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Access, Bikes Major Debates In Custer Gallatin Forest Plan Revision

By [RACHEL CRAMER \(/PEOPLE/RACHEL-CRAMER\)](/PEOPLE/RACHEL-CRAMER) • JUN 2, 2019

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(http://www.ypradio.org/sites/kemc/files/styles/x_large/public/201906/20190531_Lionhead_Rachel-Cramer.jpg)

The Lionhead Recommended Wilderness near West Yellowstone, Montana, is part of the Custer Gallatin National Forest, May 31, 2019.

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Access, Bikes Major Debates In Custer Gallatin Forest Plan Revision

The future of a forest stretching from West Yellowstone to South Dakota is reaching a pivotal point this week. The public comment period for the Custer Gallatin National Forest draft plan

(https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fseprd611313.pdf) closes June 6, and the perspectives on forest management seem to be almost as diverse as the forest itself. One of the main areas of debate is recommended wilderness.

West of Yellowstone Airport, evergreen forests spread across a rugged, mountainous terrain. Snow still covers the mountain bike trails that snake through the Lionhead Recommended Wilderness, an area that straddles the Idaho-Montana border.

As mountain biking becomes more popular and moves onto landscapes where they've never been before, who gets to use trails has become a hot topic of debate, especially as national forests work to update their management plans.

Ecoflight (<https://ecoflight.org/>) uses flyovers in small aircraft to advocate for land conservation. The non-profit teamed up with several mountain biking advocacy groups to offer journalists a half-hour flyover of the Lionhead, an area that highlights a point of contention in the bikes and wilderness debate.

“Getting in the airplane and looking at the big picture is helpful and that’s our mission,” says Bruce Gordon, a pilot who founded EcoFlight.

The area we're flying over is part of the Custer Gallatin National Forest. It's undergoing a new planning process that will shape management decisions for the next few decades.

If the Lionhead maintains its recommended wilderness status in the next plan, Congress could potentially turn it into an official, designated wilderness area in the future. This means mountain bikers would not be allowed to use the trails.

“The Lionhead is currently accepting bicycle use, but our only way to keep it the way it is, is to redesignate it into a backcountry area as opposed to a recommended wilderness area,” says Ian Jones, the president of Southwest Montana Mountain Bike Association (<https://www.southwestmontanamba.org/>) (SWMMBA).

The Forest Service is considering five alternative plans and will choose one of those or can mix and match. Alternative E would manage the Lionhead as a backcountry area

(<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/54aabb14e4b01142027654ee/t/5ce4465708c0a00001000000/1568444444/Vision.pdf>), which means mountain bikers could still use the trails.

“As it comes to mountain bikes on trails, SWMBBA’s belief is that they don’t pose any more risk to wildlife or to trail users than an individual hiker,” says Jones.

At a trailhead near Bozeman, Phil Knight says he’s a mountain biker, but he doesn’t think they should be allowed everywhere.

“To just say there’s no impact is ridiculous because there is some. How much that is, is a matter of debate. Any human presence on the landscape has impacts on the wildlife. But when you have people that are moving fast and covering more ground, you’re going to have more impact,” Knight says.

Knight represents Montanans for Gallatin Wilderness (<http://www.gallatinwilderness.org/>), which supports Alternative D with the most recommended wilderness, including the Lionhead, along with the 150,000-acre Hyalite Porcupine Buffalo Horn Wilderness Study Area in the Gallatin Range.

Knight points towards the Gallatins.

“This is part of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. It’s the one mountain range that extends into Yellowstone National Park that doesn’t have designated wilderness. The others do,” says Knight.

Knight says adding more wilderness will protect wildlife habitat and make it possible for hikers and horseback riders to experience an undeveloped landscape.

Barb Cestero’s office at the Wilderness Society is in a residential neighborhood in Bozeman.

“Those of us who live here in Bozeman are super lucky in that we can start hiking in Hyalite and walk all the way down the spine of the Gallatin Range, deep into the northwest corner of Yellowstone National Park, and never cross a road until we get to road into Madison Junction. That’s our backyard,” says Cestero.

The Bozeman-based organization is one of about a dozen conservation and outdoor user groups that make up the Gallatin Forest Partnership (<https://billingsgazette.com/outdoors/bozeman-group-proposes-forest-consider->

more-wilderness-wildlife-management-areas/article_4e190ba6-354c-5e46-a76a-7cd703657d8f.html). The partnership created a plan specific to the Gallatin and Madison Ranges, which the Forest Service included in Alternative C.

Cestero says their plan mostly locks in place what already exists.

“Really I think the biggest change is that there will be some certainty. People will still be able to ride their mountain bikes and snowmobile down in this Porcupine Buffalo Horn area, and we won’t see a lot of new roads and a lot of new trails and a lot of development that will degrade the wildlife habitat,” says Cestero.

But the partnership’s plan does propose a few changes. A little over half of the Hyalite Porcupine would be managed as recommended wilderness, stretching from Hyalite Peak to Yellowstone National Park’s northwest border. No commercial timber harvests, mining leases or road construction would be allowed. Mountain bikes and motorized vehicles would continue to have access in areas where they do today.

