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Comments:

Please accept these comments on the Custer-Gallatin National Forest (CGNF) Draft Management Plan.

I am a retired person living in Montana. Over the last 30 years I have hiked in much of the area encompassed in the Draft Plan: the Crazy Mountains, the Absaroka Mountains, The Beartooth Mountains (including the A-B Wilderness), the Pryor Mountains, and in eastern Montana, Chalk Buttes, and Capitol Rock areas. The Forest encompasses a wide range of ecosystems and topography from the highest mountain range in the state with pristine lakes and peaks, to the magnificent and unique island ranges of the Crazies and the Pryors, to the arid jewels of Chalk Buttes and Capitol Rock in the east.

The CGNF is now facing an opportunity to plan for the forest for the next 20-30 years. It is my sincere hope that the CGNF plans for the long-term health of the forest and not for short-term political gains.

These special areas must be protected. They cannot be replaced! They must be protected to preserve the unique qualities of each area for the health of the ecosystems and wildlife, as well as for the future inhabitants of Montana and the country. Although the CGNF is located in Montana is the property of all citizens of this country. As the population expands, and unfortunately it will, it is critical the CGNF plan for the future.

All currently Recommended Wilderness Areas (RWA) should continue with that designation and should be managed as Wilderness. Motorized use should not be allowed in RWAs.

Additional areas that meet the criteria should also be designated as RWAs. The Pryor Mountains include landscapes and ecosystems that are underrepresented in the National Wilderness Preservation System. To help preserve the unique features of this island range, RWA designation should be extended to Bear Canyon, Big Pryor Mountain, Punch Bowl, and the Lost Water Canyon RWA should be enlarged. This is only accomplished in Alternative D. Other alternatives designate these areas as "Backcountry Areas". The designation, "Backcountry Area" is ambiguous and does not provide the level of protection needed and that an RWA designation would give.

As urban planners have discovered, if you build highways, they will be used and the addition of the highways does not lessen the congestion. The CGNF should learn a lesson from this and not open pristine areas to motorized use - it will not satisfy the demand.

Special attention should be given to access to these special areas. Population growth and changing vehicle technology are impacting areas across the CGNF. Many roads have deteriorated so that passenger cars, or even 4-wheel drive or high clearance vehicles do not have access. The Forest is for everyone, not just those who can afford ATVs. The CGNF must maintain access for more than ATV traffic. In the Pryor Mountains for example, the road to Dry Head Vista and the Crooked Creek road used to be accessible to passenger cars. This is now next to impossible. In the last couple of years the road to the Glacier Lake trailhead has been improved, and I applaud the CGNF for that improvement.

The CGNF must plan for the future. It must protect the magnificent areas within its jurisdiction so that wildlife and unique landscapes prosper, and that future generations may enjoy these areas as we have. If anything the standards for preservation should become more strict, not less so.

