

July 18, 2008

Mary Erickson and Gallatin National Forest staff:

Please accept this as a substantive comment for Lionhead Bike Prohibition.

My name is Corey Biggers and I will be 51 this year. My wife's name is Jeannie. We both want to take this opportunity to thank you for making these trails available to bicycles. We have both very much enjoyed accessing Coffin and Sheep Lakes by bicycle. Riding the Sheep Lake trail before and after improvements has been an opportunity I wouldn't have missed for the world. We appreciate the Gallatin National Forest staff and their dedication to protecting the resource through the travel planning process.

Trail #214 Mile Creek and CDT trail. This trail was put in approximately 12 years ago with small diesel excavators. It was built to specifications that perfectly fit bicycle traffic. There are 20 to 30 switch backs on the Montana side that can be ridden. The trail uses reverse grades and has very few water bars. I have used this trail on a bicycle during archery season to access hunting areas at the back of the basin. Closing this trail to bicycles hunting the back basins during archery will literally cut off access to all but horse hunters because it will make getting downed game out before it spoils all but impossible.

The 214 CDT trail as a shuttle ride from Mile creek up over and out 215 Watkins Creek is one of the best bicycle rides available anywhere. It is invaluable to us as individuals. In 2007 I rode it August 12th and August 27th. The first 3 or so miles of 214 is heavily used by equestrian during hunting season and appears to have some foot traffic during summer months but after you start climbing the switch backs the trail use is very limited. I have cleaned trees, rocks, and debris from the trail on every ride. The trail sees more bicycles than any other uses. It has been ridden by bicycles since it was built. Hikers are rarely seen more than 4 miles up. I am reasonably sure the builders of this trail used bicycles to access it.

Trail #215 Watkins Creek to the state line has also been used by bicycles as much or more than other traffic. The section below the 217 intersection has been used by ATV traffic and is more 2 track than single track. 215 above this intersection has also been built with reverse grades and has very little use, it is the perfect bicycle trail. I would guess it sees more bicycle traffic than hikers or horses.

#215 to #209 is the Coffin Lakes Trail, my wife and I have ridden this every year at least once since 2000. It is a beautiful alpine lake ride that is suited for intermediate to advanced riders and sees bicycle traffic all summer. It is a favorite for the West Yellowstone people and is recommended as a ride all summer long to people traveling through.

#218 Sheep Lake is a premier alpine lake ride. I first rode this trail with my wife in 2000. The trail had no switch backs in an area that climbed pretty much straight up for somewhere under a mile. Since then it has been rebuilt by mechanized means (small diesel excavator). It has several switch backs and is perfectly suited to bicycles. This trail has everything and it is my favorite alpine lake ride anywhere. I have encountered as many bicycles on this trail as I have hikers or horses.

#216 West Fork of Watkins Creek is a connector between #209 Coffin Lake and #218 Sheep Lake. It sees very little traffic of any kind. It will make for an epic loop but is strictly a hike and bike for approx 4 tenths of a mile above the 218. Once up on top and headed down towards trail #209 the trail is very bicycle compatible and a great ride.

Recap,

#214 Mile Creek
#215 Watkins Creek
#209 Coffin Lakes
#218 Sheep Lake
#216 Connector trail between #209 and #218

These trails are just a few minutes drive from West Yellowstone.
These trails are 1.5 to 2 hours drive from Bozeman.

The Coffin Lake ride and the Sheep lake ride are 2 of 6 alpine lake rides available (and able to be ridden) by bicycles in the Bozeman and West Yellowstone districts of the Gallatin National Forest. Hidden Lakes and Golden Trout Lakes in the HPBHWSA have trails to them but are a hike and bike.

With 42% of the Gallatin National Forest closed to bicycles, isn't it reasonable to ask to keep this area open?

Yellowstone National Park, Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness, Lee Metcalf Wilderness, and Red Rock Lakes Wilderness comprise 3,509,444 acres that are off limits to back country bicycle travel close to Bozeman and West Yellowstone.

Sharing 23,000 acres in the Lionhead seems reasonable.

The people that ride bicycles on these trails are not the down hill, ramp building individuals that the environmental groups portray us to be. We are individuals that respect the environment, the Forest Service, and all the work you do to make it possible for us to use these trails. We have not been a visible user group, even though we have been riding back country trails for 25 plus years. We clean and try to maintain trails because we want to ride them another day.

A very viable solution that has been completely overlooked in Montana is alternative designations such as a National Protection Area or a National Conservation Area. My pick would be a National Protection Area. The RWA boundary now in existence does a great job of excluding the old mine. It appears to leave the harvestable timber and areas harvested in the past outside its boundary. The NPA would allow mechanized fire suppression, mechanized trail maintenance, bicycles, horses and hikers. In my opinion, a NPA is far better suited to protect this area than a Wilderness designation. It gives your agency far more management tools. With an NPA designation getting private support to help maintain trails would be a possibility. Jeannie and I own Rocky Mountain Truck Center and I can not think of anything I would rather support than shared trails and adopt a trail program would seem to me to be a win win for all of us. In this day and age of obesity trying to promote a healthy human powered recreation like back country bicycling is a positive step for our National Forests.