. In 2007, the Lewis and Clark National Forest significantly reduced motorized vehicle use in the Middle Fork Judith WSA to protect the wilderness character of the WSA, making it one of only three large non-motorized blocks within the plan. No rationale was provided in the Final EIS to justify disqualifying the area identified in Alternative D as a RWA. Managing this area as "Primitive" under the Recreational Opportunities Spectrum is not a substitute for a Recommended Wilderness Area because it is not a designation and the mountain bikes are allowed in a Primitive setting. It only serves to undermine efforts to protect wilderness characteristics and the potential option of Wilderness designation.

Objection 2.

The Helena/Lewis and Clark National Forest (HLC) failed to address whether or how mountain bikes, a new non-conforming use in this Wilderness Study Area, will adversely affect the potential for Wilderness designation of the Wilderness Study Area.

In the draft Record of Decision, Supervisor Avey recognized and determined that motorized and mechanized means of transportation (mountain biking) are unsuitable in recommended wilderness and that prohibiting mechanized use was needed to preserve wilderness characteristics, including the sense of remoteness and the opportunities for solitude.

At the same time the HLC seems to be claiming, without explanation, and without precedence, that allowing a new non-conforming use in the Middle Fork Judith WSA does not affect wilderness character or potential for Wilderness designation. And that the combined use of mechanized and motorized use will not exceed the level of use that existed in 1977.

HLC has never determined whether or how much mountain bike and motorized use existed in the WSA 1977. The assessment of use prepared for the 2007 Travel Management Plan indicated that trails that were open to motorized vehicles but it did not come up with a figure determining the level of use within the WSA in 1977, or address mechanized use. It can be fairly surmised that there was little if any mountain bike use and very little motorized use on the single track trails in the proposed RWA, Alternative D.

I'm not aware of any mountain bike use prior to 1977, the year the Middle Fork was designated as a WSA, but if it did exist, what level of use existed in 1977? The HLC also has never conducted an assessment of mountain bike use. It wasn't addressed the 2007 Travel Management Plan, or now in the draft plan revision. The draft plan did not provide any evidence of any assessment of mechanized use in any NEPA document. What level of mountain bike use will be allowed before wilderness characteristics are affected? The draft management plan doesn't include a meaningful plan for monitoring use and impacts, or a method and figure that would trigger adjustments. Even if it did, given current staffing levels, it's likely to be a just another low priority. If the current effort to restore the fishery in the lower segment of the with the Middle Fork is any indication of how the agency will of the actively work to protect the wilderness characteristics of the Middle Fork Judith WSA in the future, the public is right to be skeptical. Twelve years after making a decision to reroute vehicles out of the stream, restoration efforts remain years away, despite the efforts several dedicated staff.

Anecdotal evidence indicates that the level of motorized vehicle was small prior to 1977, but it increased after 1977. As a result of the increase in use after 1977, trails were closed in what is now the proposed RWA, as part of the 2007 Travel Management Plan to preserve the wilderness character and potential for Wilderness designation of this portion of the WSA. That action will now be undermined by allowing mechanized use, another non-conforming use, to become better established making it politically and practically more difficult to remove this use in the future.

The HLC also does not explain how allowing a new non-conforming use in the WSA will affect the potential for future wilderness designation or even the level of mechanized use that will be allowed before they determine wilderness characteristics are being affected.

The importance of protecting wilderness character so that Congress may decide whether it should be included in the Wilderness Preservation system is no clearer than in portions of the Custer Gallatin Forest Plan. Areas in the Gallatin NF that were recommended for wilderness (Lionhead) in the 1987 plan allowed non-conforming uses and those uses have degraded wilderness character to the point that the CGNF feels they are unable to recommend Lionhead for wilderness in their 2020 Land Management plan. Regardless of the little use that occurred in the Lionhead that existed in the 1980's, the area's wilderness character was damaged.

I fear a similar fate awaits the Middle Fork Judith WSA. While motorized use has been eliminated from the Big Snowy WSA, mountain bike use is taking its place. The HLC has no basis to claim that allowing mountain bike use in the WSA will somehow not affect the future potential for Wilderness designation. Proposing to continue to allow mountain bike use without knowing the consequences of such a decision is shortsighted and probably a violation of NEPA. Very little mechanized use exists now, but with increased popularity of mountain biking and improved technology, that could well change. Under the current circumstances, allowing a new non-conforming use to get established isn't good management, it's neglect.

Proposed Solutions:

Objection 1. The easy straight-forward solution for addressing mechanized use in the Middle Fork Judith is simply to honor the intent of the 1977 Montana Wilderness Study Act and manage the portion of the WSA with no motorized trails and very little mechanized use (approximately 62,000 acres) as a RWA. This is similar to RWA Alternative D.

Manage the remaining portion of the WSA as primitive and semi-primitive motorized, perhaps designating it as a special management area or wildlife conservation area, or National Recreation Area as proposed for the Big Snowy Wilderness Study Area.

Manage the northeast portion of the WSA as primitive and semi-primitive. Mountain bikes would be allowed on all single-track trails, motorized trails, and roads. This portion of the WSA includes the Middle Fork Road and Woodchopper Ridge Trail, much of which becomes a seasonal motorized trail to protect wildlife. There is no public access from the north side. Management would not be dramatically different from what currently exists, and with the exception of mountain bike use for the portion of the WSA managed as a RWA, it is consistent with the 2007 Travel Management Plan.

Objection 2. At the very least, fulfill travel management obligations and conduct an assessment of mountain bike and motorized use in the portion of the WSA proposed as a RWA to determine the level of use in 1977. (The level of use was not determined in the "Little Belt, Castle and North Crazy" Travel management plan, only which trails were open to motorized vehicles in 1977.) Develop a plan to monitor mountain bike use and provide a trigger figure or means to measure what level of mechanized use is allowable without adversely affecting the wilderness characteristics of WSA and potential for Wilderness designation.

Statement demonstrating the link between objections and prior formal comments:

Objection 1.

The Recommended Wilderness Area in Alternative D is a result of comments by me and others which included a proposed solution recognizing that the northeast portion of the WSA, with established trails open to motorized vehicles, is compatible with the 2007 Travel Management Plan. Contrary to the rationale used to eliminate the Middle Fork Judith WSA from Recommended Wilderness, Alternative D did not include any motorized trails in the portion of the proposed Recommended Wilderness.

My comments included a specific plan to manage the Middle Fork Judith WSA which included Recommended Wilderness for approximately 62,000 acres and the remaining portion consistent with the existing travel management plan.

