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First name: Tristan

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Organization:

Title:

Comments: Dear Forest Service Representative,

While I am not a formally trained land manager, I have spent many years of my life pondering the importance of what you are deciding over the next few months. I spent seven summers working on Wilderness based trail crews for the Forest Service. Those summers in my 20's live firmly in my heart as an important and deeply meaningful period of my life. To me, the significance of wild lands cannot be overstated. That being said, I am also a recreationist.

In my life, I've found great joy in many forms of backcountry recreation including hiking, backpacking, trail running, cross country and backcountry skiing. I also feel privileged to have enjoyed several years riding horses and packing mules as a Wilderness Ranger and can say that I miss my time in the saddle, but perhaps more, I miss the animals. I loved the experience of staying in a camp with horses milling about, sometimes right in the middle of our dinner by our campfire to avoid the bugs. To this day I appreciate seeing people on the trail who are dedicated to the trade, and maintain their skills to travel the backcountry on horseback. Unfortunately, it seems effectively impossible that I will ever have the land to own a horse, let alone an entire pack string with the associated truck, trailer, and equipment to ever do it again. I believe that the barrier to entry in the modern world is very high for horse packing, but something I (and many others) can afford and do enjoy is mountain biking.

While there are innumerable differences that can be drawn between horseback riding and mountain biking, I think the lines become more blurred in a backcountry setting. My mindset while riding my bike somewhere like Fish Creek is not that different from when I've ridden a horse. Both take preparation, dedication, technical skills and a lot of work to make the adventure a success. Additionally, it's not the "thrill of the ride that is captivating so much as the sense of wonder of just being in the backcountry. While these days "going for a ride" implies riding my bike, I'm not there to conquer the trail, or set speed records. I'm there with my bike because it's (hopefully!?) a more efficient and enjoyable means of covering ground than walking. Which is very much the exact same intent as using a horse.

It's commonly stated that mechanized travel is inconsistent with wilderness values. And while I support the idea of federally designated Wilderness excluding bikes on the grounds of preventing technological advances from overtaking traditional use, I cannot support management directives that eliminate the best remaining backcountry mountain biking in the area. There are a few specific areas that stand-out as the best opportunities for mountain bikers. The trails I'm most concerned about are:

1. The Great Burn - According to the Proposed Action the Heart Lake trail and the Fish Creek trails will be closed to bicycles. It was with great enthusiasm that we recently saw the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest leave the State Line Trail (Trail 738) open to bikes with a recreation corridor. I'm asking you to consider a similar option for the Heart Lake and Fish Creek trails as these are extremely important rides to me and many mountain bikers in the area who seek backcountry riding.

2. Blackfoot Clearwater area Trails (Lake Otatsy and Center Ridge): I would like to see the Forest's actions to be consistent with the widely accepted results of the Blackfoot Clearwater Stewardship Act negotiations and recommendations. If you are looking for a high degree of cooperation and compromise, I'm not sure there's a better example that hasn't been signed into Federal law. Please make the forest management of this land consistent with the will of the people, even if you cannot yourselves designate the formal Wilderness. Leaving the trails outlined in the Act open to bicycles is a fair and reasonable compromise.

3. Sapphire Crest: I would like to see the Sapphire Crest made a priority bike route for a few reasons, but most of all as respite from summer heat on a fairly high elevation trail. I think that the "on hold" project on the Lolo NF website to create a trail that ties the entire Sapphire Crest system to Missoula is an incredible opportunity and would offer numerous great places to ride.

4. Rock Creek: I support the Backcountry management of the Stony Mountain area and would like to see Ranch Creek and the surrounding trails left open to mountain bikes.

5. Petty Mountain: The Petty Mountain Loop is a great backcountry ride fairly close to Missoula. I think it should be kept open to bicycles maintained for multiple uses.

While I understand the goals of traditionally managed Wilderness (without mechanized travel), and I appreciate that these areas will remain managed as such, I also do not see mountain bikes as a substantial risk to the land nor the wildlife. I'll leave it to science to bear out, but I believe the real threat to wildlife is not the occasional quiet recreator, but rather it is extractive industries and development.

I've often pondered the best way to provide opportunities for those seeking a "wilderness" experience and those looking for diverse recreation like mountain biking. I propose that managers consider bi-annual use. I've never seen this in practice, but I think the merits are many. The way it would work is like this: On odd numbered years, the trails would be open to mechanized use (bikes) while on even numbered years it would be closed to mechanized use. The benefits are as follows:

1. With relatively simple planning, it provides those seeking a "wilderness" experience the opportunity to spend long stints of time in these lands without having to encounter mountain bikes.
2. It allows diverse recreation opportunities and reduces congestion on other system trails.
3. It builds stewardship into the system whereby more people have a personal connection to the trails and the lands. It would likely lead to self-policing as everyone benefits from the rules being followed.

While this may not be a perfect solution, I believe it is better than any other form of "timeshare" trail management I've seen implemented for other backcountry trails.

I implore land managers, such as yourself, to support other forms of quiet, human powered recreation, such as mountain biking, in some of the non-Wilderness backcountry areas that remain on the Lolo National Forest. Much like the wild lands that we are trying to protect, the human spirit has a need to feel untrammelled, free to enjoy the backcountry in differing ways. I would like to think that we can find a way to share these important trails as hikers, hunters, skiers, horseback riders...and mountain bikers.

Sincerely,
Tristan Dunlap