

Wildlands Recovery Plan for the Flathead National Forest

**Swan View Coalition and Friends of the Wild Swan
March 2014**

Wildlands Recovery Plan Overview

Wildlands recovery on the Flathead National Forest (FNF) will be accomplished by decommissioning some of the roads that penetrate deeply into the Mission, Swan, Whitefish, and Flathead Ranges, as well as the Continental Divide, and by disallowing mechanized uses of trails in the Wildlands Recovery Areas.

This will help restore the connectivity of currently fragmented Grizzly Bear Security Core areas and provide similar habitat security for elk and other wildlife. It will also greatly reduce the potential for targeted roads to bleed sediment into streams, a number of which are key to native fish, including Critical Habitat for threatened bull trout.

The one-time investment in decommissioning roads will also save taxpayers money by eliminating the costly maintenance of those roads in perpetuity. (Rowley 1998). The Flathead receives only about one-sixth of the funds it needs to maintain its road system. (USFS 2004). The Flathead, like all other National Forests, is currently in the process of determining which roads it can afford to keep economically and environmentally, which “points to a smaller road system.” (Holtrop 2010).

This Recovery Plan will retain road access to most popular trailheads, while converting some roads to trails below current trailheads. This will increase hiking and horseback opportunities while protecting core wildlife habitats from high levels of use.

This Recovery Plan will be submitted to the Flathead National Forest for consideration in revision of the Flathead Forest Plan. Those who endorse this Recovery Plan urge the Flathead to recommend all roadless lands be designated Wilderness, to remove all mechanized use from the Recovery Areas, and to recommend the remaining portions of the Recovery Areas be designated Wilderness as selected roads are decommissioned.

Wildlands Recovery Areas Map

The Wildlands Recovery Areas Map on the following page shows the four FNF Recovery Areas on a Google Earth base, along with FNF overlays of Inventoried Roadless Areas, Forest Service Roads, already Decommissioned Forest Service Roads, Other Roads (State, County, Private), and Forest Service Trails both motorized and non-motorized. This Forest-wide map is followed by a discussion of Grizzly Bear Security Core, maps showing where it is improved by Wildland Recovery, larger scale maps of each Recovery Area, and links to a “zoom-able” on-line Recovery Areas map.

The Security Core maps quickly show where motorized use has either been disallowed or continues, while a look at larger scales of Recovery Area maps provide more detail.

Wildlands Recovery Areas Flathead National Forest

Whitefish Range >

Northern Swan Range >

< Hungry Horse East
Middle Fork
Skyland ^

Swan Valley >

Wildlands Recovery Area

Inventoried Roadless Areas

Forest Service Roads

Decommissioned
Forest Service Roads

Other Roads

Forest Service Trails

Compiled by Swan View Coalition
Using Forest Service Data
February 2014

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Grizzly Bear Security Core Maps

The two Grizzly Bear Security Core Maps on the following pages show how Security Core habitat is improved by Wildland Recovery. The first map shows how Security Core is currently fragmented by motorized use of roads and trails, as well as by high levels of non-motorized human use. Flathead Forest Plan Amendment 19 defines Security Core as areas at least 2500 acres in size and more than 0.3 miles from roads and trails open to motorized use or receiving 20 or greater parties of people per week not using motorized vehicles (such as hikers, mountain bike riders or horseback riders).

Roads must be legally and physically closed or decommissioned to remain in Security Core and cannot simply be gated. (USFS 1995).

The “Existing” Grizzly Bear Security Core Map is labeled to include three instructive examples of how Security Core is fragmented. From south to north on the map:

1. High levels of hiking, horseback riding, and river corridor use impact 0.6 mile wide corridors entering the Bob Marshall Wilderness on the South Fork and Gorge Creek trails, disqualifying them as Security Core. (Note that Security Core is mapped only a short distance into the Bob Marshall Wilderness because most impact assessments that use Security Core occur outside Wilderness areas. Security Core continues further into the Bob Marshall than the Forest Service map overlay shows).
2. A motorized “loop” portion of Alpine 7 Trail, from Thunderbolt Mountain to Sixmile Mountain is similarly “buffered” 0.3 miles on each side and disqualified as Security Core, along with the Wire and Sixmile trails descending toward Swan Lake. In contrast, the Bond Creek and Hall Lake trails that lie between them do not reduce Security Core as they descend toward Swan Lake because they are closed to motorized use.
3. Because Jewel Basin Hiking Area has easy, high-elevation road access via Camp Misery and is near human populations, it regularly receives high levels of hiking use during the summer. Hence, the most popular parts of Jewel Basin do not serve as Security Core habitat for grizzly bear and other wildlife.

