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Comments:

Even though I now live in Miles City, I was raised on our family's place in the Clarks Fork Valley between Belfry and Cody, Wyoming. A brother and I still own the family farm/ranch, which has been in our family since it was homesteaded over 100 years ago. Growing up I hunted and fished in the nearby Custer National Forest, which is just a few miles from our place. I'm now 65, and a lot has changed, not only within the national forest, but in the regions surrounding it. Many of these changes, due to the stewardship of land and wildlife managers, have been for the better. The diversity and abundance of wildlife now is remarkable. Our 450 acre farm/ranch now has species of wildlife passing through it that I never saw growing up - whitetail deer, elk, black and grizzly bear, and wolves. At the same time that wildlife is coming back, I believe a much higher number of citizens have been able to access public lands via both federal land policies and simply better off-road equipment. It would be a great time to be a young man once again.

But we can't rest on our successes. Much of the gains that we have seen over the past fifty years are due to federal/state laws that provide protection to land, water, air, and wildlife; and also to the diligence of federal employees who carry out these laws. This needs to continue or we will go down the same path we did decades ago when safeguards were not in place or not enforced.

I also realize that those of us who live or own property in the region often times see this as our land, to do as we see fit on it - hunt, fish, log, hike, graze cattle, or use off road vehicles. But it's not. National forests belong to every citizen, not just to those of us who frequent them.

After what I believe has been a careful review of the options listed, I believe that Alternative D is the best all-round option available due to several factors. I believe additional wilderness is critical to protect both current habitat for the grizzly bear, but also to move forward with efforts to eventually connect the northern population of bears with those in the Yellowstone region. I believe this is our best option to genetically diversify the bears so they can be finally removed (without challenges) from the endangered species list. This is one more step we need to take to continue our decades long efforts to fully restore this species. Continued isolation of bear populations a problem that needs to be fixed.

Wilderness and the protection of our wildlife is perhaps the best thing we can do to continue to grow our second leading industry in Montana - tourism. One needs to look no further than the recent legal killing of a park wolf near Cooke City to understand the importance of wildlife to that town's economy. Buffers are important for wildlife, and Alternative D is the best way to protect not only our wildlife, but enhance our tourism industry as well.