

WILDGROUNDS TO PLAYGROUNDS: THE GALLATIN FOREST PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT

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Summary of Findings

The Gallatin Range in southwest Montana is an important component of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem and is the largest unprotected roadless area in the ecosystem. There is a long history of support for protecting the Gallatin Range as Wilderness, including passage of the Montana Wilderness Study Areas Act that established the 155,000 acre Hyalite-Porcupine-Buffalo Horn Wilderness Study Area. In 1994, future GFP member the Greater Yellowstone Coalition proposed 210,000 acres of Wilderness in the Gallatin Range and future members the Montana Wilderness Association and The Wilderness Society supported similar amounts of Wilderness.

The Gallatin Forest Partnership (GFP) and its Agreement (GFPA) is a “forest collaborative” formed for the purpose of influencing the outcome of the National Forest planning process and revision of the Custer Gallatin National Forest Plan. They intend to enact their proposal with federal legislation. This approach is known as “place-based” collaboration specific to individual Ranger Districts, National Forests and watersheds.

The record shows that the GFP is a coalition of the willing. Those supportive of maximizing Proposed Wilderness in the Gallatin Range based on the best available scientific information were overtly told they were not welcome and other groups in the Bozeman area were not invited, including Sierra Club and the Gallatin Wildlife Association. In fact, members of the Gallatin Wildlife Association attended the first meeting and asked to be included but were not. Other organizations such as the Great Old Broads for Wilderness and Montanans for Gallatin Wilderness were also excluded.

The GFPA and the Revised Custer Gallatin Forest Plan are recreation-centric with far-reaching impacts on the wildlife and wilderness values of the Gallatin and Madison Ranges that include fragmentation of the Wilderness Study Area. The Revised Custer Gallatin National Forest Plan largely mirrors the GFPA, but the Forest Service took advantage of the GFP to further weaken protections for wildlife and recommended wilderness.

Despite the long history of wilderness advocacy and overwhelming public support for designating Wilderness in the Gallatin Range, the GFPA recommends only 92,000 acres of Wilderness, just 40% of the eligible acres. These are mostly in the higher and less-productive elevations. Dr. Frank L. Craighead wrote:

“Fragmenting the HPBH WSA into smaller pieces of protected habitat would greatly diminish its value for wildlife habitat and the provision of ecosystems services and could nullify its ability to function as a refuge from climate change.”

Despite this warning, the GFPA fragments the WSA and adjacent wildlands into four different designations that allow roadbuilding, logging, mining and extensive trail development for motorized and mechanized recreation.

The Custer-Gallatin Revised Forest Plan

Forest-wide, the Revised Custer Gallatin Forest Plan recommends just 139,425 acres of Wilderness out of the potential 1.1 million acres, or less than 13%. In the Madison-Henry's Lake-Gallatin Mountains Geographic Area the Revised Plan recommends 110,174 acres for Wilderness, 14.6% of the Geographic Area compared to 33.2% dedicated to recreation areas and 22% to timber production. While the Revised Plan significantly includes most of the recreation portions of the GFPA, for the Gallatin Range the Revised Plan recommends just 78,000 acres of the 155,000 WSA, or 50%, compared to the 92,000 in the GFPA. Much of the rest of the Gallatin Range is designated as "backcountry" or "recreation emphasis" while the GFPA had recommended backcountry areas as "wildlife management areas." For example, the Revised Plan carves two areas out of the WSA, a 26,496 acre "backcountry area" in the Buffalo Horn-Porcupine drainage and a 22,632 acre "backcountry area" in the West Pine drainage. Another 13,763 acres are designated "backcountry area" in the South Cottonwood drainage. Management in these areas is similar to what is allowed in the Wildlife Management Areas in the GFPA except that roadbuilding and mining are also allowed. The Madison Range also saw the proposed Lionhead Wilderness changed to backcountry.