These examples help illustrate why this Recovery Plan will remove all mechanized uses within the Recovery Area and pull roads back from a number of high-elevation trailheads, primarily on the eastern slopes of the Swan Range for example. This in part because the South Fork Grizzly Bear Study found the northern Swan Range population of grizzly bear to be declining at over 2% per year, enough to halve the population in about 30 years, while being an important population “source” to offset the population “sink” of bears dying in the more densely developed Swan and Flathead valleys. (Mace and Waller 1997).

The goal is to restore Security Core habitats for wildlife and to restore opportunities for un-crowded, non-mechanized recreation. The “After Wildland Recovery” Grizzly Bear Security Core Map shows how this can be accomplished provided steps are taken to help insure decommissioned roads do not simply become high-use non-motorized trails - such as by disallowing mountain bikes.

A satellite map of a mountainous region in Montana, showing the Flathead National Forest. A large, irregularly shaped area is highlighted in a light orange color, representing the Grizzly Bear Security Core. This core follows a major river system and its tributaries. Several specific areas are labeled with text and arrows pointing to them. The background is a detailed satellite image showing forest, mountains, and some developed areas.

Flathead National Forest Grizzly Bear Security Core

Existing 2012

Jewel Basin >
Hiking Area

Motorized
Trail Loop >

Gorge
Creek
Trail >

South
Fork
< Trail

Bob Marshall Wilderness

Image Land

A satellite map of a mountainous region in Montana, showing the Flathead National Forest. A large, irregularly shaped area is highlighted in a light orange color, representing the Grizzly Bear Security Core. This core area follows a major river valley and includes several smaller, disconnected patches of land. The surrounding landscape is a mix of green forested areas and brown, cleared or burned land. Numerous lakes and smaller water bodies are visible throughout the region.

