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Comments:

I first want to thank the Forest Service and its hard-working staff for taking this decision so seriously, a fact the Service made clear through its organizing of numerous public meetings throughout the state, many of which I attended.

With regard to the five alternatives presented by the CGNF, I am, generally, in support of Alternative D, as it provides the most protection for the CGNF habitats and landscapes that are important to me, my friends and family and to the wonderful diversity of species that live there.

Specifically, I am interested in protecting the ecological, geological and archeological resources of the Pryor Mountain range in south central Montana, and Alternative D gets closest to this goal.

This amazing (and remarkably unique) range has, historically, been overlooked and understaffed in terms of management, on-the-ground scientific efforts, and law enforcement. I know this because I grew up exploring the Pryors with my family. I learned to drive on Helt and Gyp Springs Roads, I had my first date and first kiss in Bear Canyon. I found my first fossil up on Red Pryor and held my first horned lizard near Stockman Trail. I love this place. And I'm not alone. But rarely did I ever see a ranger or people working on trails or fixing the plethora of shot-up signs or dismantling illegal fire rings.

It is no surprise, then, that with the recent merging of the Custer with the immense Gallatin national forest, concerns that the relatively small Pryor Mountain range will be further neglected; possibly even sacrificed for time and money's sake have intensified.

But I would argue that this amazing range deserves as much if not more attention and protection than CGNF's more western ranges because it is so small, and yet, is receiving as much recreation pressure in many areas as some of the better managed and patrolled Gallatin ranges.

What's more, while those more western CGNF ranges are big and impressive, they are ecologically homogeneous, with little variation in their overall floral and faunal diversity from one to the other.

The Pryors, meanwhile, include Montana's only red desert habitat and are home to more than 800 species, many of which are Great Basin species that find their northernmost limits in the Pryors, the only place they can be found in MT!

It's such a biologically important landscape, not to mention the fascinating geology and archeology that can be found there.

However, I am extremely worried that drastically increased, and often unregulated, motorized use in this range is turning this very special place (a place for which eastern Montanans should be so proud) into the south hills of Billings. A barren up-and-down of mud sculpted ruts and tire tracks. Please, don't let this happen.

The best way to avoid such a future for this gorgeous range is for CGNF to make its management a priority when considering alternatives.

Specifically, I ain't no dummy! The backcountry area designation just doesn't cut it. Not for a range with habitats and ecosystems as underrepresented in the CGNF as those in the Pryors. The range is home to everything from cutthroat trout to black bears to tiger salamanders to cave crickets to scorpions! Creatures you just can't find all in one range in other parts of the CGNF.

In fact, I recently received a grant to do some insect biodiversity research in the south Pryors because the plant communities there are so unique for MT.

What's more, Alternative D maintains almost all existing motorized and bike trails. So that loud crowd is not losing anything. That's reasonable! Let's celebrate and endorse reason and show the rest of the state that beautiful landscapes and a commitment to land stewardship are not the sole purview of places like Bozeman and Missoula. South central Montana has something special too: a little piece of the Great Basin and the desert southwest right here in the Big Sky state.

I thank you for your time and consideration of this comment.

Best wishes in your work ahead,

Marian L. Kirst