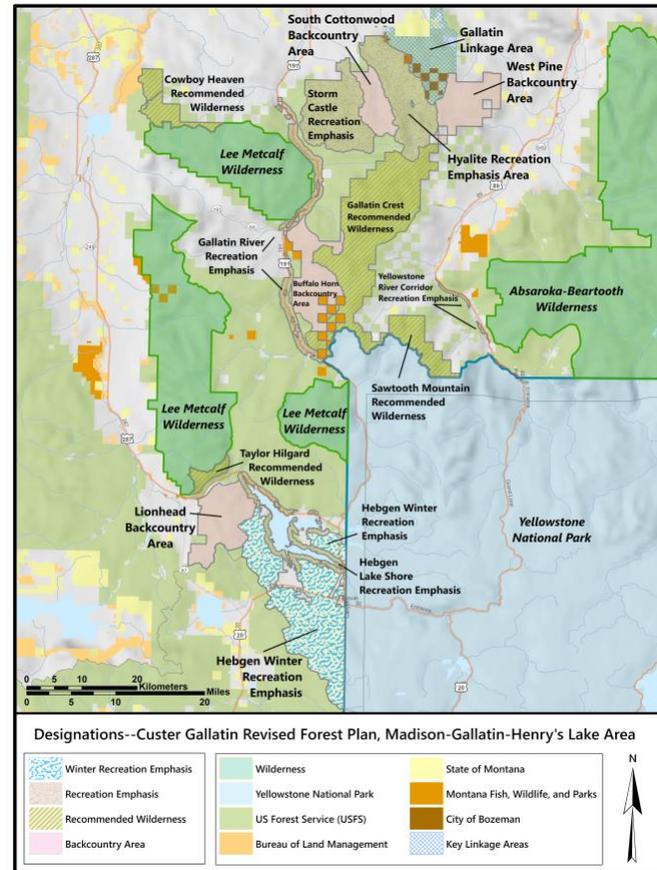
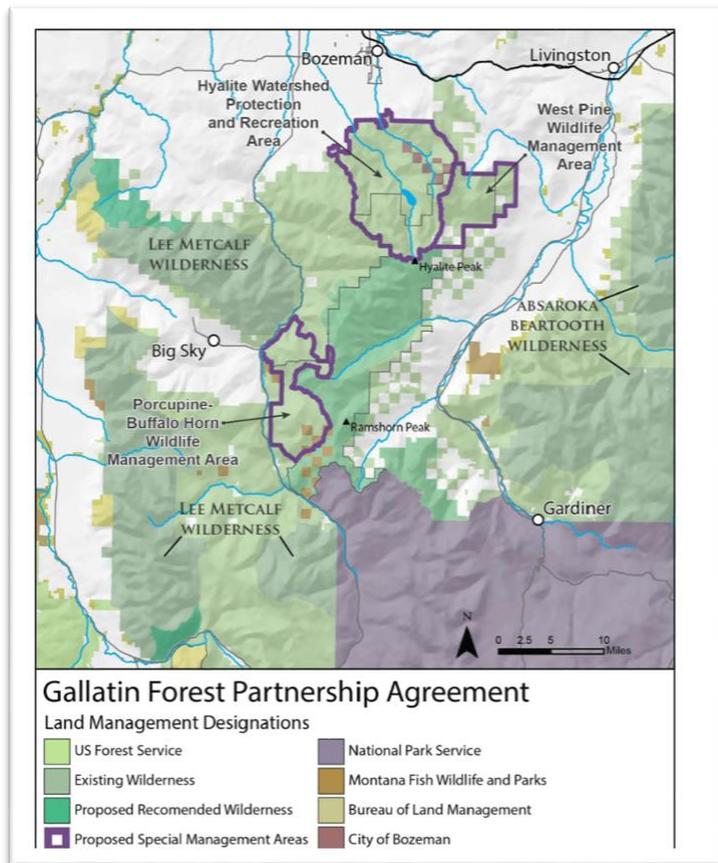


Figure 1. Designations in the Gallatin Forest Partnership Agreement (left) and the Revised Custer Gallatin National Forest Plan (right).