The following was taken from my comments:

Little Belts Geographic Area

Middle Fork Judith

My preference is to manage the Middle Fork Judith Wilderness Study Area as proposed in Alternative D, which recommends the non-motorized portion of the WSA as wilderness. If the H/L&C is unwilling to adopt

Alternative D, I ask that consideration be given to managing the entire area encompassed by the WSA, as a Special Management Area, with two separate zones of management. A precedent for special management already exists with the South Hills Recreation Area.

The proposed Middle Fork Judith Special Management Area, approximately 82,000 acres in size, includes the Middle and Lost Forks of the Judith River drainages. These drainages are characterized by deep twisted canyons of multi-colored limestone cliffs, but also uplands with big open parks and high ridges such as Sand Point.

Bordering the WSA is the state managed Judith River Wildlife Management Area that provides winter range for over 1,000 elk, most of which migrate to the WSA during the summer and fall.

This area may be just a remnant of the Judith River Country Charlie and Jake viewed, but the scenic character, high quality wildlife habitat, and many streams, provide one of the last large blocks of land in central Montana where a true wilderness experience can still be found.

Middle Fork Judith Special Management Area (MFJSMA) Plan Components

Desired Conditions within the MFJSMA:

Approximately 60,000 acres of the MFJSMA (Zone 1), will provide a wilderness setting and be managed to protect the area's wilderness characteristics. That includes the area south of the Middle Fork, including all of the Lost Fork, and Sand Point area.

Most of the area (approximately 60,000 acres) would provide a primitive recreation experience in a large, highly scenic setting. Trail opportunities would be for foot and horse use.

A smaller portion of the MFJSMA, (approximately 23,000 acres), (Zone 2), would be managed for a broader mix of uses including motorized vehicles and mountain bikes. This area located in the northeast portion of the polygon, extends north of the Middle Fork Road, bounded on the west by Trails 443 and 444. The north boundary follows the Wilderness Study Area boundary.

A small slice of the west boundary between Yogo Peak and Weatherwax would be slightly modified so as to conform more closely with the topography and existing snowmobile use.

The Middle Fork fishery would be restored to more natural conditions and stream conditions in the upper Middle Fork would be monitored to prevent more erosion and stream sedimentation.

Quality habitat for elk and other wildlife will be maintained.

Where appropriate, more defensible space for inholders with cabins will be created.

Goals:

Ensure that lands within the WSA boundary that have genuinely retained their wilderness character be managed to protect their wilderness characteristics.

Provide a reasonable balance of use in Little Belts by providing a large block of land for foot and horse use.

Accommodate motorized and mechanized use within the MFJSMA in areas where the criteria for Wilderness is not met.

Work with inholders, conservation groups, FWP and other interests to develop and implement a plan to restore the fishery in the lower segment of the Middle Fork where vehicle use is severely damaging the Middle Fork fishery.

Work with Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks to maintain high quality habitat for elk and other wildlife and ensure that there are not impediments to elk migration from the Judith Wildlife Management Area.

Reduce wildfire hazards for inholders with cabins along the national forest boundary.

Improve manageability where borders do not conform to topography and existing use.

Suitability

Foot and horse use are suitable throughout the MFJSMA.

Consistent with the current travel plan, Mountain bikes and motorcycle activities are suitable within the MFJSMA on Roads 825, 6531, 6399, 6418, 6541, and Trails 443, 444, 435.

Consistent with the current travel management plan, vehicles less than 50 inches would be suitable on Roads 825, 6531, 6399, 6418, 6541, Trails 444 and 435. Vehicles greater than 50 inches are suitable for all system roads.

Consistent with the current travel plan, snowmobile use is suitable for the Middle Fork Road. Additional snowmobile use could be accommodated between Yogo Peak and Weatherwax where the WSA boundary does not conform to topography and use has been established.

MFJSMA is unsuitable for timber production, but some fuel reduction activities (removal of downfall, thinning) may be conducted to create more defensible space where vegetation from National Forest land is encroaching and increased the fire risk to cabins on private property.

Excavation equipment necessary for stream restoration work is suitable.

Chainsaws are suitable in both zones.

Livestock grazing is suitable in both zones where it currently exists.

Wilderness - Middle Fork Judith in Context

Managing national forest lands for multiple-use includes managing some areas for their wilderness characteristics. Designated and even recommended Wilderness in central and eastern Montana is extremely rare. Recommending wilderness for most of the Middle Fork will help ensure that opportunities for a true wilderness experience will be preserved for the future in central Montana. The HLCNF already recognizes that the wilderness characteristics of the Middle Fork Judith have been retained and that they have the ability to manage the area's wilderness characteristics. As noted in the DEIS, page 18, "The ability to protect and manage these wilderness characteristics is high because it has been managed as a Wilderness Study Area since 1977."

Non-conforming uses - Middle Fork Judith

As proposed, mountain bike use would be discontinued on trails in the portion of the polygon managed to protect wilderness characteristics. Mountain bikes are a relatively new use on the Forest and were not analyzed in the 2007 Travel Management Plan. In the Middle Fork Judith, mountain bike use appears to be very limited but it is a new non-conforming use in a Wilderness Study Area, and a use that over time could have impacts on wilderness characteristics, other users, and wildlife. It needs to be analyzed in this management plan.

Holiday Campground provides a base camp for a variety of activities but it serves as one of the primary portals into the Wilderness Study Area for horseback riders. The campground provides corrals, feeding troughs and plenty of space for loading and unloading horses. From the campground it is a short distance to the Burris Cabin Trailhead and Trail 433. This narrow and steep trail leading into the Lost Fork has many switchbacks, encouraging mountain bike use on this trail invites conflicts.

Trail 409 which also leads into the Lost Fork is very narrow and little used. In its current condition, it would not be suitable for mountain bikes.

Doerr Creek Trail 407, from Sand Point, is steep making it a difficult bike ride for the average bike rider.

There are no motorized trails under the current travel management plan located within the polygon that would be managed for wilderness values.

Snowmobile use is allowed on the Middle Fork Road and used during the winter primarily to access cabins, but the Middle Fork Judith is not a destination for snowmobiles. With the excellent snowmobile trail system that does exist in the Little Belts, the portion managed for primitive recreation, as proposed in all alternatives, should remain a non-motorized.

Wildlife - Middle Fork Judith

As noted in the Draft management plan, "The location and configuration of the Middle Fork Judith RW helps maintain or enhance habitat connectivity for large, wide-ranging wildlife species." According to a FWP biologist, the Middle Fork Judith provides high quality habitat during the summer and fall for most of the 1,000 plus elk that winter on the Judith WMA. As a primitive area, the Middle Fork Judith WSA compliments the wildlife values of Judith River WMA.

According to FWP biologist Jay Kolbe, a wolverine was spotted near the Judith headwaters near the Middle Fork Judith WSA. Wolverines have been as an at-risk terrestrial wildlife species found on the H/LC National Forest and are proposed for listing under the Endangered Species Act.

