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Organization:

Title:

Comments: Cooke City Fuels and Forest Health Project

Custer Gallatin National Forest

Gardiner Ranger District

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Jim Barrett

Dear District Ranger Thom,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposed Cooke City Fuels and Forest Health Project. I am advocating for the No Action Alternative. I am not convinced, after reviewing the proposal, that any of the actions proposed would result in a healthier forest or decrease the risk of wildfire or increase forest-resilience. The fact that the United States Congress has suggested/mandated the treatment of up to 50 million acres across the United States is for me an immediate red flag. Forest fires are occurring across the United States and, indeed, the world at unprecedented rates largely due to the climate changing at similarly unprecedented rates. As we learned during the fires of 1988 the congress is all about demanding action to impress their constituents that they are taking charge and making things happen. In one infamous event during those fires the United States Forest Service itself fell victim to their cries for action and started the largest and most destructive fire in anyone's memory in the Silver Gate/Cooke City/Colter Pass area, and, ultimately the Beartooth Absaroka Wilderness. This miscalculation ended up burning a number of residences and other structures as well as private timber lands costing the American taxpayer untold thousands of dollars in damage payouts to the affected parties. The unnecessarily burned lands are a lasting reminder of how politics over science can be very problematic. And, to add insult to injury, the United States Forest Service attempted to "Salvage log" the trees they ignited. Fortunately; this brazenly insensitive proposal was stopped on appeal.

Apart from a relatively lackluster attempt to enhance the White Bark Pine's chances of surviving in an increasingly warming planet I find the other rationales for the imposition of chainsaw medicine to be spurious at best. Overwhelming science has shown that the most effective way to protect structures, i.e., residences, and firefighters and the public, is to create defensible space at the residence first and the rest will follow. No amount of tree removal in the adjacent forest will keep a home from igniting if it has highly flammable building materials and is crowded with vegetation that is vulnerable to the sparks and firebrands broadcast by a burning tree - sometimes miles ahead of the burning tree.

To get a good fire going the vegetation must be dry and the air warm and then add a stiff Wind to give it plenty of oxygen and off we go. By thinning the forest, you invite the sun to create a dry fuel source. Add a warming climate plus wind and you have the perfect recipe for raging fires. These become acts of God and only God controls them.

Having lived in the area of the proposal for more than fifty-years, I am well acquainted with the activities and proposals of the United States Forest Service. My impression after such a long acquaintance has evolved from the naive impression that the bear with the, well, the

Smokey Bear hat, was a benign and benevolent guardian of nature, to the reality of an agency that orchestrates

logging, mining, cattle and sheep grazing, and other related activities that are not so benign. You are mandated in the "Land of Many Uses" creed to orchestrate taking away from the forest. That's why I hope you understand that when, as the famous Ronald Reagan once said, be skeptical when you hear "we're from the government and we're here to help."

If you detect a tone in this missive, please understand that for the past six-years that I have been aware of some vague proposal myself, my family, and most of my neighbors have been fretting not the fear of a fire - we all knew we were in a forest that might someday burn - no, it was the fear of the government coming to help.

Instead of allaying our fears you have elevated our concerns. Most of my neighbors are well informed. Many highly educated, capable of doing research into contemporary science as it relates to fire behavior, forest ecology, defensible space and, like myself, are not convinced that the proposed actions will be of any benefit to the ecosystem. In fact, the consensus among them is it will be detrimental.

So, as for the Bannock Trail, for which I have the most intimate knowledge, the main concerns I have with the proposed actions (and I must say that in the past six years my knowledge of approaches to hardening communities against destructive fire behavior has increased exponentially after experiencing the "88 fires") are the opening up of the forest canopy to air and sun; the thinning of the now dense foliage to allow wind to move freely and dry out the soil and give an open path to fire brands in the event of a fire within two miles of my home; the removal of trees that act as a buffer against falling rocks and mudslides and snow avalanches; the disruption of wildlife movement and cover; and the general disruption of daily life for myself and others who live on and otherwise use the Bannock Trail for solace and in general for communing with nature in a rare setting.

My-general concerns beyond my own backyard are related to the approach to these projects from a silviculturist's perspective. It is beyond my comprehension how there would be any logging in a place that has evolved miraculously from a highly industrialized mining area to a relatively stable year-round tourism hot spot adding generously to the Park County tax base. The notion of manipulating the forest to make it "healthy" sounds like something forest planners would use to enhance future cuts. It has nothing to do with maintaining a complete complement of forest assets; from the mycorrhizal fungi that help trees transport nutrients, to the Nutcracker planting White Bark Pine Seeds, to the myriad insect life providing food for countless others species, such as bats, and squirrels, who's caches of White Bark Pine seeds are then used as an important food for grizzly bears, and on and on. We must come to terms with the fact that fire is one of the attributes of forest ecosystems and to continue attempt to remove it from the landscape is futile and likely more destructive of 'forest health' than the fire itself. We must stop killing trees to keep them from burning. That's what the mantra has been from the industrial logging faction all along, "There's been too much fire suppression and build up of fuels!" This proposal adds to that century-long practice of fire suppression and inserts an ill-advised and unscientific manipulation of a presently healthy ecosystem by thinning vital components of a healthy and resilient forest.

Respectfully Submitted,

Jim Barrett