

**Highlights – Custer Gallatin West Zone Programs  
Hebgen Lake and Bozeman Ranger Districts  
Cavan Fitzsimmons and Lisa Stoeffler, District Rangers**

**General Overview**

Both of these Districts are located in Gallatin and Madison County in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. They cover roughly 750,000+ acres of National Forest system lands from the north end of the Bridger Mountains to Yellowstone Park and the Idaho state line. They encompass three of the four units of the Lee Metcalf Wilderness Area, the Cabin Creek Wildlife Management Unit and a significant portion of the Hyalite Porcupine Buffalo Horn Wilderness Study Area. They surround the communities of Bozeman, Big Sky and West Yellowstone as well as other private ownerships in Gallatin Canyon, Bridger Canyon and along Hebgen Lake.

**Trails**

Trail management and maintenance is a huge part of the program of work on these two districts and a large part of what makes them so popular with the public. Together we manage **1450 total trail miles**. Roughly **350 miles of these also serve as winter trails**. Of the summer trails, roughly 15% are located in the Lee Metcalf Wilderness and roughly 40% are motorized summer trails. Another unique aspect of the West Zone trails program is the many specially designated trails. The Hebgen Lake District has a section of the Continental Divide Trail running through it along the Montana/Idaho state line. The two districts also have eight trails designated as National Recreation Trails.

**Recreation**

The two districts manage **14 public rental cabins** which see tremendous use – more than 85% occupancy. These historic buildings also provide a unique recreation opportunity for the public. Campgrounds – **15 fee campgrounds** are managed by a Concessionaire. This program works very well, the campgrounds are well managed and heavily used. There are also **4 non-fee campgrounds** managed by the districts. These are more informal, with fewer amenities.

Recreation Residences – The districts administer roughly **160 private recreation residences** under permit on National Forest system lands.

Outfitters/Guides – The two districts administer roughly **75 permits for private outfitting and guiding businesses** on National Forest lands. These uses range from traditional hunting and fishing, to backpacking, ice climbing, snowmobiling and youth education trips.

Recreation Event Permits – The west zone hosts about **30 significant commercial recreation events** each year under permit. These include such events as the Bozeman Ice Festival, Fall Camp Nordic Ski training, the Ridge Run, the World Snowmobile Expo, mountain bike, dog sled and running races and Mountain Man Rendezvous.

Resorts and Camps – The zone also administers **three private resorts and one organization camp** under permit on National Forest system lands.

Hebgen Lake is a 13,000 acre impoundment constructed in 1915 as a part of the lower Missouri hydro-irrigation project. PPL Montana (soon to be Northwestern Energy) currently manages the dam and reservoir under permit from the FEC, and assists with some funding for recreation site development and maintenance.

Earthquake Lake and Visitor Center – Earthquake Lake was created after the 1959 earthquake that cause a massive landslide, resulting in 28 deaths and a 1600 acre newly formed lake. Today the Visitor Center and associated waysides interpret the dramatic stories behind the geology, survivors, rescuers and human interests surrounding the event. The Visitor Center underwent a major renovation in 2013 and is again open to the public and operated under a partnership with the Yellowstone Association. After the remodel, the visitor center visitation increased over 36% from 23,709 visitors in 2011 to 37,079 visitors in 2014. There is no longer a fee for visitors to enjoy this facility.

Hyalite Canyon and Hyalite Reservoir are the most heavily visited area in the Northern Region of the Forest Service. They receive an estimated 18,000 visitors a month during the winter and almost 60,000 visitors a month in the summer. The area has trails, campgrounds, cabins, water-based recreation, day use facilities and a new pavilion overlooking the reservoir. The dam is operated by DNRC and serves to impound water for irrigation and municipal use.

Bridger Bowl Ski Area – Bridger Bowl operates largely on National Forest system lands under special use permit. It hosts over 200,000 skier days per year on 2,000 acres of skiable terrain. Over the past 6 years they have expanded and upgraded with four new lifts and new facilities.