Middle Fork Judith Fishery

Despite being designated as a Wilderness Study Area, the stream corridor running through the lower portion of the Middle Fork Canyon has been severely degraded because of motorized vehicles traveling on the Middle Fork Road which runs through and across the stream many times en route to the private inholdings. The degradation of the stream corridor affects the WSA's wilderness character and the fishery. The impact on the fishery from sediment washing into the stream from vehicles is well documented by National Forest and FWP biologists. To prevent more damage and allow restoration of the stream and riparian area, the 2007 Travel Management Plan proposed that vehicles be rerouted out of a 2-½ mile segment of the Middle Fork Road.

On weekends during the summer and fall months, vehicle use on the Middle Fork Road can at times be heavy. As noted, the fishery has become severely impacted because of the use. It has also come to our attention that a new outfitter/ATV rental business is opening up in Utica and could further exacerbate this problem.

As a Special Management Area, restoration work to restore the fishery is permissible. Restoration work is also permissible in Wilderness Study Areas, as noted in the Draft Revised Forest Plan, page 69:

"Motorized and mechanized equipment (such as chain saws to clear trails) is suitable for accomplishing restoration activities and/or administrative work. (page 69).

Reconstruction or rerouting existing roads to eliminate impacts to natural or cultural resources is suitable provide abandoned routes are fully rehabilitated.

The HLCNF has a legal obligation to maintain the wilderness character and water quality in the Middle Fork Judith. This obligation should be recognized and the Middle Fork Judith WSA managed accordingly.

Unfortunately a plan for restoration work has not been a project or funding priority and remains the one remaining piece of the 2007 travel management plan that has yet to be implemented. The level of motorized and mechanized use and the impact on the fisheries and wildlife should be monitored, and if a restoration plan is not implemented, or can't be implemented because of funding or land access issues, temporary action should be taken to prevent more damage.

Recreation - Middle Fork Judith

Elk tags for Hunting District 420, which includes the Middle Fork Judith, are highly coveted. This is in no small part because of the area's roadless character and big open parks which provide quality habitat. The fishery in the Lost Fork is healthy and with restoration of the fishery in the lower Middle Fork, could be restored to the healthy fishery it once was.. National Forest staff have commented that when restored, the Middle Fork could again be the blue ribbon trout stream.

Rickard Coulee - Middle Fork Judith

All of the Recreational Opportunity Spectrum maps show a road corridor leading into Rickard Coulee as semi-primitive motorized. However, there is no public access to the road and it is closed under the current travel management plan. A trail does exist on the ground, but the travel plan map does not show it as open to

motorized vehicles or even as a system trail.

For the portion of the WSA with motorized trails the following solution was proposed.

Consistent with the current travel management plan, vehicles less than 50 inches would be suitable on Roads 825, 6531, 6399, 6418, 6541, Trails 444 and 435. Vehicles greater than 50 inches are suitable for all system roads.

Consistent with the current travel plan, snowmobile use is suitable for the Middle Fork Road. Additional snowmobile use could be accommodated between Yogo Peak and Weatherwax where the WSA boundary does not conform to topography and use has been established.

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A smaller portion of the MFJSMA, (approximately 23,000 acres), (Zone 2), would be managed for a broader mix of uses including motorized vehicles and mountain bikes. This area located in the northeast portion of the polygon, extends north of the Middle Fork Road, bounded on the west by Trails 443 and 444. The north boundary follows the Wilderness Study Area boundary.

A small slice of the west boundary between Yogo Peak and Weatherwax would be slightly modified so as to conform more closely with the topography and existing snowmobile use.

The Middle Fork fishery would be restored to more natural conditions and stream conditions in the upper Middle Fork would be monitored to prevent more erosion and stream sedimentation.

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Accommodate motorized and mechanized use within the MFJSMA in areas where the criteria for Wilderness is not met.

Work with inholders, conservation groups, FWP and other interests to develop and implement a plan to restore the fishery in the lower segment of the Middle Fork where vehicle use is severely damaging the Middle Fork fishery.

Work with Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks to maintain high quality habitat for elk and other wildlife and ensure that there are not impediments to elk migration from the Judith Wildlife Management Area.

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Excavation equipment necessary for stream restoration work is suitable.

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Livestock grazing is suitable in both zones where is currently exists.

Objection 2

The following statements were taken from my comments:

"Non-conforming uses - Middle Fork Judith?As proposed, mountain bike use would be discontinued on trails in the portion of the polygon managed to protect wilderness characteristics. Mountain bikes are a relatively new use on the Forest and were not analyzed in the 2007 Travel Management Plan. In the Middle Fork Judith, mountain bike use appears to be very limited but it is a new non-conforming use in a Wilderness Study Area, and a use that over time could have impacts on wilderness characteristics, other users, and wildlife. It needs to be analyzed in this management plan."

"Holiday Campground provides a base camp for a variety of activities but it serves as one of the primary portals into the Wilderness Study Area for horseback riders. The campground provides corrals, feeding troughs and plenty of space for loading/unloading horses. From the campground it is a short distance to the Burris Cabin Trailhead and Trail 433. This narrow and steep trail leading into the Lost Fork has many switchbacks, encouraging mountain bike use on this trail invites conflicts."

"Trail 409 which also leads into the Lost Fork is very narrow and little used. In its current condition, it would not be suitable for mountain bikes."

"Doerr Creek Trail 407, from Sand Point, is steep making it a difficult bike ride for the average bike rider."

"From our experience, motorized use and mechanized transport can diminish an area's "primeval character," its "outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and confined type of recreations," as well as its ecological value. Just as important, it can diminish the social characteristics and lead future decision makers to reduce, or eliminate, RWAs as outlined in the case studies below."

Region 1 Examples - RWA Management

In Region 1, there are several examples that illustrate how Forest Service decisions to allow non-conforming uses in Recommended Wilderness have led to losses of RW acres in subsequent Forest Planning processes, reducing the wilderness potential for those areas. Summarized below are five (three on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge NF, one on the Kootenai NF and one on the Gallatin NF) case studies across different landscapes where RWAs have decreased in size following RW management decisions that did not protect and maintain ecological and social characteristics for wilderness designation by allowing non-conforming uses to persist, and by not managing these areas in a manner consistent with the Forest's recommendation.

Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest: Mt. Jefferson Recommended Wilderness

In 1989 the BDNF created the 4,474 acre Mt. Jefferson Recommended Wilderness in the Hellroaring Creek drainage, the ultimate headwaters of the Missouri River. Although small, the Mt. Jefferson RW was adjacent to the 23,054 acre Centennials RW, managed by the BLM, for a combined total of approximately 28,000 acres. The previous BDNF Forest Plan allowed snowmobiling in RWAs, and when snowmobile technology improved in the 1990s, Mt. Jefferson became a publicized snowmobile destination, accessed primarily from the Idaho side. Attempts by the Madison District Ranger to close the area to snowmobiles were overruled by the Forest Supervisor. In contrast, snowmobiling was prohibited in the adjacent BLM Centennials RW. In 2002, the responsible BLM Field Manager wrote a letter to the BDNF requesting the closure of the USFS portion of the RW in order to curtail illegal trespass. His request was ignored.

When the BDNF revised its Forest Plan in 2009, the already small Mt. Jefferson RW was cleaved in half 2,000

acres in the upper reaches of the Hellroaring Creek drainage were stripped of their recommendations, leaving only a 2,000 acre RWA in the lower reaches of the valley.

Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest: West Big Hole Recommended Wilderness

Approximately 56,000 acres of the approximately 130,000 acre West Big Hole Inventoried Roadless Area, on the east slope of the Beaverhead Range west of the towns of Wisdom and Jackson, MT, was an RWA in the BDNF's 1980s-era Forest Plan. Crowned by 10,620 ft. Homer Youngs Peak, the West Big Hole is a key link in the chain of wild areas that connect the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem with Central Idaho wildlands including the Frank Church-River of No Return and Selway-Bitterroot Wildernesses. The previous BDNF Forest Plan allowed snowmobiling in RWAs, and when snowmobile technology improved in the 1990s, the West Big Hole became a popular high-marking playground. When the BDNF released its revised Forest Plan in 2009, all of the West Big Hole had its RWA status removed.

Beaverhead/Deerlodge National Forest: Anaconda/Pintler Wilderness Recommended Inclusions (Sullivan and Tenmile Creeks)

The 1980s BDNF Forest Plan put Sullivan and Tenmile Creeks in Recommended Wilderness status as additions to the Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness. At the southeastern end of the Anaconda Range, these drainages harbor ancient, gnarled, 800-year-old subalpine larches that are among the oldest trees in Montana. Just as with the cases of the West Big Hole and Mt Jefferson, snowmobiles were allowed in this RWA. When technology improved enough to allow access into this rugged high country, recreation became popular enough that the BDNF removed the area's recommendation for wilderness when it revised its Forest Plan in 2009.

Kootenai National Forest (KNF): Ten Lakes Recommended Wilderness

The Ten Lakes area is a critical area for grizzly bears and other rare wildlife that sits across the North Fork Flathead River valley from Glacier National Park. The Ten Lakes Wilderness Study Area (WSA) was designated by Congress as part of the Montana Wilderness Study Act of 1977. The 1980s-era KNF Plan included just two Recommended Wildernesses, including the Ten Lakes recommended Wilderness (34,000 acres). As with other forests such as the BDNF, the KNF allowed biking to establish and snowmobile use to persist and increase over the three decades of the Forest Plan. Thus, when the KNF revised its plan in 2015, a "no action" alternative was selected that did not include the previous recommended Wilderness lands adjacent to the WSA (6,800 acres). As a result, 26,000 acres is currently recommended Wilderness until travel planning is complete, and the adjacent 6,800 acres that was previously recommended for Wilderness has been completely dropped from protection. Meanwhile, travel planning for this area has been in draft form for nearly eight years. This case represents a severing of wild land protection based on clear non-conforming use mismanagement. In the end, wilderness character, recommended Wilderness allocations, and the potential for designation has been degraded.

Custer-Gallatin National Forest: Lionhead Recommended Wilderness

The HLCNF can also look the Custer-Gallatin NF for another example of non-conforming use in a Recommended Wilderness. The Lionhead Recommended Wilderness, roughly 22,800 acres, was recommended in the 1987 Forest Plan and has been in most statewide wilderness legislation since 1988. This landscape acts as a critical wildlife corridor connecting the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem to the High Divide.

The 2006 Travel Management Plan decision stated that the Gallatin National Forest felt the Lionhead Recommended Wilderness should be closed to mountain biking but postponed making the decision due to the absence of opportunity for the public to weigh in on the decision in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the Travel Management Plan. While the GNF did offer the public an opportunity to comment on this decision, it never issued a final decision. The recommended wilderness remains open to mechanized use creating a constituency of mountain bikers that opposes future designation, therefore compromising the social characteristics and reducing the suitability for inclusion in the NWPS.

Summary?As outlined above, recommending areas for wilderness designation, then managing them in a way that reduces the ecological or social characteristics of wilderness can compromise an area's potential for inclusion into the National Wilderness Preservation System and is inconsistent with the 2012 Planning Rule, 2015 Forest Service Manual Directives and 2008 Region 1 guidance. Non-conforming uses, such as mountain bikes, affect both the ecological and especially the social character of these wild places that recommended wilderness is designed to protect. Visitors of wilderness are intended to have an opportunity for a remote experience. In identifying lands deserving of wilderness protection, the HLCNF discontinue all recreational uses

that are inconsistent with that designation. Failing to do so weakens an area's suitability and puts the potential for legislative protection at risk.

Wilderness - Middle Fork Judith in Context

Managing national forest lands for multiple-use includes managing some areas for their wilderness characteristics. Designated and even recommended Wilderness in central and eastern Montana is extremely rare. Recommending wilderness for most of the Middle Fork will help ensure that opportunities for a true wilderness experience will be preserved for the future in central Montana. The HLCNF already recognizes that the wilderness characteristics of the Middle Fork Judith have been retained and that they have the ability to manage the area's wilderness characteristics. As noted in the DEIS, page 18, "The ability to protect and manage these wilderness characteristics is high because it has been managed as a Wilderness Study Area since 1977."

Trail 409 which also leads into the Lost Fork is very narrow and little used. In its current condition, it would not be suitable for mountain bikes.

Doerr Creek Trail 407, from Sand Point, is steep making it a difficult bike ride for the average bike rider.

Big Snowy Mountains

The reasons for this objection are:

In the Proposed Action, Alternatives B and D, the H/L&C National Forest recommended wilderness for the 95,299 acres in the Big Snowy Mountains. Neither the Record or Decision nor the Final EIS provided an explanation for the reduced acreage. The decision makes management will become more difficult and enforceable.

Objection 1.

As proposed, the boundaries for the Recommended Wilderness in the Draft Record of Decision (DROD) will make management more difficult. The lack of a topographical barrier will encourage trespass into RWA, make enforcement of nonconforming uses nearly impossible, and create safety issues.

Objection 2.

