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Conservationists Challenge Abandonment of Grizzly Bear and Bull Trout Protections In Flathead National Forest

New Plan for Flathead National Forest Could Fragment Wild Habitat for Grizzlies and Discards Longstanding Wildlife Habitat Standards

Kalispell, MT – Two Montana conservation groups have notified the U.S. Forest Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that a newly revised management plan violates the Endangered Species Act by abandoning longstanding protections for key grizzly bear and bull trout habitat in the Flathead National Forest.

The 2018 Flathead Forest Plan purports to maintain habitat conditions that existed in 2011. However, the plan actually abandons key measures that have protected grizzly bear and bull trout habitat on the Forest for more than two decades, allowing new roadbuilding and wildlife disturbances in formerly secure habitat.

Swan View Coalition and Friends of the Wild Swan have notified both agencies that they will file a lawsuit challenging the 2018 Plan's abandonment of wildlife protections if the agencies do not correct their legal violations within 60 days.

"By abandoning the cap on new roads and eliminating the provisions to remove roads, this new plan harms bull trout and native aquatic life," said **Arlene Montgomery of Friends of the Wild Swan**.

"When road culverts inevitably fail they dump sediment into streams that will clog spawning beds. The Flathead doesn't have the budget to maintain its existing road system, so they should be reducing the miles of road on the Forest instead of degrading habitat for wildlife and fish."

"The Flathead is abandoning road removal, the true habitat restoration it says is helping recover grizzly bears and bull trout," said **Swan View Coalition Chair Keith Hammer**. "It is replacing that with road building and logging and trying to call that restoration. We don't buy it and the science doesn't support it."

NEW ROADBUILDING THREATENS HARM TO GRIZZLY BEARS AND BULL TROUT

The Flathead National Forest encompasses 2.4 million acres of public land in northwest Montana, including large areas of public land adjacent to Glacier National Park. The Flathead therefore provides key habitat for the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem population of grizzly bears, whose range extends from the Park southward down the spine of the Northern Rockies, as well as a significant stronghold for the region's threatened bull trout.

Seminal grizzly bear research in the 1990s demonstrated that the presence of roads in grizzly bear habitat, and the motorized and non-motorized intrusion those roads allow, harm bears' survival. Researchers found that even roads closed to the public can displace bears from otherwise secure habitat because bears learn to avoid such roads and the roads also facilitate motorized trespass and other human access. Roads also threaten harm to bull trout, because roads and the culverts that come with them can send sediment into the streams where bull trout live.

Recognizing these threats, the Flathead National Forest in 1995 adopted a Forest Plan provision called Amendment 19, which limited the number of roads the Forest Service could maintain in the Flathead. To meet this standard, the Forest Service was required to decommission some existing roads, as well as any new roads it built, through revegetation, culvert removal, and other measures intended to ensure the roads no longer function as either a road or a trail.

NEW PLAN PAVES THE WAY FOR MORE ROAD CONSTRUCTION IN THE BACKCOUNTRY

The new 2018 Forest Plan abandons this approach in favor of a requirement that the Forest Service claims will maintain the habitat security that existed in 2011. This new management direction is less protective of grizzly bears and trout, because in many parts of the Flathead, the Forest Service never achieved the standards and goals set by the 1995 plan and the new plan excuses that failure. The change further ignores broad public support for Amendment 19: fully 98% of public comments the Forest Service received during its planning effort supported retaining Amendment 19's road decommissioning program.

Also, the new plan does not actually commit to maintaining 2011 conditions. That is because it allows new road construction beyond 2011 levels so long as the Forest Service administratively closes the new roads by placing an inadequate barrier—even just a fallen tree—across the entrance. Such new roads would not be counted against total road limits in the Forest, even though such minimal barriers enable continued ATV and dirt bike use in grizzly habitat.

“This new plan is a stealth attempt to allow harmful new roads in key grizzly bear habitat, just as the Fish and Wildlife Service is talking about removing the Northern Continental Divide's grizzly bears from the endangered species list,” said **Josh Purtle, an attorney in Earthjustice's Northern Rockies office.**

Under the lax new plan, the Forest Service has already planned extensive new roadbuilding in the Flathead Forest. A new project proposed in the Swan Valley would build 60 miles of new roads and retain them on the road system indefinitely. By contrast, the Forest Service built only 3.2 miles of new roads in grizzly bear habitat over 14 years under the former, stronger plan.

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