The rest of the Hyalite Porcupine would be managed as backcountry and recreation emphasis areas. The plan would maintain recommended wilderness status for the Lionhead area but add corridors to ensure future access for mountain bikers if it became designated wilderness.

Near Four Corners west of Bozeman, Kerry White takes a break from working in his machine shop. White is a representative in the Montana Legislature and the executive director of the advocacy group Citizens for Balanced Use (<https://balanceduse.org/>). He says he’s opposed to all of the proposed forest management plans because they recommend road closures.

“The Forest Service over the last 20 years has -- in Montana alone -- has closed nearly 22,000 miles of road (<https://leg.mt.gov/content/Publications/Committees/interim/2015-2016/hj13-finalreport-roads-land-big-game-harvest.pdf>), and this forest plan is, all the alternatives propose to close even more access when the public really is demanding increased access to our forests,” says White.

That statistic is from a study report (<https://leg.mt.gov/content/Publications/Committees/interim/2015-2016/hj13-finalreport-roads-land-big-game-harvest.pdf>) White requested from the Environmental Quality Council in 2016, which White is a member of.

The Custer Gallatin Forest manages about 1,500 miles of road. The alternative plans propose removing between 5 and 85 miles.

White says roads help the young and elderly and people who are disabled or can't hike long distances access places in the backcountry. He says roads also help with the management of weeds, wildfires and search and rescue efforts.

"Will CBU litigate? We will see if our comments or the comments from multiple use folks will be listened to. We will see if the Forest Service complies with the laws and regulations as they go through the forest planning process, and we will probably be filing objections," says White.

Mariah Leuschen-Lonergan, a public affairs specialist with the Custer Gallatin National Forest, says they've received around 5,000 comments already.

"We have five different alternatives out there, but it's not a voting process," says Leuschen-Lonergan. "Why is it that you like that alternative? What would you like to see added to in that alternative, or what piece of scientific information do you have that we didn't use or that we may not be aware of?"

The 90-day public comment period on the Forest Service's draft plan ends at midnight June 6.

Leuschen-Lonergan says they'll spend several months going through all the comments before working on the revised plan and environmental assessment. She says they hope to have that version available next spring. Previous commenters can object before the the final plan is released.

Electronic comments can be sent here (<https://cara.ecosystem-management.org/Public/CommentInput?project=50185>). Comments delivered by mail can be sent to the Custer Gallatin National Forest Supervisor's Office, 10 East Babcock, Bozeman, MT 59715.

Table 2. Forestwide comparison of issues by alternative

Issue	Alternative A	Alternative B	Alternative C	Alternative D	Alternative E
Recommended wilderness number	7	9	9	39	0
Recommended wilderness acres	33,741	113,952	146,555	711,425	0
Backcountry area number	3	9	12	1	2
Backcountry area acres	38,414	125,090	252,896	5,937	173,266
Recreation emphasis area number	0	8	8	4	12
Recreation emphasis area acres	0	178,094	208,718	34,649	213,258
Stillwater complex acres	0	102,945	102,945	0	102,945
Miles motorized trail no longer available	0	0	4	172	0
Miles mechanized trail no longer available	0	0	20	256	0
Acres winter motorized recreation use no longer available	0	0	24,885	232,985	0
Forested acres suitable for timber production; percent Custer Gallatin National Forest	665,247 22%	582,338 19%	570,146 19%	553,950 18%	604,502 20%
Forested acres unsuitable for timber production but where timber harvest may occur for other purposes; percent Custer Gallatin National Forest	523,883 17%	592,261 19%	563,839 19%	246,127 8%	608,056 20%
Bison	No plan direction	Proactive bison support	Proactive bison support	Most proactive bison support	Less proactive bison support
Bighorn sheep disease prevention Permitted use of domestic sheep or goats (grazing or outfitting)	No plan direction; risk assessment per policy.	Not allowed in Pryor, AB, or MHG GAs. Risk assessment elsewhere.	Not allowed in Pryor, AB, or MHG GAs. Risk assessment elsewhere.	Not allowed forestwide	Risk assessment
Bighorn sheep disease prevention Public use of recreational pack goats	No plan direction	Not suitable in Pryor, AB, or MGH GAs. Suitable elsewhere.	Not suitable in Pryor, AB, or MGH GAs. Suitable elsewhere.	Not suitable forestwide	Suitable forestwide
Bighorn sheep disease prevention Agency use of domestic sheep or goats for weed control	No plan direction; risk assessment per policy.	Risk assessment	Risk assessment	Not allowed forestwide	Risk assessment
Connectivity	No plan direction	Plan components and key linkage areas	Plan components and key linkage areas	Plan components and key linkage areas	Plan components
Aircraft landing strip acres	1,021,650	937,310	907,300	0	938,591

GA = geographic area; AB=Absaroka Beartooth Mountains Geographic Area; MHG=Madison, Henrys Lake, and Gallatin Mountains Geographic Area

(http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/kemc/files/styles/x_large/public/201906/CustGallatin-Plan-Comparison-Chart.png).

Comparison of the five Alternatives in the Custer Gallatin National Forest draft plan.

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