



WILDERNESS WATCH

Keeping Wilderness Wild

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Mission Mountains Wilderness targeted for heavy-handed manipulations

Missoula—Wilderness Watch filed a formal objection to the Forest Service’s (FS) *Mid-Swan Landscape Restoration and WUI Project*. This 15-year project entails widespread habitat manipulation in the Mission Mountains Wilderness in northwest Montana. It also approves 17 miles of new roads and almost 18,000 acres of commercial logging across a 272-square-mile area of the Flathead National Forest, between the Swan Mountains Crest and the northern portion of the Mission Mountains Wilderness.

The FS claims its ill-conceived project will benefit terrestrial and aquatic biodiversity and reduce wildfire, but opponents see it as a massive make-work project that will further fragment wildlife habitat, exacerbate climate change, and trammel the Mission Mountains Wilderness. More than 14,000 Wilderness Watch members and supporters opposed the project during the last public comment period, which ended in October 2020.

The highly controversial project—with the FS igniting fire from helicopters across 5,887 acres of the Mission Mountains Wilderness (plus 7,800 acres of recommended Wilderness) and selectively planting white bark pine across 1,860 acres—violates the fundamental tenets of the Wilderness Act and strikes at the heart of Wilderness as a place free from intentional human intervention. And this massive landscaping project threatens not only the Mission Mountains, but would set a dangerous precedent for other Wildernesses.

“The Wilderness Act prohibits manipulating Wilderness—like what the agency proposes for the Mission Mountains—for good reason. Wilderness is meant to be shaped by natural processes, not gardened into what land managers want,” said Gary Macfarlane, board member of Wilderness Watch. “Wilderness Act author Howard Zahniser put it best when he implored us to be ‘*guardians not gardeners.*’”

The FS should allow the area’s natural processes to determine where and when fires burn, and what the distribution of white bark pine is. The agency claims burning and logging is needed to reduce wildfire risk to homes, but its argument fails to address climate change as the underlying cause of hotter fires, or protect property or lives since scientific studies show home ignition is determined by conditions in a home’s immediate area, not by conditions in

forests far from communities. Trying to short-circuit an evolutionary process of tree adaption is not only likely to fail, but may further endanger white bark pine across the landscape since rust is highly adaptive and would likely overcome trees previously thought to be rust resistant.

This project raises the very question of whether we allow Wilderness to persist into the future. It's not the Forest Service's job to decide what the Mission Mountains Wilderness looks like now or at some time in the coming years; nature alone gets to determine what happens in Wilderness.

View our objection: <https://bit.ly/3BBx0nS>

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