

Flathead National Forest Breaks Pledge to Maintain Grizzly Bear Habitat Security!

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Kalispell, MT - Two local conservation groups and an independent wildlife consultant are citing several Flathead National Forest projects and their supporting documentation to demonstrate the Flathead is breaking its pledge of maintaining the grizzly bear habitat and security that existed in 2011.

They find the revised Flathead Forest Plan pledged to maintain the on-the-ground grizzly bear habitat conditions that existed in 2011, in order to be consistent with the NCDE Grizzly Bear Conservation Strategy and plans to remove Endangered Species Act protections from NCDE grizzly bears.

Now, they find the Flathead says it will not maintain those levels of habitat security as it increases human development of bear habitat - and claims it isn't required to do so under its revised (2018) Forest Plan!

Swan View Coalition, Friends of the Wild Swan, and Independent Wildlife Consultant Brian Peck summarize this about-face in [their primary Objection to the Flathead's Hellroaring Basin Improvement's Project](#).

The Flathead admits the HBIP would reduce grizzly bear habitat security in Hellroaring Basin by constructing two new chairlifts, their service roads, new ski runs, and the thinning of forest hiding cover for glade skiing. The Flathead also admits that two mountain bike trails to be built in Hellroaring Basin, among the 28 miles being constructed under the already approved Taylor Hellroaring Project, will also displace bears from their habitat.

The Flathead nonetheless attempts to make it look like this is consistent with its pledge to maintain the level of 2011 grizzly bear habitat security, a 1995 requirement to maintain bear security in Hellroaring Basin on the south side of Big Mountain as Whitefish Mountain Resort was expanded to the north side of Big Mountain, and the revised Forest Plan's condition to provide increased grizzly bear security in the Hellroaring watershed. It does so by **saying it will maintain its 2011 baseline security parameters, but then intentionally not quantifying the additional displacement of bears and not measuring it against those parameters, making it appear the 2011 baseline is not being degraded.**

The Objectors find this same "phony numbers" system is being applied to all projects being implemented under the revised Forest Plan, masking the on-the-ground impacts of scores of miles of new logging road construction, the construction of 79 miles of new mountain bike trails, and ski area developments like those in Hellroaring Basin. **Objectors list five ways in which impacts to bears are not being included in, and hence limited by, the 2011 baseline security parameters:**

1. Allowing unlimited miles of non-motorized trails to be constructed with no trail density standard - or 2011 Baseline parameter - to limit them.
2. Allowing unlimited miles of non-motorized "high-use" trails to exist in the Secure Core Baseline parameter by redefining the previous Plan's Amendment 19 "Security Core" in order to allow them to go undetected in the revised Plan's "Secure Core." "Security Core" did not allow such high-use trails.
3. Allowing an unlimited mileage of roads - by not including roads with the entrance simply rendered "impassable" to motor vehicles in Total Road Density, even though the road will be retained as a road and continue to contribute human impacts to grizzly bear habitat. This was not allowed under Amendment 19, which required that roads had to be reclaimed and no longer function as roads or trails, motorized or non-motorized, to be omitted from TRD.
4. By not including Special Use Permit roads that are on Forest Service land, and often simply closed by gates, in calculations of TRD.
5. By allowing road construction and the relaxing of road closure types to diminish the amount of "security habitat" greater than 500 meters from roads simply because that habitat does not already remain in blocks of at least 2,500 acres. This is essentially a license to further fragment already fragmented habitats and further relegate security habitat to higher elevations rather than allow it to persist in critical lower elevations such as Hellroaring Basin.

Objectors ask for a new Environmental Impact Statement to look at the cumulative impacts of the many projects being implemented under the revised Forest Plan, the degradation of bear habitat and security going unaccounted for, and to reinstate the former Plan's Amendment 19 with modifications to insure that it does not allow impacts to bears to go unaccounted for.

"The Flathead's phony numbers scheme is deceitful and allows unchecked human development of grizzly bear habitat," said Swan View Coalition Chair Keith Hammer. "The security numbers they show the public admittedly don't include the impacts of planned developments like mountain bike trails, new logging roads and ski area expansions. It's disgusting."

"The Flathead is arbitrarily ignoring the Forest Plan requirement to maintain grizzly bear security in the Hellroaring Basin in favor of increased development, recreation, roads, logging and habitat fragmentation," said Arlene Montgomery of Friends of the Wild Swan. "This also impacts lynx, wolverine and other wildlife."

The Objectors' primary and supplemental Objections, along with the Flathead's Exhibits they cite can be found at:

http://www.swanview.org/articles/reports-documents/flathead_nf_breaks_promise_to_maintain_grizzly_bear_habitat_security/274

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