HLC did not conduct an analysis of mountain bike use and how allowing a new non-conforming use in the Big Snowy WSA would impact wilderness character to potential for Wilderness designation. Like the Middle Fork Judith WSA, the HLC never determined the level of mountain bike use within the WSA in 1977, the base line year for determining the wilderness character of the WSA. The HLC is now proposing to continue to allow mountain bike use for a portion of the WSA, even exceeding the percentage of area a 2001 wilderness assessment determined was used by snowmobilers. There probably was little or no mountain bike use in 1977, so for all practical purposes all of the current use is probably a new use. But without knowing the level of use in 1977, it is impossible to determine how much of the WSA should be open to mountain bike use.

In 2001, the Lewis and Clark National Forest prepared a supplement to the Big Snowy Mountains Access and Travel Management Environmental Assessment. The stated purpose of the supplement was to "clarify issues relating to access and travel management within the Big Snowies relative to the 1977 Montana Wilderness Study Act and determine their impact on the wilderness character of the WSA." The supplement determined that snowmobile use existed in portions of the Big Snowy Mountains prior to 1977, but it did not identify or mention use by mountain bikes prior to 1977, except to note that "In the past 15 years we have seen all sorts of new recreational pursuits, including ... and mountain bikes. No doubt there will be other new activities in the years ahead," (page 255).

The stated purpose of the supplement was to "clarify issues relating to

It seems accurate to say that in 1977, bikes were rarely if ever used in the Big Snowies, and if they were used, mechanical limitations probably prevented most bike riders from traveling on trails used today. Even now, for

experienced mountain bikers with high-end bikes, the steep trails leading up to places like the crest of the Big Snowies, pose challenges. A former Great Falls Tribune Outdoor writer and mountain biker described the trail from Crystal Lake leading to the Ice Caves as "challenging." "True adrenaline junkies will love this gnarly downhill ride. For me, it involved lots of hike-a-biking."

It's noteworthy that the Crystal Lake Trail loop was created after 1977. It wasn't until 1992 that Grandview Trail 403 was extended about 2 miles into the designated WSA to complete a loop route for "hikers and equestrians" to access the crest of the mountains. I'm not aware of any analysis that assessed the possible impact of expanding the trail in the WSA to new non-forming uses like mountain bikes.

Encouraging more mountain bike use up the many steep trails and across the ridges invites more conflicts with other users and detracts from the wilderness character of the Big Snowies. Importantly, it also affects the future potential for Wilderness designation.

Objection 3.

Allowing mountain bike use on Neil Creek Trails encourages conflicts. Of all the trails leading up the ridge, allowing mountain bike use on Neil Creek Trail is especially egregious. This trailhead is preferred by stock users because of there is space for parking and room to maneuver trailers to load and unload horses. Allowing the trail to continue to be open to mountain bikes will likely encourage more use and better establish use which in other forests has resulted in more conflicts, greater safety concerns, and the displacement of horse use. Both hikers and stock users naturally gravitate to places where conflicts can be avoided.

Mountain bike use on Neil Creek is limited and the steep narrow trail leading up to the ice caves would require walk-a-biking for most riders going up and with the speed going down invites conflicts. For mountain bikes coming from West Peak, east of West Peak, the segment of Trail 403, leading to the Ice Caves, is extremely steep in places requiring most mountain bikers to both walk-a-bike down and up. Why encourage mountain biking in this area?

Solutions:

Objection 1.

I am aware that mountain bikers are advocating for continued use on Crystal Lake loop trails. Aside from questions as to whether a nonconforming use such as mountain biking should be authorized in a WSA, I ask that you consider other options that would protect the Wilderness character of most of the WSA and Recommended Wilderness, and still provide appealing options for mountain biking.

I am proposing a clear solution below that supports existing use and trail construction, safe travel for foot, stock and mechanized use, while also adhering to the realities of the land and its management. The proposal would align with the use as it existed in 1977. Trail 493, which forms the eastern side of the loop should be managed as a foot and horse trail while Trail 403, on the west side of the loop, which leads to West Peak, should be managed for mountain bikes. This would at least separate uses and avoid conflicts while still providing a quality recreational opportunity for experienced mountain bike users.

The vegetation and topography to the south of West Peak would make a trail closure more enforceable by utilizing recognizable/physical barriers. With only one trail leading through a forested area east of West Peak, signage would be easily visible and make management easier, as compared to the more open area, currently proposed, with no topographic barrier. The segment of Trail 403 east of West Peak, leading to the Ice Caves, is extremely steep in places requiring most mountain bikers to walk their bikes down and up. With signage it would provide a boundary that is recognizable and enforceable.

It is also a recognition that the west side loop Trail 403 which leads to West Peak is better suited for mountain

biking than the east side loop Trail 493/490. It must also be acknowledged that these trails were not constructed with mountain biking in mind. Allowing mountain bike use to become better established on this historic foot and horse trail raises concerns about safety as it becomes more of a fast paced downhill mountain bike run geared to thrill seekers. While HLC is obligated to provide recreational opportunities for a variety of users, it is not obligated to provide thrill seekers their adrenaline fix which endanger other users.

By contrast, Grand View Trail 403 is longer at 3.4 miles, with a 1,800 feet elevation gain. This trail is longer and more gradual, with the entire trail averaging closer to a 10 percent grade. As such, it would better conform to a more standard grade for mountain bike use.

For those riders seeking a loop trail experience, I am also proposing that mountain bike use be authorized from West Peak down Dry Pole Trails 490 and 481, that end up near the lower parking lot. This mostly downhill loop would especially appeal to mountain bikers looking for a longer trail loop.

Like all trails originating from the crest, it is steep in places. Trail maintenance would be needed, but these are existing system trails. The lower part of Dry Pole Trail 481 would also provide an up-and-back mountain biking opportunity for the average mountain biker looking for a shorter trail riding experience without steep slopes.

Allotting this northwest portion of the Snowies for mountain bike use would be more consistent with the existing travel management plan, historical use and allow for a more varied mountain bike experience than authorizing mountain bike use on the entire Crystal Lake loop. The 2005 Access and Travel Management plan for the Big Snowies allotted approximately 12 percent of the land within the Big Snowy WSA for snowmobile use in this northwestern portion of the Big Snowies. Allowing mountain bike use in this same northwest portion of the Big Snowies more in line with the historic use and of the area.

The Neil Creek Trail(#654), Blake Creek Trail (#655), and Timber Creek trail (#676) should be included in RW. The Crystal Cascades Trail (#445 and #445a) should also be included in the RW and the boundary aligned with the existing snowmobile area. The trail from Crystal Lake to the Ice Caves (#493) should be included in RW. The trail from Crystal Lake to West Peak and west should be included in the Grandview Recreation Area (#403, #490). This would provide an opportunity for a good ride for mountain bikers if trail maintenance is complete on trail #490, west of West Peak, and on trail #483 (Dry Pole Creek). See attached map

Objection 2.

