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Comments: Objections to the Custer Gallatin NF final draft LMP

American bison

I object to Forest Supervisor Erickson's decisions denying American bison habitat protections within our National Forests in the Yellowstone ecosystem. I support including standards conserving American bison habitat in the Custer Gallatin National Forest land management plan.

I also object to Northern Region Forester Marten's decision not to designate the American bison as a species of conservation concern.

There was broad public and tribal support for American bison habitat protections, and the listing of this iconic species as a species of conservation concern. The American bison is America's national mammal and deserves much more respect.

Recommended Wilderness

Cowboy Heaven

Cowboy Heaven, which connects the Spanish Peaks and Bear Trap Canyon areas of the Lee Metcalf Wilderness, is also adjacent to Recommended Wilderness in the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest. By recommending Cowboy Heaven for Wilderness, the Forest Service would be recommending consistent management and consolidating a wild corridor for wildlife away from the busy Gallatin Canyon and Gallatin Valley.

Protecting Cowboy Heaven with wilderness designation was at the heart of the Gallatin Forest Partnership Agreement, endorsed by over 900 individuals and 100 organizations and businesses, including the Park, Gallatin, and Madison County Commissions.

Crazy Mountains

The Crazy Mountains have been historically, culturally, and spiritually significant to the Apsáalooke (Crow Nation) since time immemorial. This island range's alpine and riparian ecosystems also provide crucial habitat for pikas, wolverines, and other species that are dwindling as a result of climate change. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks also considers the Crazies essential to the future survival of mountain goats. As our climate warms, it's becoming imperative that we protect high-elevation refuges like the Crazies.

The Forest Service proposes a 10,257-acre Recommended Wilderness area in the southern Crazy Mountains, along with a 28,084-acre backcountry area. While these are notable improvements in protection, they should be expanded eastward.

The east side of the Crazies should stay primitive and open to foot and stock only, as they currently are. Allowing bikes will change the character of these unique alpine ecosystems and invite conflict.

Pryor Mountains

Like the Crazies, the Pryors are sacred to the Apsáalooke. Three distinct ecoregions converge here: the Middle Rockies, Wyoming Basin, and Northern Great Plains. This confluence has created a biodiversity hotspot, where many plants and animals found nowhere else in Montana (and even the world) thrive, often at the northernmost reaches of their range.

The Forest Service is recommending expanding the Lost Water Canyon Recommended Wilderness area to include more of Crooked Creek, and it's recommending Bear Canyon for Wilderness designation. This is a noteworthy achievement for the many people who have advocated for this unique range over the years.

The Big Pryor and Punch Bowl areas make up a fourth distinct area of the Pryors and should also be recommended for wilderness designation, instead of designating them as BCAs open to mechanized and motorized use.

Elimination of Recommended Wilderness

The previous Custer and Gallatin forest plans, written before the forests were combined, recommended only six Wilderness areas across the two forests, with a combined acreage of 33,741 acres. Although the new plan recommends some new wilderness, it proposes eliminating five of the six Recommended Wilderness areas from the previous plans, including the 20,774-acre Lionhead area.

The Lionhead adjoins the Targhee Creek Recommended Wilderness in Idaho along the Continental Divide. The area protects an important wildlife linkage between Yellowstone National Park and the Centennial Mountains and provides secure habitat for elk, bighorn sheep, wolverines, and grizzly bears. It also offers a stunning backcountry experience and encompasses the only section of the Continental Divide Trail within the Custer Gallatin National Forest.

Even though the Forest Service has allowed mountain biking to become established here, the wilderness character has not changed.

Hyalite Canyon

The Hyalite watershed is a popular recreation destination in all seasons and provides the majority of Bozeman's municipal water supply. The South Cottonwood trail, characterized by old-growth forest, lush riparian areas, and meadows, is popular with hikers, mountain bikers, and trail runners and connects with Hyalite Canyon. It also connects with Mt. Blackmore, a popular area for backcountry recreation and an iconic Bozeman landmark.

The final forest plan draft cuts the GFP's recommended protections for Hyalite in half, notably leaving out both South Cottonwood and Mt. Blackmore. I support the GFP's proposed protections which protects important wildlife habitat and backcountry recreation opportunities.

Thank you for the opportunity to make OUR LMP, better!