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Comments: Comment: Failure to Mention Ambassadors, Volunteers, and Transparency:

The Draft Assessment for the Bridger-Teton Forest Plan Revision addresses many of the growing challenges the Forest faces, such as fire management, recreation, and public safety, yet it glaringly fails to mention one of the most vital resources available-ambassadors and volunteers. This omission is not only an oversight but a missed opportunity to enhance Forest management through community-driven involvement and support. Volunteers and ambassadors have long been key partners in promoting fire safety, educating the public, maintaining trails, and generally supporting the work of the Forest Service. Their absence from the plan reflects a troubling disregard for the potential of these community-driven efforts.

As a long-time past ambassador myself, I've witnessed firsthand the invaluable contributions that volunteers and ambassadors make to the Forest. These individuals are not just filling in for understaffed agencies; they are often the primary point of contact for visitors, educating them on fire safety, Leave No Trace principles, and responsible recreation practices. Yet, despite their clear importance, the Draft Assessment fails to incorporate any mention of how volunteers and ambassadors can be utilized or expanded to address the increasing demands on the Forest.

Ambassadors and volunteers are a resource that should be fully integrated into the Forest's strategies. However, the plan's failure to mention them signals a deeper problem: a tendency to treat volunteers as expendable and unimportant, rather than as crucial partners in managing the Forest's challenges. Volunteers and ambassadors should not be taken for granted or overburdened with responsibilities that should fall to Forest Service staff. If they are to be utilized, it must be in a manner that respects their time and skills, with proper support, training, and recognition. Overworking volunteers without adequate resources or fair compensation leads to burnout and a failure to leverage their full potential.

The lack of mention of volunteers also underscores a critical failure in transparency. The Forest Service has an obligation to be transparent about how volunteers are utilized, tracked, and compensated. This includes clear reporting on volunteer logs, pay, stipends, per diem rates, and the financial aspects of partnerships like Friends of Bridger-Teton (FBT). Without this transparency, it's difficult for the public to trust that volunteer resources are being properly managed or that public funds are being allocated appropriately. As a past ambassador, I can attest that a transparent system of financial reporting and volunteer tracking would not only ensure fairness but would also build public confidence in the Forest Service's stewardship of both financial and human resources.

Furthermore, partnerships with organizations like FBT should be fully disclosed, including the financial support provided and the nature of their collaboration with the Forest Service. If ambassador and volunteer efforts are being funded or supported through such partnerships, the public deserves to know how those funds are being spent and what role these organizations play in forest management.

Recommendation:

It is critical that the Forest Service revise the Draft Assessment to explicitly include ambassadors and volunteers as essential partners in fire management, recreation, and public education. Volunteers should be recognized not only as a helpful resource but as a key element of the Forest's broader strategy for managing increasing use and fire risks. The plan should also emphasize full transparency in regard to all ambassador and volunteer logs, pay, stipends, per diem rates, and financial aspects of partnerships like FBT. The public and the volunteers themselves deserve to know how resources are being allocated, and how these programs are contributing to the overall mission of the Forest Service.

The failure to include volunteers and ambassadors in the plan, coupled with the lack of transparency, is a serious oversight. The Forest Service must treat these resources with the respect they deserve, ensuring they are utilized in a manner that is sustainable, supported, and fully transparent.