

May 13, 2019

Custer Gallatin National Forest
Attn: Forest Plan Revision
10 East Babcock
PO Box 130
Bozeman, MT 59771

Attention: Virginia Kelly, Forest Plan Revision Team Leader

I have been actively engaged in the overall Pryor Mountain area for well over 45 years. I worked on the Crow Reservation as a nurse serving the Indian people living in and around Pryor MT; I raised horses in remote drainages of the greater Pryor landscape; and I remain active leading Montana Wilderness Association hikes throughout the different terrains in the Pryor Mountains landscape managed by the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and National Park Service.

The Pryor Mountains are very important to me! For about the past twenty years, I have regularly explored, hiked, and enjoyed the area's remote, primitive, and undisturbed environment. I also participate in regular noxious weed pulls in coordination with Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management, birding fields trips sponsored by Yellowstone Valley Audubon Society, and historical tours when they are offered by the National Park Service.

The Pryors are home to many plants and animals found nowhere else in Montana. It often is the northern-most reach of their range although climate change may be affecting that in the future. It is quite unique as a few of the species may not be found anywhere else in the world. The rugged remote landscape is valued as a rare commodity appreciated by local residents and by out of state or international visitors who were inspired by this rare ecosystem.. People do not want to see things parceled up.

I believe to the majority of citizens in Montana and United States value and respect wilderness even if they are unable to live in, near or even ever experience

the wilderness themselves.. It is a fundamental part of our heritage. This interest is well demonstrated by Montana Wilderness who sponsors popular hikes in the Pryors to showcase wild and intact ecosystems and by Yellowstone Valley Audubon Society who regularly do birding trips thorough out the whole range searching for unique and rare birds. Professional photographers seek out the natural beauty of wilderness environments. Out-of-state and international visitors visit these places because their homelands have not preserved natural landscapes and intact wilderness environments. People want to preserve and experience these areas in a controlled manner so as not to disrupt the natural solitude and wilderness. I also believe there are many people who never intend or are able to visit but only want a rare treasured landscape to be preserved for future generations.

In terms of detail on individualized locations for protection, I have read and concur with the recommendations and detail provided by a variety of groups including the Pryors Coalition, Montana Wilderness Association, Montana Wildlife Federation, and Yellowstone Valley Audubon Society.


As a sidebar, I and others personally struggle with and are confused with the term "backcountry". I totally understand this has official usage in some land management situations but it is not a term that the outdoor public uses or understands especially when it comes to land preservation. This is evidenced by common synonyms of backcountry- backwater, backwoods, bush, frontier, hinterland, outback, outlands, up-country. boonies, boondocks, country, countryside, sticks. Wilderness which is preserved, untouched, undisturbed habitat is the language that people understand and want to use to protect these precious lands.

At the public comment meeting in Billings, Mary Erickson seemed to suggest that different activities (motorized, nonmotorized) could occur in different small subsections of the Pryors.. I totally understand the desire to serve everyone and perhaps I misunderstood but it seems this perspective does a disservice to the land itself and all its unique intact ecosystems and overarching landscapes that exist/complement/contrast with each other in the Pryors.

In summary, I urge you to implement Alternative D which would provide by far the best protection for the unique landscape and habitat of the Pryors. It truly is an irreplaceable treasure with its rare native plants, remote wild rugged mountains, deep daunting canyons, and quiet solitude - truly it would be

undisturbed wilderness to be cherished by generations to come. Please create and manage the Pryors as designated wilderness. Remember, once gone it can never be recreated.

THANKS YOU and your staff for the opportunity to comment and for all the hard work on this massive process!!!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Rita Harding". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name and address.

Rita Harding
PO Box 30324
Billings, MT 59107