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Comments:

Encompassing more than three million acres, the Custer Gallatin National Forest in Montana is a stronghold for iconic wildlife species like grizzly bears, gray wolves, bighorn sheep, mountain goats, and moose, which are very sensitive to human disturbance and development, and are teetering on the brink.

As a gateway to Yellowstone National Park, the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness is home to Montana's tallest peak, the steep, rocky mass known as Granite Peak, which tops out at 12,799 feet. The 155,000-acre Hyalite Porcupine Buffalo Horn Wilderness Study Area (HPBH WSA) in the northern Gallatin Range adjacent to Yellowstone National Park is one of the crown jewels of the Northern Rockies and a stronghold for threatened wildlife. Meanwhile, the Lee Metcalf Wilderness is distributed across the Madison Range in southwest Montana. Elsewhere on the Custer Gallatin National Forest, remote buttes and bluffs stretch across southeastern Montana all the way to northwestern South Dakota.

As part of the Forest Plan revision process, the Gallatin Range-stretching from Bozeman to Yellowstone National Park-including the HPBH WSA, is particularly at risk of being sacrificed as a motorized and mechanized recreational playground for the exploding populations of Big Sky and Bozeman.

Wilderness recommendations in Alternative D of the draft forest plan, with the suggested improvements outlined below, would offer the best protection for the Gallatin Range and other critical wildlife habitat across the Custer Gallatin National Forest.

Alternative D creates 39 Recommended Wilderness areas totaling over 711,000 acres, including the Gallatin Range, Lionhead, Crazy Mountains, Bridger Range, Cowboys Heaven, Deer Creeks, Line Creek Plateau, Emigrant Peak, West Fork Rock Creek, Red Lodge Creek, Pryor Mountains, and Tongue River Breaks.

I support the wilderness recommendations in Alternative D of the Revised Draft Forest Plan; however, they must be improved by adding the entire 230,000 wild, roadless acres of the Gallatin Range as Recommended Wilderness in the final forest plan. The following three points also expand on the importance for the wild Gallatin Range.

The plan should prohibit all motorized and mechanized uses, and any other activities not consistent with wilderness protection, in the Recommended Wilderness areas so as to preserve their wilderness qualities until Congress acts on the wilderness recommendations.

The draft plan has little direction for administering the Absaroka-Beartooth and Lee Metcalf Wildernesses. The current wilderness management plans allows destructively large groups of up to 25 head of stock (horses and mules) and 15 people in most areas. Research shows that impacts increase significantly when group-sizes exceed eight head of stock and 12 people. The Forest Service should reduce group size limits accordingly so as to protect all Wildernesses on the forest from harm. Further, the forest plan should put an end to ecologically destructive fish stocking in naturally fishless wilderness lakes, which significantly alters the areas' natural conditions.

The plan must address the issue of human and pack animal feces contamination of lakes and streams on the Beartooth Plateau in the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness. Eliminating fish stocking would likely go a long way toward solving this problem, but additional measures must be included if needed.

Thank you.