Flathead National Forest Grizzly Bear Security Core

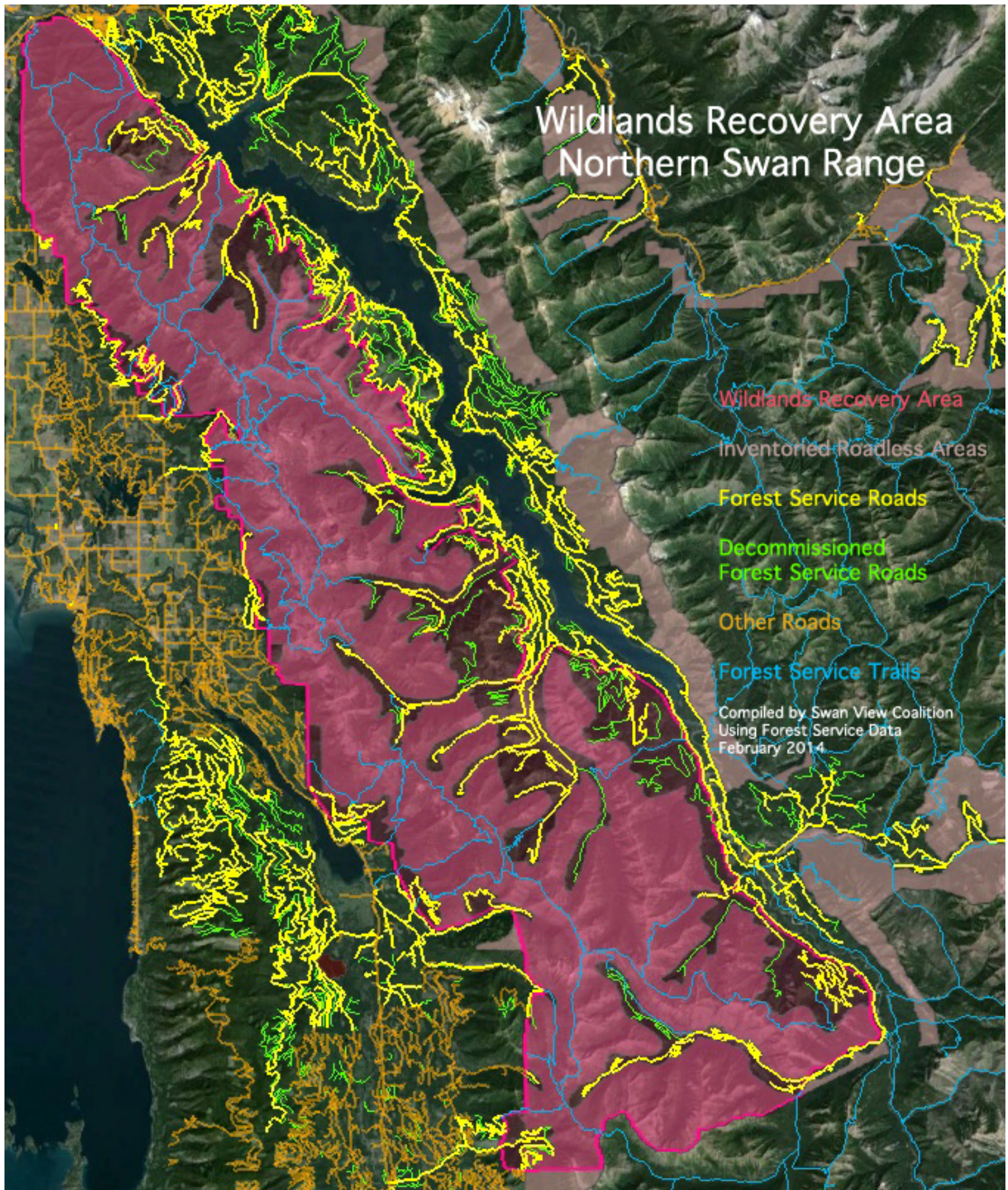
After Wildland Recovery

Image Land

Wildlands Recovery Area Northern Swan Range

- Wildlands Recovery Area
- Inventoried Roadless Areas
- Forest Service Roads
- Decommissioned Forest Service Roads
- Other Roads
- Forest Service Trails

Compiled by Swan View Coalition
Using Forest Service Data
February 2014



Wildlands Recovery Area Swan Valley

Wildlands Recovery Area
(Roadless Lands Not Shaded)

Inventoried Roadless Areas

Forest Service Roads

Decommissioned
Forest Service Roads

Other Roads

Forest Service Trails

Compiled by Swan View Coalition
Using Forest Service Data
February 2014

Image USDA Farm Service Agency
Image © 2014 DigitalGlobe

Imagery Date: 7/25/2013

Wildlands Recovery Area
Hungry Horse East
Middle Fork
Skyland

Wildlands Recovery Area

Inventoried Roadless Areas

Forest Service Roads

Decommissioned
Forest Service Roads

Other Roads

Forest Service Trails

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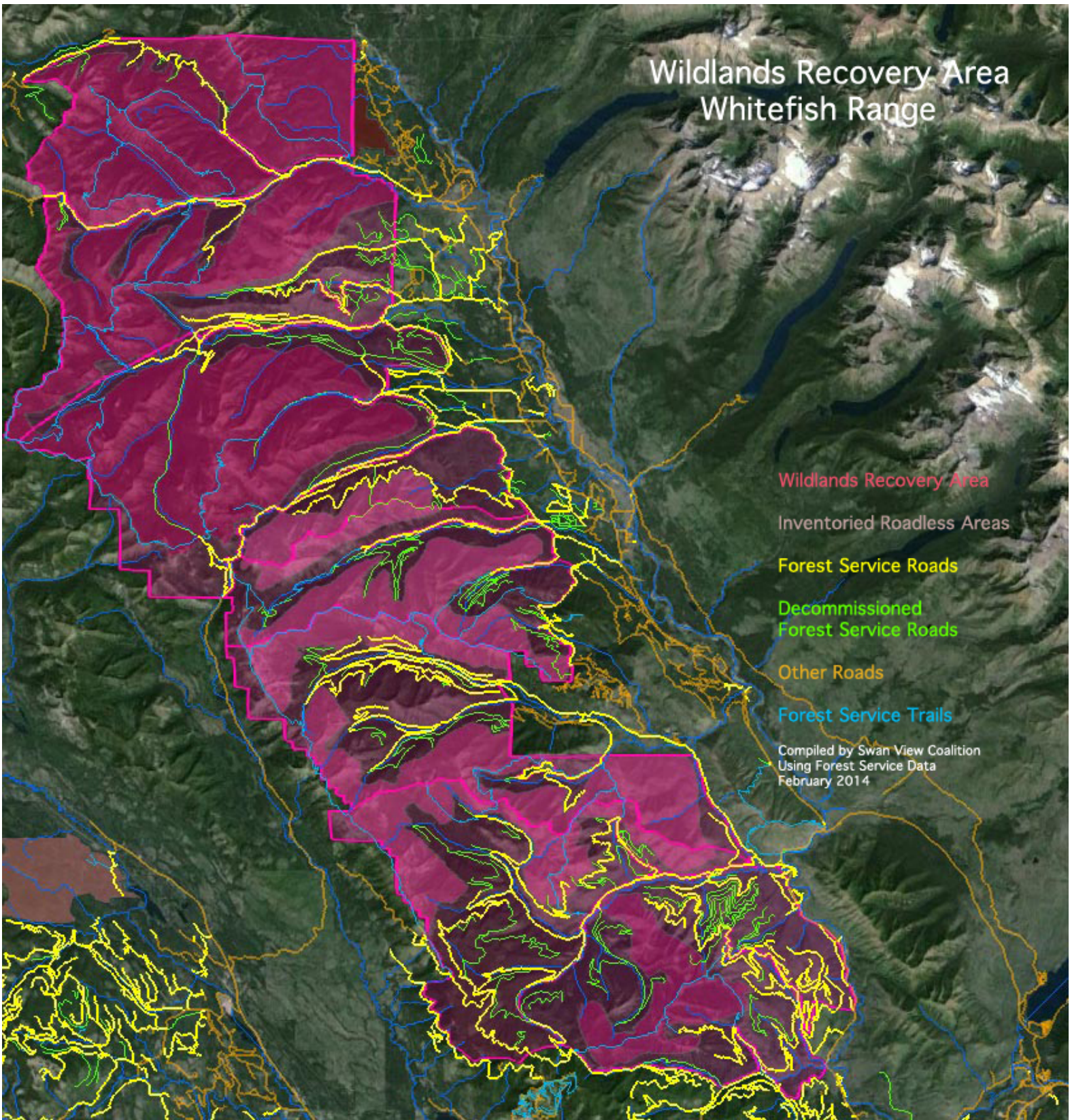
Image Landsat

