

A Guide to Commenting on the Custer Gallatin National Forest Plan Revision

From the soaring peaks in the west to the badlands in the east, the Custer Gallatin National Forest (CGNF) encompasses some of the wildest lands in the Lower 48. Here is an overview of many of those places in the Custer Gallatin that we are aiming to protect in the Custer Gallatin Forest plan revision. We've included the recommendations that MWA will offer the Forest Service. Please join us in making the same recommendations.

The Lionhead (Henry's Lake Mountains)

The Lionhead area is one of the few places that was recommended for Wilderness in the 1987 Gallatin Forest plan. Characterized by outstanding natural beauty and sweeping views, this is the only place in the Custer Gallatin where the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail passes through. The Lionhead provides a range of habitat types from sagebrush to lush riparian areas to high alpine basins. It provides habitat for grizzly bears, moose, westslope cutthroat trout, elk, lynx, and sage grouse, providing a critical link between the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem and the High Divide. However, mountain biking has become established in this area, threatening its status as recommended wilderness.

MWA recommends that the Forest Service maintain the existing 22,800 acres of recommended Wilderness in the Lionhead, reflected in the no-action Alternative A. We would also like to see this area managed to allow foot and stock travel only, so that it may one day be eligible for congressional Wilderness designation.

The Gallatin and Madison Ranges

Securing lasting protection for the wildlands of the Gallatin Range has been an unwavering goal for MWA since its founding 61 years ago. From the cascading waterfalls and lush creek bottoms of Hyalite to the breathtaking views along the Gallatin Crest, this area is one of the most spectacular places in the CGNF. At the heart of the Gallatin Range is the 151,000-acre Hyalite-Porcupine-Buffalo Horn Wilderness Study Area (WSA). Lying between Yellowstone National Park and the Lee Metcalf Wilderness, this corner of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem is one of the few places left in the Lower 48 with nearly the full complement of species that were here 200 years ago when Lewis and Clark made their journey west. Among the species the Gallatin Range supports are grizzly bears, moose, mountain goats, wolverines, and the occasional lynx. Portions of the Gallatins also provide critical winter range for elk, bighorn sheep, and other big game. It's also an essential source of clean water for nearby towns, a recreational mecca, and a place for the residents of some of Montana's fastest growing communities to find solitude. MWA has been working with the [Gallatin Forest Partnership to](#)

[recommend 250,000 acres of conservation protections in the Gallatin Range, as well as in the Madison Range](#)

MWA recommends supporting the Gallatin Forest Partnership agreement, which is reflected in Alternative C.

The agreement asks the Forest Service to recommend Wilderness for 102,000 contiguous acres between Yellowstone National Park and Hyalite Peak, ensuring north-south connectivity. The proposed area encompasses the entire Big Creek drainage, Rock Creek, and Tom Miner basins – all of which include a diversity of lower elevation habitat popular with grizzly bears.

The GFP agreement also urges the Forest Service to recommend Cowboy Heaven and Quake Lake in the Madison Range as additions to the Lee Metcalf Wilderness Area. In total, we are asking the Forest Service to recommend Wilderness for over 124,000 acres in the Gallatin and Madison Ranges.

Let the Forest Service know you support the Gallatin Forest Partnership agreement.

The Crazy Mountains

Visible for 100 miles across the central Montana prairie, the Crazy Mountains are known for their stunning lakes and alpine peaks. The 83,000 roadless acres managed by the Custer Gallatin National Forest provide ample opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation. Before the arrival of European settlers, great leaders of the Apsáalooke (Crow) Nation, such as Plenty Coups, journeyed to Awaxáawe Pía, the Crazy Mountains, to pray for spiritual guidance. Their descendants still do today.

Montana hunters cherish this area for its outstanding elk and mountain goat hunting opportunities. The area also provides vital habitat for Yellowstone cutthroat trout, grizzly bears, and lynx.

MWA recommends the Forest Service manage the Crazies to protect their wilderness values and cultural significance. We would like to see no new expansion of motorized or mechanized trails. We also urge the Forest Service to manage the area in close consultation with the Crow Nation in order to protect and honor Crow reserved treaty rights and traditional cultural practices.

The Pryor Mountains

The Pryor Mountains, or Baahpuuo Isawaxaawúua, are a critical piece of the Apsáalooke peoples' traditional and contemporary homelands. The Apsáalooke are spiritually tied to

Baahpuuo Isawaxaawúua, where people continue to practice traditional cultural rituals, such as vision quests and medicinal plant gatherings.

The Pryor Mountains are as unique as they are wild. These mountains represent a truly one-of-a-kind convergence of three separate and distinct ecoregions: the Middle Rockies, Wyoming Basin, and Northern Great Plains. This confluence results in a biodiversity hotspot. The Pryors are home to many plants and animals found nowhere else in Montana, often representing the northern-most reach of their range, as well as species that are found nowhere else in the world. These uplifted limestone plateaus, featuring numerous caves and canyons, rise from the driest region in Montana and yet hold year-round snowfields atop Big Pryor.

