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Public Comments Reveal Tremendous Support for Wilderness and Wildlife in New Flathead National Forest Plan

Over 34,000 citizens ask U.S. Forest Service to protect all roadless lands as wilderness and protect habitat for grizzly bears, other wildlife and fish

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MISSOULA, MONT. – Public comments submitted on the proposed revised Flathead National Forest Plan show a groundswell of public support for protecting all remaining roadless wildlands as Wilderness, as well as maintaining requirements in the current forest plan to protect grizzly bear security and habitat for other wildlife and fish.

According to conservation and wilderness groups, at least 34,400 American citizens [1]– the vast majority of citizens who commented on the draft forest plan – urged the Forest Service to recommend all remaining roadless areas as Wilderness, and they supported maintaining promises made in the current forest plan to remove 500 miles of damaging roads to protect grizzly bear security and habitat for other wildlife and fish.

“It’s heartening to see this groundswell of public support grow from a grass roots Citizen revision proposal [2] to broad national support for more wilderness, more fish and more wildlife on the public’s Flathead National Forest,” said Keith Hammer, Chair of the Swan View Coalition. “Even the Forest Service acknowledged in its draft plan that managing roadless areas as wilderness is best for water quality, fish, and wildlife.”

The Flathead National Forest covers 2.4 million acres of public lands west and south of Glacier National Park in Montana. The previous Flathead National Forest plan was written in 1986 and the U.S. Forest Service expects a draft record of decision for the new plan to be released in June 2017.

On the homepage of the Flathead National Forest’s official website it says “the forest is the premiere destination for visitors looking to experience natural landscapes of the American West” and the forest is “celebrated for its water, wildlife, and wilderness.” [3]

The Flathead National Forest’s Draft Environmental Impact Statement stated that 96% of American’s like Wilderness and 70% of the American people want more Wilderness. [4] Such strong support for Wilderness and wildlands protection isn’t surprising.

For example, in 2001, 17,429 Montanans commented on the 2001 Roadless Rule and 78% were in favor of protection of roadless areas [5], while nationally more than 2.5 million citizens submitted comments on the Roadless Rule, with 95% in favor of protection of roadless areas. [6]

“The citizens who commented on the Flathead Plan were unequivocal. They want their wildlands protected and they want them managed like Wilderness until Congress acts. That means no motorized or mechanized vehicles or other incompatible activities,” stated George Nickas, executive director of Wilderness Watch.

“Wilderness provides the best protection for clean water, fish and wildlife in the most fiscally responsible way,” said Arlene Montgomery, Program Director for Friends of the Wild Swan. “The Flathead National Forest belongs to all people in the United States and they should be heard loud and clear in their support for protecting these wildlands.”

“It’s clear that the vast majority of Americans value Wilderness and want more of it. This was evident in the outpouring of support for wilderness recommendations for 500,000 acres of the Flathead National Forest. These areas provide quality habitat and clean water essential to wildlife and fisheries in the face of climate change”, stated Claudia Narcisco, conservation chair of MT Chapter Sierra Club. “We encourage the Flathead to produce a plan that protects all roadless areas and supports an economy that focuses on restoration in the areas that connect them.”

“The Flathead National Forest admits it can’t afford its current massive road network, and those roads are inflicting serious harm on grizzly habitat,” said Greg Dyson, Wild Places Program Director at WildEarth Guardians. “It’s time for the Forest to do what the vast majority of the public wants and say no to selfish motorheads who think they can drive everywhere. It’s time for the Forest to step up and protect grizzlies, bull trout and other wildlife that require habitat on the Flathead.”

SOURCES:

1. http://www.swanview.org/reports/Documented_34409_FFP_Comments.pdf
2. http://www.swanview.org/reports/Citizen_reVision_Flathead_Forest_Plan.pdf
3. <http://www.fs.usda.gov/flathead/>
4. http://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fseprd502199.pdf , DEIS Volume 2, page 56
5. <http://www.bigskylegacy.org/supporters.html>
6. <http://www.pbs.org/now/shows/408/rules.html>

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