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Organization:

Title:

Comments: My name is Norm Williamson. I'm a CPA, husband and father that has lived and worked in Missoula since 1998. I have spent countless hours in the backcountry of the Great Burn. I have reviewed the Revised Land Management Plan Draft Record of Decision and I object to the proposed reduction of the Great Burn Recommended Wilderness and to the opening up of those reduced areas to mechanized transportation. I am not representing any organized group or constituency. I am simply writing on behalf of myself, as someone who has found great solace in the truly wild landscapes of the Great Burn.

On April 20, 2020, I submitted an objection to the Nez-Perce-Clearwater Forest Plan Revision Draft Environmental Impact Statement and Draft Revised Forest Plan. In that objection I recounted personal wilderness experiences I'd had within the Great Burn and cited those experiences to support my assertion that the Great Burn should be permanently protected as a true wilderness area. I also recounted a specific incident where I had discovered a rusted-out snowmobile in an alder thicket surrounding Kid Lake, which I found alarming and demonstrative of the need for greater protections.

When I refer to the Great Burn Recommended Wilderness, I'm referencing the roughly 250,000-acre area that falls within both the Nez-Perce-Clearwater and Lolo National Forests. Never, on any of my numerous trips into this area, have I distinguished between an "Idaho Great Burn" and a "Montana Great Burn". And I'm certain there have been plenty of occasions where I couldn't have told you which jurisdiction I was in. I view the entire region as one connected and interdependent area and I feel strongly that the region should be managed uniformly as proposed wilderness throughout its entirety.

I was frankly mortified to see that the current forest proposal by Cheryl Probert has removed 40,000 acres of the Great Burn from recommended wilderness status, to allow for snowmobile and mountain bike accessibility in those areas. These uses have no place in either established or recommended wilderness areas. The areas in question are primary arteries into the heart of the wilderness. When planning an extended trip into the region, it is highly likely that Stateline Trail 738 and/or the Blacklead network of trails would of necessity be incorporated into any traverse of the region. To have these areas removed from Recommended Wilderness status impairs the ability to enjoy an extended outing fully immersed in true wilderness.

I am fearful that opening these areas to mechanized travel will inevitably lead to "access creep" where users push the boundaries further and further into unauthorized or "protected" areas. This is especially concerning given that the areas referenced border Montana, where we've thus far enjoyed greater protections against motorized access and encroachment. It is also hard to imagine that decisions made by the Nez Perce-Clearwater will not bleed over and negatively impact choices and the decision-making process on the Lolo side, further dismantling any hope that a fully intact and protected Great Burn Wilderness will ever come to fruition.

I have reviewed the full text of the Draft Record of Decision and nowhere did I see a cost benefit analysis weighing the real and perceived costs of the reduction in proposed wilderness acreage against the benefit of providing additional access to groups of snowmobile and mountain bike enthusiasts. I cannot fathom an analysis that would "pencil out" when the real cost is impairment of a wilderness and an ecosystem that still bears the unique scars and characteristics of the 1910 fires that shaped this landscape.

I'd like to share some details from two trips taken to the Great Burn in recent years. On one, my son and I hiked to Dalton Lake, just below Stateline Trail 738. Not only did we see mountain goats on this trip, we had them with us in our camp. Mommas, babies and even an impressive Billy on the other side of our campfire. It was a unique experience that neither of us will forget, and one that I suspect can't be replicated in many places outside

of our crowded and overrun national parks. The next year, we opted to go to Goat Lake, an area we hadn't yet explored and which seemed to promise a similarly wild experience. After setting out from the Blacklead trailhead, we descended to the first trail junction, where we were astounded to find multiple trucks and wall tents literally in the middle of the trail. After talking to the nice folks who apparently had a mining claim in the area, we continued on to Goat Lake, where we were greeted with a fireplace full of garbage and nothing approaching the pristine experience we had been anticipating. While we certainly didn't expect to see goats or to have the place to ourselves, we were nonetheless very disappointed by the overall "wilderness" character of this outing.

There is a real need for truly wild places, where we can go and be awed and humbled and feel like a very small player in a greater universe. Places that don't serve as a playground or testing ground or as an opportunity to conquer nature, but to experience nature as a respectful guest and to leave it better than we found it. The Great Burn is one of those places, and I implore you to consider the costs of your decision before recklessly jeopardizing its protection.