At the very least, prepare a supplement to the EIS, as was done with snowmobile use, to determine the level of mountain bike use in 1977, the baseline for determining allowable uses in WSAs.

Objection 3.

The remedy for the Neil Creek Trail to manage it as a foot and horse trail and the preferred access for livestock use and away from the Crystal Lake Trail loop.

Statement demonstrating the link between objection and prior formal comments:

MWA supported the Proposed Action in Alternatives B and D. If Alternative F was proposed, we could have provided more specific objections and solutions.

Taken from MWA comments:

MWA supports recommended wilderness for the portion of the Big Snowy Mountains described in Alternatives B and D, 95,299 acres. The Helena/ Lewis and Clark National Forest recognizes the Big Snowies as the largest and most pristine mountain landscape in Central Montana. Recommended Wilderness is consistent with past management decisions and would provide a better balance of use, consistent with the multiple use mandate to manage some areas within the national forest for wilderness values.

The one remaining non-forming use is mountain bikes, a new use that was not analyzed in the 2005 travel

management plan and has not been analyzed in any NEPA document. Mountain bike use is limited and the steep trail leading up to the ice caves is limited to more advanced mountain bikers. A former Great Falls Tribune Outdoor writer and mountain biker described the trail from Crystal Lake leading to the Ice Caves as "challenging." "True adrenaline junkies will love this gnarly downhill ride. For me, it involved lots of hike-a-biking." Encouraging moHelena/Lewisre mountain bike use up the many steep trails and across the ridges would invite more conflicts with other users and detract from the wilderness character of the Big Snowies.

Tenderfoot Deep Creek Roadless Area

The reasons for this objection are: The wilderness character of the lower portion of the Tenderfoot/Deep Creek Roadless Area has improved over the years because of land trades, conservation easements on remaining private lands, and the 2007 travel management plan that eliminated most motorized trails. This roadless area was included in past wilderness bills and is now deserves to be managed as a RWA.

Objection 1.

The HLC did not provide a rationale for eliminating a portion of Deep Creek for Recommended Wilderness.

The rationale for dropping the 14,500 acre parcel in Deep Creek for Recommended Wilderness is not explained in the Final EIS or ROD. In fact, it states that this parcel was Recommended Wilderness "based on outstanding opportunities for solitude and ecological characteristics. Without providing an explanation for why this parcel was dropped, it is impossible for the public to understand or respond to the change.

Likewise no explanation has ever been provided for not Recommending Wilderness for any portion of Tenderfoot Creek. All that is provided is a statement that "In alternative F, both Deep Creek and parts of Tenderfoot Creek were identified as primitive ROS areas rather than as RWA's."

A "primitive ROS" is not a management designation and does not provide the same level of protection a RWA does. A Primitive ROS is not managing an area to protect wilderness characteristics.

Deep Creek was identified as one of three large nonmotorized blocks in the 2007 Travel Management Plan and receives almost no mountain bike use. As noted in my comments it was also included in past wilderness bills.

If there were concerns about managing the area as Recommended Wilderness they need to be explained.

Anticipating concerns the HLC might have about management, trespass, or boundaries of this area, I proposed a Special Management Area as another management option and a means of protecting wilderness characteristics while also providing more flexibility to eliminating any possible concerns the HLC might have, be the use of motorized vehicles to manage noxious weeds or the seasonal use of a horse drawn wagon by an outfitter on a trail.

If the HLC will not provide the public with thorough explanation for eliminating parcels, which even the agency acknowledges has wilderness characteristics, it is impossible for the public to provide meaningful and thoughtful input.

Objection 2

The HLC did not prepare an evaluation of mechanized use. Draft ROD authorizes mechanized travel throughout the entire Deep Creek/Tenderfoot Roadless Area making no distinction between areas which have retained their wilderness characteristics and areas more suitable for mountain biking. The draft decision sets in motion changes to the wilderness charter of these remote wildlands without benefit of analysis. Mechanized use differs in effects, yet has never been analyzed to determine suitability in this roadless area.

Solutions for Objection 1.

Provide the public with an explanation for why the non motorized parcel in Deep Creek was dropped as a RWA and why non motorized portions of the Tenderfoot, as proposed by me and others, were not proposed

as RWAs. My preference is to manage lower Deep Creek as Recommended Wilderness, as proposed in Alternatives B and D. I also support Recommended Wilderness for the non-motorized portion of lower Tenderfoot, a modified Alternative D as proposed in my comments.

If the H/LC National Forest is unwilling to manage these areas as Recommended Wilderness, I ask that consideration be given to managing the entire Tenderfoot/Deep Creek area for special management with three different the management zones providing different recreation opportunities and management objectives. A precedent for special management has been established with the South Hills Recreation Area.

See specific plan components of the Special Management Area plan in my comments.

Objection 2

Evaluate mechanized use on the non-motorized parcels of the Tenderfoot/Deep Creek Roadless Area to determine suitability and affect on wilderness character. Look for opportunities to manage some areas for wilderness characteristics and others for mechanized used.

Statement demonstrating the link between the objections and prior formal comments:

Zone 1, Smith River Corridor to including the lower Tenderfoot and Deep Creek would be managed to protect wilderness characteristics.

Zone 2, Upper Deep Creek managed for motorized and mechanized use, and Zone 3, Upper Tenderfoot managed as a more primitive setting to protect the fishery while also providing opportunities for motorized and mechanized use consistent with the existing travel management plan.

The proposed Tenderfoot Deep Creek Special Management Area covers approximately 62,000 acres and includes both the Deep Creek and Tenderfoot Drainages as well as small parcels of unroaded national forest lands in the Blacktail Creek area, which is included in the Big Belt Mountains Geographical Area.

Smith River Corridor (approximately 30,000 acres)?The Smith River is a nationally recognized river noted for its fishing, outstanding scenery, and the opportunities it provides for a 60-mile float through private, state, and National Forest lands during the late spring and early summer months. Arguably the most scenic portion of the Smith River is the segment of river stretching from the Syringa Campsite near Tenderfoot Creek to the Parker Flat campsite near Deep Creek, a distance of more than 11 miles.

The corridor also includes high parks that are bracketed by Deep Creek, Tenderfoot, and the Smith River canyons with a mountain backdrop. This is a connected landscape in primitive backcountry setting.

The small parcels of unroaded national forest lands in the Blacktail Creek area were included because they provide boats camps for floaters and are unroaded and undeveloped, in keeping with a primitive floating experience.

As a result of the 2007 Travel Management Planning process, the Smith River Corridor is one of the last large blocks within the Jefferson Division of the H/L&C National Forest managed as a largely non-motorized block of land. The exception is Trails 311 and 311A that access from the east via Deep Creek and only provide limited access to adjacent landowners only have public and their friends from the Smith River side on the west. In keeping with the current travel plan, the terminus for Deep Creek Ridge Trail number 338, which is being improved to provide a safer trail for ATVs, should not be expanded to Trails 317 and 311. MWA would strongly oppose that change to the travel management plan.