Nordic Skiing – The west zone hosts three Nordic ski areas either partially or fully on National Forest system lands. They are a huge economic driver in Bozeman, Big Sky and West Yellowstone. Rendezvous ski trails are managed in partnership with the West Yellowstone Ski Education Foundation and the Chamber of Commerce. Through improvements from RAC, RTP, USFS, and volunteers, the ski trails have experienced a 50% increase in use from 20,799 skiers in 2009 to 41,965 skiers in 2014. The ski trails are configured to host international qualifying events and races. Such events were utilized in determining the US cross country ski team for the 2013 Olympics as well as the junior nationals for 2014-15.

Snowmobiling—240 miles of trails are managed in partnership with Gallatin Valley Snowmobile Association and the West Yellowstone Chamber of Commerce snowmobile grooming committee. In West Yellowstone alone we average over 100,000 snowmobilers a season on the four trails that we are able to put data collection counters. West Yellowstone trails connect to a

large network in Idaho on the caribou-Targhee National Forest making it the largest network in the region.

### **Wildlife**

These two districts have responsibility for habitat management of over 300 species of wildlife, including threatened grizzly bears and Canada lynx and gray wolves, bald eagles and peregrine falcons. The Hebgen District plays a key role in the Inter-agency bison management group responsible for the complex and controversial management of Yellowstone bison. We work closely with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks on management of National Forest lands to support wildlife population goals and undertake vegetation and travel management projects in support of those goals.

### **Water/Fish**

The west side of the Custer Gallatin National Forest provides much of the headwaters for two internationally recognized blue ribbon trout streams – the Madison and Gallatin Rivers. We also manage miles of fishable streams that include rainbow, brown, westslope cutthroat, Yellowstone cutthroat and brook trout, arctic grayling and whitefish. The municipal water supplies for the City of West Yellowstone and the City of Bozeman also reside on National Forest System lands – these are Whiskey Creek, Hyalite Creek and Bozeman Creek.

Over the past 10 years the Forest has worked closely with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks to restore key native trout populations. This includes increasing the miles of occupied westslope cutthroat stream habitat. During this time, on the west zone we have added 189 miles of stream miles and 21 lake acres to the cutthroat trout recovery in the Upper Missouri River basin. Historically there were over 17,000 miles of occupied westslope cutthroat trout streams in the Upper Missouri. Today there are only 1,145 miles.

### **Range and Weeds**

The west zone manages an assortment of both cattle and horse grazing allotments. Overall there are 30 active allotments with more than 50 permits issued for grazing on more than 133,000 acres of National Forest system land. More than 7300 cattle AUM's are grazed each year on the zone and more than 1400 horse AUM's are grazed.

Noxious weed prevention and treatment are also a priority for the zone. Working with partners, contractors and our own staff, we treat more than 5,000 acres of invasive weeds a year. Emerging populations or new weed species are the priority for treatment. Our backcountry areas are relatively clear of noxious weeds and the crews work hard to maintain that condition. For many years the Forest has had a Weed Free Feed/Hay Order for all National Forest system lands.

## **Land and Special Uses**

The Zone administers over 220 special use permits that range from driveways and mailboxes on National Forest System lands, to municipal water systems and subdivision roads. The municipal watersheds for both the City of West Yellowstone and the City of Bozeman, as well as some of the associated water infrastructure, is located on National Forest System lands. The Transfer Station and sewer system at West Yellowstone is also located on National Forest land under a special use permit.

Much of the current land configuration in Gallatin County is a result of numerous land exchanges and purchases over the last 20 + years. This includes the consolidation of public lands in the Taylor Fork and along the Gallatin Crest and the private ownership in Big Sky. The Bangtail Mountains also went through a significant land exchange and consolidation with Big Sky Lumber, lands now held by RY Timber. Much of this land was harvested by Big Sky Lumber before coming into public ownership.

Currently a unique land sale is underway adjacent to the City of West Yellowstone. It would authorize the sale of 80 acres of National Forest to the City for municipal expansion needs, ranging from housing to industrial or infrastructure development.

## **Fire**

The Forest Service has the responsibility for all wildland and forested fire protection within and adjacent to the National Forest boundary, regardless of ownership. This includes DNRC lands, FWP lands and private lands in Big Sky, Bridger Canyon, Gallatin Canyon and the Hebgen Basin. This also includes the fire protection and suppression around hundreds of private homes within the wildland/urban interface in Gallatin and Madison Counties. The West Zone partners with 10 rural fire departments and one private fire department to offer fire protection and response. These are active relationships in which we train together and coordinate on response and fire prevention.

