Part 1. Introduce yourself in a short paragraph (150 word maximum) that may include any of the following: your background, interests, goals, extracurricular activities. Also, identify a goal you would like to achieve within the next five years.

Part 2. In written form, use Option A or Option B prompt and quote as the subject of your essay. Note: Use font size 11; 1,000 words maximum, excluding the quote and prompt. Option A Quote: “Wilderness is not a luxury but a necessity of the human spirit, and as vital to our lives as water and good bread. A civilization which destroys what little remains of the wild, the spare, the original, is cutting itself off from its origins and betraying the principle of civilization itself.” - Edward Abbey, Desert Solitaire, 1968.

Background: The Wilderness Act of 1964 set the stage for Congress to designate Wilderness Areas. Montana has 15 Congressionally designated Wilderness Areas. Wild Montana has been involved in securing each of these designations. Wild Montana Sources: Public Lands 101 and Wilderness Areas. Prompt: What are your thoughts about what the author of the quote was trying to convey? Why do you think designated Wilderness Areas are important to our nation and to us individually today, 50 years after this quote? What do Wilderness Areas protect and what do they provide to us as public landowners and inhabitants of our planet? Refer to Wilderness Areas in Montana of special interest to you. Describe what wild public lands mean to you with a focus on Wilderness Areas.

Part 1:

Hi! My name is Reese Covington and I love being in the wilderness. I am an avid hiker, backpacker, trailrunner, backcountry and downhill skier, and camper. I’ve spent 3 summers volunteering with Montana Conservation Corps and the Montana Wilderness School assisting in research projects, maintaining and restoring trails, and caretaking the wilderness. I run Cross Country for Bozeman High School, work 25 hours a week at Target, and have volunteered over 180 hours as a peer tutor. I am planning to graduate from Paul Smith’s College in upstate New York with a degree in Forestry and Disaster Management and I look forward to applying those skills in a career protecting and serving the wilderness.

Part 2:

Edward Abbey wrote Desert Solitaire during his time as a park ranger at Arches National Monument. At the time, Arches was largely undeveloped and Abbey was able to really soak in and be a part of the wilderness. While much more remote and lonely than the work Park Rangers have today, Abbey still had a lot of experience working with a public that he was happy to see coming to the wilderness, but dismayed at how often they didn’t understand what the wilderness was. Injured or even killed because they treated the wilderness like an amusement park rather than a place to connect with the primal soul of humanity. His work serves as a bridge between the earlier nature writers, such as Henry David Thoreau and Mary Hunter Austin, and the modern environmental movement.
Like the earlier writers, Abbey advocated turning to wilderness to recharge our humanity, to become reconnected with nature and recenter ourselves. Remind ourselves how connected we really are to the wilderness. But his work contains real urgency. Even in 1968, Abbey could see the beginnings of what was to come: shrinking and polluted wilderness. Public access closed off. The wilderness being misunderstood and, as a consequence, damaged, degraded, destroyed. The damage humanity was and is doing to the environment was as real to Abbey as it is to us today. The loss of nature that we need to be fully connected to the world, even to be fully human.

The risk the wilderness faces is something that I am aware of. I’m part of the generation that sees this change happening before our very eyes. That sees the fields across the street from my house, where migrating elk from Yellowstone stopped every spring, now turned into a luxury home subdivision. Ancient footpaths to the public lands beyond are now closed off by someone who wants to be part of nature, maybe even thinks they are now, but they don’t understand. You can close an amusement park and no one really suffers. When you close off the wilderness, you kill a part of our ability to connect to the land. The elk have gone elsewhere, but they are running out of places to go to.

Abbey tells us to reconnect with nature, but he tells us that it has to be done with respect. I’ve spent summers with the Montana Conservation Corps in the Lolo National Forest and the Bob Marshall Wilderness, breaking up illegal campsites, cleaning out trash, and repairing trails overused by people who don’t understand or respect why a switchback exists. I did this not for the volunteer hours, but because I understand what Abbey meant. We need these connections to nature to remind us what really matters. We aren’t called to the woods because it is like Disney World: a place to escape life and pretend, we’re called because it isn’t Disney. It’s real and we’re part of it, even when we leave it.

My passion is the wilderness. I’ve found myself and who I am hiking and camping in the Absarokas, the Bridgers, Glacier. I learned how much I love photography because I started taking photos in the wilderness. I learned that I can be a leader, bringing an injured teammate miles through the backcountry in the Bob Marshall Wilderness. I learned that I have something in common with Abbey, with Thoreau, with Austin, with anyone who sat on a log on a cool fall evening and watched the sun set behind a lake. Most importantly, I learned that I want to protect the wilderness that has given me so much.

I want a career working in, maintaining, and protecting the wilderness I hold so dear, which is why I’m pursuing a degree and a career in Forestry. Like Abbey, I want to issue a call to action, I want to call all the people of the world to come, walk in the woods, connect with nature, don’t treat it like a shabby activity, there just for your amusement, but for what it is: our connection to the world and its pulse, our connection to what makes us human. I want to teach people to understand.