Road 263 provides seasonal access for motorcycles to the Smith River in lower Deep Creek. Road 6424, which currently crosses private land to a campsite in the lower Tenderfoot, is also accessible to all vehicles.

The Travel Management Plan was an important step in ensuring that the Smith River corridor is managed to protect its "unique special character and purpose." Whether floating down the Smith, hiking or horseback riding in the Tenderfoot or Deep Creek canyons, or looking across the high parks one can't help but feel like this is a wilderness setting.

Upper Deep Creek Mixed Use Area (approximately 12,000 acres)?Under the current Travel Plan, Upper Deep Creek, located in the northeast corner of the roadless area is managed for primarily for motorized vehicle use, providing many good trails to motorcycles and with the reconstruction of Trail 338, will allow more ATV users to more safely access the South Fork of Deep Creek. The loop trails in Upper Deep Creek are highly valued by motorcyclists.

Upper Tenderfoot (approximately 20,000 acres)?Upper Tenderfoot Creek has a healthy fishery and provides good opportunities for fishing in a largely pristine creek. The trail along the creek can be brushy and is well suited for hiking and horseback riding. Under the current travel management plan the creek can also be accessed in two spots by motorized vehicles, but motorized access into the drainage is possible through multiple routes. The objective of management should be to protect the fishery and provide a quality fishing experience in a natural setting, but also provide some motorized access as currently exists.

Plan Components?Desired Conditions within the TDSMA:

3. The Smith River Corridor covering approximately 30,000 acres of the TDCMA will be managed to protect the area's wilderness characteristics. That includes the lower Deep Creek and Tenderfoot drainages to the Smith River.?This area would provide a primitive recreation experience in a large, highly scenic setting. Trail opportunities would be for foot and horse use, with the exception of Trails 311, 311A and Road 263 which provides seasonal access to the Smith River for motorcycles and mountain bikes.

Livestock will remain on this landscape.

Tenderfoot Creek will provide high quality water and flows to the Smith River as well as critical spawning habitat for fish from the Smith River.

Westslope trout will be restored in the South Fork of Tenderfoot Creek.

Deep Creek will provide high quality water to the Smith River.

Noxious weeds will be eradicated in the Smith River corridor.

Quality habitat for elk and other wildlife will be maintained along with opportunities for ?quality hunts.

Upper Deep Creek (approximately 14,000 acres) will provide quality trails for a broader mix of uses including motorcycles, ATVs and mountain bikes. This area located in the northeast portion of the polygon, extends from Monument Peak and Desolation Peak on the south, the South Fork of Deep Creek on the West, the national forest boundary on the north and Logging Creek Road on the east.

Upper Tenderfoot Creek (approximately 30,000 acres) will provide a healthy fishery and quality fishing experience in a primitive setting while allowing some access for motorized vehicles and mountain bikes.

Trails will be maintained and cleared.

Goals:

Manage the Deep Creek Tenderfoot Roadless Area as three zones with the Smith River corridor, including the high parks, managed to protect wilderness characteristics and provide a wilderness experience; Upper Deep Creek managed to provide a quality motorized and mechanized experience; Upper Tenderfoot managed primarily as a primitive setting to protect the fishery, but also allowing some motorized and mechanized access. Provide a reasonable balance of use in Little Belts by providing a block of land in the lower Deep Creek and Tenderfoot Roadless Area for foot and horse use.

Protect and restore fisheries and habitat and provide a quality hunting and fishing experience.

Consolidate national forest land through lands trades and acquisitions.

Suitability

Foot and horse use are suitable throughout the TDCMA.

Mountain bikes and motorized vehicles are not suitable within the Smith River Corridor except for seasonally open Trail 331, 311A leading to the Smith River. Motorcycles and mountain bikes are suitable for these trails and all motorized vehicles and mountain bikes are suitable for Road 263.

Motorized vehicles are suitable for administrative use to treat noxious weeds within the Smith River corridor.

Livestock are suitable throughout the TDCMA, but subject management guidelines.

Use of a horse drawn wagon by the Anderson Ranch to transport clients as a limited and ?permitted use within lower Deep Creek is suitable.

Motorized vehicle and mountain bikes are suitable in Upper Deep Creek and Upper Tenderfoot consistent with the existing travel management plan.

Consistent with the current travel plan, snowmobile use is not suitable in the lower and Tenderfoot and Deep Creek.

Supplemental Information on the TDCMA

Deep Creek?Lower Deep Creek within the Smith River Corridor receives little use largely because of its remoteness. Access to this area comes from the Smith River, private lands, Deep Creek Trailhead, and

Monument Peak.

Under the current travel management plan there are no motorized recreation uses within the Smith River Corridor with the exception of Trails 311, 311A and Road 263, leading to the Smith River, which are open to motorcycles July 15 - August 31. The area is not well suited for moderate skilled mountain bikers because of trail conditions.

Wildlife - Deep Creek? Deep Creek Park is home to a sizable elk herd and provides nearly 53,000 acres of secure elk habitat, roughly 23,000 acres of winter range, 11,000 acres of elk calving habitat, and 27,000 acres of mule deer winter range. According to FWP biologists, the herd has remained stable providing the right amount of hunting pressure.

A concerted effort has been made by the Forest Service, with input from FWP, to manage Deep Creek Park as a non-motorized area providing quality elk habitat. Trail 311, which provided easy motorized access to the elk herd for a private landowner and friends was closed to motorized vehicles in the 2007 Travel Management Plan. A recreational airstrip, as proposed by the Montana Pilots Association was not adopted in the plan.

Recreation - Deep Creek

CMA is unsuitable for timber production consistent with the roadless rule.

9. Chainsaw use is suitable in the TEDCMA

The Smith River Corridor is well suited for those looking for a primitive backcountry experience and the opportunity to camp on the Smith River during the summer months, or hunt in the fall. Coordination with FWP may be needed for hikers and horseback riders wanting to use the Smith River campsites, but after the float season, these campsites receive little use.

Segments of Deep Creek Trail 309 are difficult to follow because the trail has not been maintained and can be confused with livestock trails. Some signs have been knocked down. It is our understanding that the H/L&C National Forest will be using "witness posts" to help guide hikers and horseback riders through the open parks which will improve the recreational experience. Other agencies managing recreation in grasslands are finding them effective, and much cheaper than building and maintaining trails.

