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Conservation Groups Find Massive Road-Related Landslide in Sullivan Creek



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KALISPELL, MT - Swan View Coalition and Friends of the Wild Swan, local conservation groups that monitor the management of roads, fish and wildlife on the Flathead National Forest, found a massive road-related landslide into Sullivan Creek on July 16, 2014. They reported their findings to State and Federal agencies in a letter on July 21, documenting how the Sullivan Creek logging road has contributed to the landslide and alleging it violates federal laws by damaging water quality and “critical habitat” that is key to the survival of threatened bull trout. See the letter and photos at: http://www.swanview.org/reports/Sullivan_Landslide_SVC-FOWS_140721.pdf and video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=951cOSt1wV8>

The groups determined the landslide occurred sometime since July 2013 and that poor design and maintenance of ditches and culverts contributed to the landslide. “This is a road built on an unstable hillside to begin with,” said Keith Hammer, Chair of Swan View Coalition. “Then the Forest Service failed to install enough culverts to drain the ditch, causing runoff to instead perk beneath the road and lubricate this landslide. It was a ticking time bomb.”

Hammer had recently written the Flathead National Forest about its draft Travel Analysis Report, where it is identifying which roads it should keep and which roads it should decommission. He provided ample evidence that the Flathead must decommission more roads and not simply demote them to Maintenance Level 1 Basic Custodial Care where they will not receive needed maintenance.

See http://www.swanview.org/reports/SVC_on_FNF_dTAR_140711.pdf

Hammer says “The Flathead National Forest is lying when it says it can simply demote most of its roads to minimal maintenance and that those roads can be safely stored. The Flathead and other National Forests have determined roads need to be decommissioned and problem areas fixed before they can be safely stored for any length of time. Sullivan Creek is just one more example of what goes horribly wrong with logging roads.”

“The Fish and Wildlife Service requires annual monitoring and maintenance of culverts and ditches on closed forest roads to protect bull trout,” says Arlene Montgomery, Program Director of Friends of the Wild Swan. “If they cannot do this then the road should be made hydrologically secure so it doesn’t pose a threat to fish or water quality.”

“Bull trout need cold, clean water to survive and reproduce, and Sullivan Creek is the best bull trout spawning stream in the South Fork Flathead outside of the Bob Marshall Wilderness,” Montgomery said. “These roads need to be decommissioned, not simply gated shut and ignored.”

The groups’ July 21 letter notes this is not the first road problem to occur in bull trout habitat in the South Fork. They cite a 1995 survey conducted by Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks that found 52 culverts partially plugged or undermined and 13 culverts blown out in bull trout streams in the South Fork Flathead.

“The Forest Service will forever downplay the great liability these roads are to the American taxpayer and the environment,” Hammer concluded. “The risks are much higher than the benefits on most of these old remote logging roads.”

“It’s much better to make the investment in removing these roads rather than suffer the consequences,” Montgomery concluded. “This landslide is an unnecessary setback for water quality and native fish habitat.”

For higher resolution photos email keith@swanview.org and credit Swan View Coalition.

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