The West Zone experiences an average of 30 fire starts each year, with half of these being human caused and half being lightning. Large fire seasons are infrequent but can be significant in these fuel types, including the fire seasons of 2003, 2006, 2007 and 2012.

Smokejumpers and Heli-Rappellers – The West Zone hosts two regional and national fire fighting resources. The West Yellowstone Interagency Smokejumper base trains and staffs 22-30 smokejumpers each year, available for assignments around the country. It also houses an air tanker facility capable of resupplying both large and small air tankers. The helicopter base in Gallatin Canyon trains and hosts a staff of 10 rappellers and a nationally available large helicopter for use in fire fighting.

**West Yellowstone/Island Park Sustainable Fire Communities:** The Objective of this project is, long term and at a landscape level, to develop a sustainable fire-adapted social and ecological community that is resilient and accepting of fire, insect and disease disturbances.

This project involves two Ranger Districts, two National Forests, two Forest Service Regions, two Cities, two Counties and two States. Numerous grants and coordination has occurred with the project between fire districts and communities due to this project.

### **Vegetation Projects**

The West Zone has accomplished and is planning several larger vegetation management projects over the last 5-7 years. These have achieved a range of objectives including treatment of hazardous fuels, addressing forest insect and disease issues, providing wood products to local markets and supporting other project needs such as clearing for ski runs or roads.

- Recently Completed Projects or Projects Currently being Implemented: Hebgen Basin Fuels (933 acres), Taylor Fork Fuels (338 acres), Madison Arm Salvage (200 acres), Millie Roadside Hazard Salvage (300 acres), Bridger Bowl (250 acres), Gallatin Canyon North (2900 acres)
- Projects Awaiting Implementation or Currently in Planning: Lonesome Wood (3000 acres), Bozeman Municipal Watershed (5,000 acres), South Bridger Interface (250 acres), Rendezvous Trails (225 acres), Buck Taylor (10,000 acres), Campground Insect and Disease Reduction and North Hebgen.

### **Partnerships**

The zone has developed strong partnerships and relies heavily on these partnerships to complete a wide array of projects, work and service to the public. The following are just a few of the key partnerships:

**Town of West Yellowstone** – Frontier Trail

**University of Utah and MT Bureau of Mines and Geology** – Seismic monitoring

**PPL Montana** – Recreation, fish, wildlife projects and studies through FERC licensing

**The Yellowstone Association** – Interpretive sales and services at Quake Lake VC

**MT Fish, Wildlife and Parks** – Fish and Wildlife management and studies

**West Yellowstone Chamber of Commerce** – Groomed snowmobile/ski trail

management, recreation events

**West Yellowstone Ski Education Foundation** – Nordic ski trail management and grooming

**Gallatin and Madison County** – Invasive weed treatment, RAC projects, snowplowing Hyalite Road, roads

**Yellowstone National Park** – Facilities management, fire fighting, weed treatments, bison management

**Backcounty Horsemen, MT Mountain Bike Alliance, Wilderness and Recreation Partnership, Montana Conservation Corps, Big Sky Community Corporation, Continental**

**Divide Trail Alliance, MT Wilderness Association, Bridger Ski Foundation, Gallatin Valley Snowmobile Association, etc.** – Trail maintenance, grooming and construction

**Friends of Hyalite** – Snowplowing Hyalite Road, volunteer support, clean up days, general maintenance

**City of Bozeman** – Watershed restoration and protection, road and trail maintenance

**MDOT** - Snowplowing and road maintenance

**Montana Audubon** – Bridger Raptor Festival

### **Staffing and Organization**

The Hebgen Lake Ranger District has 14 permanent employees and 8-12 temporary employees in the summer months. The Bozeman Ranger District has 22 permanent employees with 12-18 temporary employees in the summer months. Many of these employees serve the entire zone and travel from West Yellowstone to the Bridgers to complete their work. The two District Rangers manage this combined staff under one umbrella and a consolidated program of work. Some of these employees also have responsibilities across the entire Custer Gallatin National Forest as specialists in their area.

The employee expertise includes fire prevention specialists, fuels specialists, fire fighters, visitor services clerks, wildlife biologists, foresters, weed and range specialists, trails technicians and managers, administrative staff, recreation planners and technicians and facilities maintenance.