It has come to my attention that Vic Anderson has a special permit to use a horse drawn wagon to take outfitting clients into Deep Creek Park during the hunting season. I support the continuation of this limited and permitted use. This use is allowed in Recommended Wilderness. Examples of wheeled support exist in Wilderness Areas such as the Boundary Waters Wilderness Area where wheeled support is allowed for moving boats. There are also examples of allowing permitted motorized vehicles in both recommended and designated Wilderness to maintain infrastructure, fences, stock tanks, reservoirs etc. If issues arise, they can be addressed through the permitting process.

Tenderfoot? To maintain the special character of the Smith River corridor, Tenderfoot would also be managed as a RWA to protect wilderness characteristics and provide continuity with the Deep Creek RWA. The high parks of these two areas are similar and all part of the same landscape. Both areas are free of roads and other constructed features, with the exception of seasonal motorcycle Trails 311, 311A and Road 328 which, along with the Anderson Ranch inholding, divide the two roadless areas. Managing the lower Tenderfoot to protect the wilderness characteristics, as is proposed for Deep Creek, would be consistent with the values the Forest has been trying to protect through land trades, acquisitions, and travel management. It also complements the efforts of private landowners within the River Corridor who have obtained conservation easements on their properties. The Smith River Corridor as defined is a pristine natural setting providing outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation. It is also important for species diversity, the protection of threatened and endangered species, and watershed scientific research. In other words, the Smith River Corridor as defined, meets the criteria of an area having wilderness characteristics.

Fisheries and high quality water values - Tenderfoot? Tenderfoot Creek provides high quality water and flows to the Smith River as well as critical spawning habitat for fish from the Smith River. Westslope trout restoration is underway in the South Fork of Tenderfoot Creek.

Wildlife Values - Tenderfoot? According to the information provided to the public during the Bair Trust Land Trade process, the Tenderfoot roadless area provides habitat for over 300 elk. Other big game such as moose, mule deer, black bear mountain lions, and multitude of other wildlife also inhabit the area. Wolverine should also be added to the list of wildlife that inhabit the Tenderfoot/Deep Creek area. Anecdotal evidence comes from an MWA member who has seen tracks in the winter time and Karl Puckett's Great Falls Tribune 5-1-17 article

"Wolverine Detected in Little Belt Mountains." Contributing to the variety of wildlife is a 3,200 foot elevation drop that allows for more diverse habitats.

Recreation - Tenderfoot?Tenderfoot Creek is actively used for recreational fishing while the narrow canyons, scenic ridge-tops, and high parks attract hikers, backpackers and horseback riders. The area is also used for wildlife viewing, hunting and camping.

History - Tenderfoot?The Tenderfoot/Deep Creek Roadless Area was included as a wilderness study area in legislation introduced by Senator Max Baucus in 1987 and in the 1988 Wilderness bill spearheaded by Senator John Melcher that past both houses of Congress only to be pocket-vetoed by President Reagan. Several years later Congressman Pat Williams considered the Tenderfoot/Deep Creek as a wilderness study area in legislation he proposed. The private inholdings made Wilderness designation difficult, but the forest supervisor at the time suggested that if the checkerboard and inholding issues were ever resolved, the area could be a good candidate for Wilderness. Those issues have now been resolved.

With consolidation of the Anderson Ranch properties in Deep Creek Park into one contiguous unit and the placement of a conservation easement on the parcel, a major step was taken toward preserving the wilderness character of Deep Creek. Former landowner Ron McMicking followed suit with conservation easements on his three inholdings in the Deep Creek and Tenderfoot drainages.

More recently, the 8,000 acre Bair land trade eliminated the checkerboard pattern of land ownership and consolidated Forest Service land in the lower Tenderfoot. The acquisition of the Zehntner Taylor Hills homestead further consolidated Forest Service land on the lower Tenderfoot and largely resolved the inholding issues for this drainage. The proposed acquisition of the remaining Zehntner properties will further add to the consolidation of National Forest land.

As noted, the Smith River corridor is one of the few large blocks within the Jefferson Division of the Forest that is managed as a non-motorized block of land to protect the primitive character of the area. As proposed, there are no conflicts with motorized vehicles.

Mountain bikes were not analyzed in the travel management plan, but the absence of a main trail requires bushwhacking, and frequent stream crossings make Tenderfoot ill-suited as a place to encourage mountain bike use. On the ground observations indicate that there is very little, if any, mountain bike use in Tenderfoot. As proposed, motorcycles and mountain bikes would continue to be able to continue to access Tenderfoot Creek for fishing or hiking using primitive road 6424.

With the Bair Trust land trade and the acquisition of the Zehntner properties, opportunities for a variety of recreational users were opened up. The logging roads in the south fork could provide more opportunities for more mechanized use. MWA supports the existing travel management plan that that provides quiet trail use on the north side of the the Tenderfoot while still allowing motorized access into the drainage. Bald Hills Trail number 345 provides access to the top of the Bald Hills, but terminates at the top of the hill. In addition, the access issues across Zehntner's land will be resolved with pending a land acquisition.

The combination of these land trades, acquisitions, and conservation easements were major steps towards preserving the wilderness character of the Tenderfoot drainage and have largely resolved the inholding issues.

These steps and others have eliminated some of the thorniest management concerns for a more protective designation of the Tenderfoot Deep Creek area, one that provides opportunities for foot and horse use in Wilderness setting while also protecting the high wildlife values of the area.

Management Issues - Tenderfoot?Noxious weeds, especially spotted knapweed and leafy spurge, have become established along the trail that follows the lower part of Tenderfoot Creek. The spread of noxious weeds has probably been exacerbated by illegal ATV use that continues despite the closure of the trails to motorized vehicles. While all users can spread noxious weeds, ATVs are an especially effective means of spreading weeds as they gather seeds in the undercarriage, loosen up soil, and spread them over many miles.

It is our understanding that the preferred method of treating noxious weeds by the HLCNF and the weed district is with motorized vehicles. As an administrative use, if it is determined it to be the most practical and effective way to eradicate and prevent the spread of weeds over a large area, this use would be allowable in the TDCMA. Biological controls are also allowable. As noted in the Draft Revised Forest Plan, even "Wilderness Study Areas are suitable for restoration activities (such as management of ignited fires, active weed management) to protect and/or enhance the wilderness characteristics of these areas." MWA supports the efforts of the HLCNF to

eradicate and prevent the spread of noxious weeds in the Smith River Corridor with the continued use of motorized vehicles.

Managing the Smith River Corridor to protect wilderness characteristics won't prevent all motorized vehicle trespass, but it will help reinforce the existing travel management plan by clarifying the zones of use and make it clearer to the public that the Smith River Corridor is managed for quiet non-motorized, non-mechanized recreation. Over time it is reasonable to expect that most motorized vehicle users will honor the management designation and travel restrictions.