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Comments: I want to start by simply stating that I oppose the current proposal of this land exchange. I believe it is one that has been set up purposefully to look like a net gain for number of acres gained for the public. However, this would a be a prime example where quality should be the focus, not quantity. Though the quantity of acres gained may be a plus for the public, the quality of acreage lost does not justify the exchange. This quality of acreage, while tough to put a number on, is something that should be made public if this exchange wants to move forward. The value of the land and its quality, the value of water rights, the value of timber rights, and the value of mineral rights should all be considered and publicly disclosed before anything plans to move forward.
For overall access to the area, I wanted to continue the argument of quality vs. quantity. As I look closer as to where the new access will be and where the trail will run it seems there is a net loss in both areas concerning the public. There will be a decreased number of trails/access points and the trails themselves will traverse areas that are of a "lesser" quality when considering diversity of habitat.
It is true that the new proposed trail will create a larger single "loop" of a trail. One of the attractive benefits of this new trail, according to those that support this exchange, is that it will provide better views since apparently "The Sweet Grass Trail is a long out and back trail with no scenic destination". Anyone who has been on the current trail knows how truly beautiful this trail is and, as I previously mentioned, the diversity of habitat it offers. While these new proposed scenic views may be nice for the Yellowstone Members to enjoy when they visit MT twice a year on vacation, it doesn't seem to be the sole interest for year-round residents who use the trail systems for more than their scenic opportunities.
The proposed exchange also claims that the "current use levels are low" which is false or at best a subjective opinion on the use to justify these changes they want. The current use of the trails increases in the Fall which shows the importance of access to these lands for hunters. The new loop will not only get rid of one of the current public access points but also decreases other current land access opportunities due to the increased distances that will be required to get to them. This reduces opportunity for your typical DIY hunter that doesn't have access to pack animals or at least limits use of the most common day-hikes.
Even taking my opinion out of the argument, the proposed exchange is in violation of Executive Order 12962, a wetlands exchange action that requires no net loss in land exchanges. When the land being exchanged was surveyed it was shown that there would an estimate loss of at least 40 acres of wetland loss.
Considering all this, it seems the public does not benefit from this proposed exchange but instead the Yellowstone Club and adjacent landowners do. It seems this is an easy "out" for USFS rather than uphold/defend current access rights through the established easements. These prescriptive easements allowing these current trails to pass through some private land have been illegally obstructed and post with "no trespassing" signs. Instead of USFS officials working to correct this injustice by confronting landowners, it now seems they would rather reward their behaviors by exchanging lands with them to which they would benefit from. This is wrong to do now and seems it could turn into a slippery slope that sets a precedent for other landowners for obstructing legal public access.