MWA recommends that Forest Service protect the wild character and cultural significance of Bear Canyon, Big Pryor, and the Punch Bowl areas in the Pryor Mountains by managing them as recommended Wilderness, as reflected in Alternative D. We would also like to see the existing Lost Water Canyon Recommended Wilderness area expanded to 13,000 acres, also reflected in Alternative D. These four areas are not suitable for motorized recreation and mechanized recreation, both of which degrade the wilderness quality of the areas and threaten irreplaceable cultural values.

Absaroka-Beartooth Area

The Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness is a landscape of towering peaks, sapphire lakes, lush meadows, stunning sunsets, and spectacular night skies. Lee Metcalf described it as "this magnificent primeval expanse of nearly a million acres... a land of jewel-like lakes, clear cold streams, and picturesque waterfalls." Surrounding Absaroka-Bearthooth Wilderness are several roadless areas that have Wilderness-worthy qualities.

MWA recommends that the Forest Service manage the following places as recommended Wilderness as reflected in Alternative D: Line Creek Plateau (the entirety of the plateau), Red Lodge Creek-Hellroaring Plateau, North Fork, Strawberry Creek, Chico Peak, Emigrant Peak, and Dome Mountain. We also support managing Bad Canyon as a Backcountry area with no mechanized and motorized recreation as proposed in Alternative B.

Ashland Ranger District

The Ashland Ranger District is the largest contiguous block of land managed by any federal agency in eastern Montana. Like every piece of land in our state, this area is rich with indigenous history. The Sioux, Crow, and Cheyenne peoples all have historic ties to this part of the forest, though none with as strong a contemporary relationship as the Northern Cheyenne Tribe. The Tongue River Breaks, directly east of the Northern Cheyenne Reservation, are particularly important to the Só'taétaneo'o and Tsitsistas people. After being forcibly removed from their homelands and detained in Oklahoma and Nebraska in the 1870s, the ancestors of the people now known as the Northern Cheyenne walked back to the Tongue River Breaks and

homesteaded the area. The Ashland District is also deeply connected to Montana's cattle drive history, and to this day boasts one of the largest cattle grazing systems in the nation.

Characterized by bright red sandstone hills, thick stands of ponderosa pines, and open meadows of sage and beautiful wildflowers, this district is important wildlife habitat for all kinds of critters, in addition to being a backbone of the local cattle grazing economy. Three areas -- the Tongue River Breaks, King Mountain, and Cook Mountain -- are roadless and have been managed for their primitive foot-and-hoofstock opportunities alongside thoughtful grazing for the last 30 years.

MWA recommends that Tongue River Breaks, King Mountain, and Cook Mountain be recommended for wilderness, thereby protecting the incredible natural landscapes and indigenous cultural values, while still allowing ranchers to administer essential components of their grazing permits.

Sioux Ranger District

The Sioux Ranger District is the smallest of the Custer Gallatin's ranger districts. This district is comprised of eight small parcels on the prairies of far eastern Montana and northern South Dakota. What this district lacks in size it makes up for in height: these areas are all characterized by impressive sandstone outcroppings and stands of pines rising dramatically out of the surrounding prairies. The area is rich in archeological and paleontological resources and offer many opportunities for solitude. Chalk Buttes, in particular, provide unique and rewarding hiking opportunities that are unique in the far southeastern corner of our state.

MWA recommends that this place be managed as a "backcountry area" prohibiting motorized and mechanized recreation, as reflected in Alternative D.

Management of Recommended Wilderness

Recommended Wilderness areas (RWAs) should be managed to protect their wilderness character and the potential for Congressional designation in the future. RWA management can also improve the wilderness character of an otherwise outstanding area, so that it may qualify for future designation. This means allowing foot and horse travel only. Recreational uses that do not conform with the Wilderness Act -- such as mountain biking, snowmobiling, OHV riding, and other mechanized and motorized uses -- are not allowed.

MWA recommends that the forest service adopt clear standards that prohibit non-conforming uses in RWAs.

Suggestions for effective comments

- Be as specific as possible about the management you are supporting (e.g. “I support recommended Wilderness for the Gallatin Crest because...”)
- Include things you want to see on the forest and things you don’t (e.g. “I want to see areas open to foot and stock use only because...”)
- Mention specific places (e.g. “I particularly care about the Crazies and the Beartooths because...”)
- Give reasons for your comments (e.g. “I want to see more areas protected on the Custer Gallatin because wilderness is a valuable resource that protects wildlife and clean water.”)
- Include your personal experiences or stories in your reasoning (e.g. “I want to see recommended wilderness in the Big Pryor Mountain area because I went there on a hike and it was the most beautiful place I have ever seen and I would like to take my children there someday.”)
- Avoid blanket general statements (e.g. “I think everything should be wilderness”) and instead, try to give the Forest Service specific, detailed thoughts, using the guidelines mentioned above.
- Remember that the Forest Service employees that are reading these comments are real people too. Be polite and avoid abusive or condescending language.