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Revised Flathead Forest Plan Fails to Protect Wildlands, Fish and Wildlife

Conservation Groups Review Pending Flathead Forest Plan

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Kalispell, MT – Two conservation groups have reviewed a description of the revised Flathead Forest Plan and found the Plan lacking in the protection of wildlands, fish and wildlife. While a formal public release of the Plan is still pending, Swan View Coalition and Friends of the Wild Swan reviewed a description of it in the Biological Assessment the Forest sent the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service during recently completed consultation between the two agencies.

“Unfortunately,” said Swan View Coalition Chair Keith Hammer, “the agencies have abandoned overwhelming public comment and science supporting the Flathead’s current integrated road management plan. The current Forest Plan Amendment 19 restores habitat for bull trout and grizzly bears by removing damaging roads and their culverts.”

“The agencies are terminating the very programs they claim have helped increase the grizzly bear population and are necessary to conserve bull trout,” Hammer said. “The revised plan is an irresponsible rollback in essential protections and reflects the political haste to remove Endangered Species Act protections from the grizzly bear.”

“The revised Forest Plan removes key habitat parameters for streams and riparian areas,” said Arlene Montgomery of Friends of the Wild Swan. “It also relaxes the current requirement to annually monitor culverts left on closed roads to only monitoring them every six years. This all adds up to less protection for fish and water quality.”

“The Flathead is proposing less wilderness than it found wilderness-suitable and it is reducing protections for roadless areas,” Montgomery added. “These areas provide secure habitat for wildlife and cold, clean water for aquatic life and should be fully protected.”

The groups, along with WildEarth Guardians, put the two agencies on notice in November that they would sue over attempts to relax culvert monitoring requirements

from annually to every sixth year. "It appears they've hastily pasted the ill-conceived culvert plan into the Biological Assessment without full consideration of the impacts," Hammer said.

Following are some links to the Biological Assessment (BA) and other facts:

The 10/31/17 Biological Assessment of the Revised Plan can be found at:

http://www.swanview.org/reports/Biological_Assessment_Flathead_Forest_Plan_171031.pdf

A Description of the Preferred [Plan] Alternative - B Modified is on BA pages 11-20.

BA page 17 describes how "the revised forest plan would replace the 1986 Flathead National Forest plan in its entirety, including but not limited to A[mendment] 19, the Swan Valley Grizzly Bear Conservation Agreement, and other Flathead National Forest plan direction related to grizzly bears."

The BA pastes in the proposed 8-page Culvert Monitoring Plan between pages 285 and 286.

BA page 13 describes the 8 areas recommended for wilderness totaling 190,418 acres. This is 30% of the 644,847 acres the Flathead determined are suitable for wilderness recommendation (see page 6 at

https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprd3813568.pdf)

The overwhelming majority of public comments on the draft revised Flathead Forest Plan asked for the retention of Amendment 19 road/grizzly management and asked that all roadless wildlands be recommended for wilderness. This is documented in the 11/30/16 press release at:

http://www.swanview.org/newsroom/Flathead_Plan_Comments_Release_161130.pdf

The 11/15/17 Notice of Intent to File Suit over the Culvert Monitoring Plan is at:

http://www.wildearthguardians.org/site/DocServer/2017_11_15_NOI_Flathead_NF_Bull_Trout_w_Att_A-F.pdf

In response to a Freedom of Information Act request, the Flathead National Forest told Swan View Coalition it would post its revised Forest Plan Biological Assessment and FWS's Biological Opinion on the Forest's web site by December 1. It later decided to send the documents via CD and U.S. Postal Service to Swan View Coalition.

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