Imagery

Wildlands Recovery Area Whitefish Range

- Wildlands Recovery Area
- Inventoried Roadless Areas
- Forest Service Roads
- Decommissioned Forest Service Roads
- Other Roads
- Forest Service Trails

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Interactive Versions of the Maps

The preceding maps show that roads and trails can exist in Security Core, provided they are legally and physically closed to motor vehicles. Flathead Forest Plan Amendment 19, however, prefers that the roads be fully decommissioned to simultaneously protect fish and water quality through the preemptive removal of all stream-crossing culverts and bridges before they fail. (USFS 1995). Fish and Wildlife Service concurs. (USFWS 1993, 1998a and 1998b).

The maps show quite a number of roads exist in Security Core that have not been decommissioned and that culverts and bridges remain at risk of plugging, collapsing and/or “blowing out” with dire consequences to fish and water quality. Viewing these map layers on Google Earth allows one to zoom in and see where culverts and bridges have or have not been removed - and clicking on individual Forest Service Roads displays pertinent road data including which roads are receiving what levels of maintenance when such funds are available.

Toggling various map layers on and off in Google Earth also allows one to discern greater detail and access more data than viewing the static maps we have included here. To view Google Earth versions of these maps:

1. Install Google Earth on your computer if you haven't already. It's free at:

<http://www.google.com/earth/download/ge/agree.html>

2. Download the necessary Google Earth KML or KMZ map overlay files from the Flathead National Forest web site at:

http://www.fs.usda.gov/detailfull/flathead/landmanagement/planning/?cid=fsm9_042517&width=full

The files you'll need to download from the Flathead National Forest web site are: Inventoried Roadless Areas, National Forest System Roads, Other Roads, Historical (Decommissioned) Roads, Trail Routes, and Grizzly Bear Security Core Areas.

Click on the desired .kml or .kmz link in the right-hand column and it should automatically download to your computer. When you double-click on that file on your computer, it should automatically start up and display that map layer in Google Earth, while also placing that file/map layer in your Temporary Places folder. When you Quit Google Earth, select the option to save your Temporary Places if you don't want to have to rebuild all the map layers again.

3. Download our FNF Wildlands Recovery Areas KML map overlay file at:

http://www.swanview.org/home/articles/reports-documents/kml_files_for_use_with_google_earth/183

As above, double-click on our .kml file to load and display it in Google Earth.

4. For an example of the many factors considered in delineating the Wildland Recovery Areas, see pages 6-13 of our more detailed Wildlands Recovery Plan for the Northern Swan Range. It can be viewed or downloaded at:

http://www.swanview.org/reports/Wildlands_Recovery_Plan_N_Swan_Range.pdf

Literature Cited

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