The Forest Service did not establish the GFP and has been careful to keep an arm’s length and vice versa, yet it is clear they were delighted as evidenced by the consistent praise for the GFP by the Custer Gallatin National Forest Supervisor Mary Erikson. She repeated this in the Record of Decision for the Revised Plan:

“While I did not incorporate the Gallatin Forest Partnership proposal in its entirety, I found the work of the Gallatin Forest Partnership to be the most compelling for this landscape... The plan includes backcountry areas in the Buffalo Horn, South Cottonwood, and West Pine areas, and a Hyalite Recreation Emphasis Area although with some different boundaries than the Gallatin Forest Partnership proposal.”

The Forest Service benefitted from having a collaborative with a green tint set a lower bar for Wilderness and wildlife which put conservation interests in a weak position in regards to the Revised Plan. The Forest Service took advantage by further weakening the GFPA protections. Nonetheless, GFP members had effusive praise for the final result. For example, Greater Yellowstone Coalition, which had once testified before Congress about opportunities for an “unbroken wilderness” from Bozeman to Yellowstone said:

“Overall, the new plan represents a balanced approach to managing the national forest’s 3-million-acre landscape. We commend the forest managers for including many of the collaborative solutions that GYC advocated for to protect our wild backyard for humans and wildlife alike. Included are protections for the Gallatin and Madison mountains that largely mirror the recommendations of the Gallatin Forest Partnership, of which GYC is a founding member. While not perfect, the new plan is a decisive win for public lands in the northern Greater Yellowstone...it represents a bright future for the Gallatins and beyond. This forest plan is a huge step forward, but it’s not the end of the road. Ultimately, it will take an act of congress to permanently protect the Gallatins.

While GFP founding members Greater Yellowstone Coalition and Montana Wilderness Association were once small-budget grassroots organizations that were stalwart advocates of Wilderness, today they are multi-million dollar organizations flush with foundation money. They have watered down their Wilderness proposals and Montana Wilderness Association even removed wilderness from its name to become Wild Montana.

Table 1. Shrinking Wilderness Proposals for the Gallatin Range as a Percentage of Eligible Acres. *

MWA 1986	GYC 1994	GFPA	Revised Forest Plan
171,000/202,000	210,000/210,000	92,000/230,000	78,000/230,000
85%	100%	40%	34%

*The amount of eligible National Forest lands has increased with land exchanges and GIS technology.

The record shows the GFP and its green member organizations are willfully ignoring the scientific information on the impacts on wildlife and wildlands resulting from increased recreation, particularly mountain biking. Dr. David J. Mattson and other leading grizzly bear scientists have analyzed the impacts of different forms of recreation on grizzly bears, finding that mountain biking is many times more likely to

result in a grizzly bear-human encounter. Dr. Mattson is well-known in the Greater Yellowstone area as the former Field Team Leader of the Yellowstone Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team.

World-renowned scientist Dr. Reed Noss and over 100 scientists and organization leaders including former Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt, former Yellowstone Superintendent Mike Finley, principal GYC founder Rick Reese, former GYC executive director Mike Clark and a host of former GYC program directors and MWA council members called for 230,000 acres of Wilderness for the Gallatin Range, stating that The Wilderness Act is the “gold standard” for protection of wilderness, wildlife and fish habitat and biological diversity.

The designations in the GFPA and the Revised Custer Gallatin Forest Plan are not well-suited to the unique landscape they are applied to and will fragment wildlife habitat and diminish the effectiveness of a key linkage between the Greater Yellowstone and NCDE. While paying lip service to the outstanding wildlife and unique ecosystem values, these resources will be negatively impacted by industrial strength recreation and naïve, improper broad-scale application of the Wildland-Urban Interface concept to portions of the WSA and adjacent remote roadless areas far from any “urban areas.” Rather than representing a broad cross section of interests, the GPF is a “coalition of the willing” and the “green” members of the GFP have willingly compromised their long enjoyed discursive legitimacy.