



WILDERNESS WATCH

Keeping Wilderness Wild

November 19, 2018

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Objection Reviewing Officer Bitterroot Travel Plan
USDA Forest Service
26 Fort Missoula Road
Missoula, MT 59804

Sent via Email to appeals-northern-regional-office@fs.fed.us

Dear Objection Reviewing Officer:

Please accept the below objection and comment regarding the Forest Service's 45-day objection period for the *Record of Decision Bitterroot National Forest Travel Management Planning Project*. Wilderness Watch is a national wilderness advocacy organization, headquartered in Missoula, Montana, dedicated to the protection and proper administration of the National Wilderness Preservation System. Congressionally designated wilderness study areas (WSAs), like the Sapphire and Blue Joint Wilderness Study Areas, are also within the mission of Wilderness Watch. Wilderness Watch members use and will continue to use the Sapphire and Blue Joint WSAs for outdoor recreation and professional pursuits, including hiking, wildlife viewing, and wildlife study. As more fully described below, we support a complete closure of the WSAs to mechanized transport. The court found a lack of clarity on the Record of Decision and asked the agency to clarify its decision. Allowing mechanized use anywhere within the WSAs would adversely affect Wilderness Watch's organizational interests, as well as its members' use and enjoyment of these WSAs.

Introduction

We recognize the unique circumstances surrounding this objection period, including the fact the final ROD was issued in 2016. As such, we refer in this objection to the ROD rather than a draft ROD (or DROD). The agency "determined that all interested parties should be allowed to provide input on this issue, regardless of whether they previously commented." Our specific objection is input to the process to support keeping a complete closure, including the trails in the two WSAs, to mechanized transport. This would include trails the agency may have "inadvertently omitted" in various tables. This is apparently what the Court ordered the agency to do in this instance.

Preserving Wilderness Character

Mechanized transport is antithetical to Wilderness or preserving wilderness character. The overarching legal mandate of the Wilderness Act is to preserve the wilderness character of each Wilderness. Preserving wilderness character is the essential key to keeping alive the very meaning of Wilderness in America. Wilderness is a place where nature rolls the dice, a place untrammelled by our intentional meddling. We have opportunities for reflection, freedom, risk, adventure, and mystery if we approach Wilderness with humility and restraint. Key to this, Wilderness is a place to experience our connection to the larger community of life a place that forever remain in contrast to modern civilization, its technologies, and contrivances.

Mechanized transport is one of those contrivances. It is explicitly prohibited in the Wilderness Act. We concur with the decision in ROD to close the two WSAs to mechanized transport. The FEIS, ROD and supporting materials make a strong case for this to be done. Indeed, the ROD summarizes on page 25 the reasons to close the WSAs to mechanized use:

After carefully considering the available options for maintaining the wilderness character in the Sapphire and Blue Joint WSAs as it existed in 1977, I have decided to close these areas to snowmobiling and other over-snow vehicle uses. I am also prohibiting summer motorized use and bicycling as well. I believe we have an obligation to manage WSAs for those social and ecological characteristics to preserve wilderness character. These actions assure that Congress' intent for these areas will be honored while preserving their potential for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System.

The Forest Service is required by the 1977 Montana Wilderness Study Act to maintain “presently existing wilderness character and potential for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System” for the WSAs, including Sapphire and Blue Joint. Case law and internal agency direction also reaffirm this point. The supporting materials concluded that mountain biking was “non-existent” in the WSAs in 1977. As such, the Forest Service made the correct and only legal decision to close the WSAs to mechanized use.

Maintaining the mechanized closure would be important for wildlife movement and connectivity. For example, the Sapphire Range is a likely route that grizzlies would use to re-inhabit the Bitterroot grizzly recovery area, including the Selway-Bitterroot and Frank Church-River of No Return Wildernesses.

Even though the ROD and FEIS make a strong case for the closure to mechanized travel, the court asked for clarification on specific trails. It may also be important to re-emphasize that mechanized use is prohibited in the WSAs year round, and that trail closures don't mean that mountain bike use is allowed off-trail.

Remedies¹

¹ While the objection is limited to mechanized use on trails in the WSAs, allowing mechanized or motorized use on a trail that begins outside of Wilderness or a WSA but crosses into Wilderness or a WSA will mostly likely prove to be unmanageable.

1- Reaffirm the existing ROD that closes the Blue Joint and Sapphire WSAs to mechanized use.

2- Clarify, if warranted, that the decision applies to the entire WSAs, and not just the specific trails mentioned in the October 2, 2018 letter re-initiating the objection period.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gary Macfarlane". The signature is fluid and cursive, written over a light grey rectangular background.

Gary Macfarlane
President