

MEMORANDUM

Custer Gallatin Working Group Provides Major Contribution to National Forest Service Decision on The North Hebgen Multiple Resource Project

The Custer Gallatin Working Group (CGWG) is a collaborative established July 2014 to develop agreement around priority areas and approaches for project work on the Custer Gallatin National Forest and to help completion of those projects at a local level. The CGWG represents a wide range of stakeholder interests including County Commissioners, representatives of Conservation NGO's, the Skiing industry, Agriculture and Ranching, Quiet and Motorized Recreation, Hunters, Anglers, Outfitters, Mining, Economic Development and the Timber Industry.

The Forest- in- Focus (FIF) funding played an instrumental role engaging the Custer Gallatin Working Group and the general public. The CGWG formally began collaborating and interfacing with the Forest Service in 2015 on the North Hebgen Multiple Resource project. The CGWG members worked to educate themselves and the local community by organizing several informational meetings, which brought in speakers that were experts on topics such as Silviculture, Grizzly bear and ungulate habitat and fire prevention and mitigation. The group attended all Forest Service (FS) informational meetings and field trips. CGWG members had numerous meetings and interaction with the Custer/Gallatin Ranger National Forest to further understand the multidimensional aspects of the project. This education and information gathering process culminated in the CGWG writing comments to the Draft Environmental Assessment. The interface with the FS and the comment letter facilitated some changes in the Draft EA and promoted some additional ideas that will benefit the project and make it more acceptable to the public.

The CGWG interface with the FS and comment letter affected the final EA in these practical and identifiable outcomes:

- CGWG questioned the scientific reasoning to justify a treatment along Highway 191 at the Yellowstone Park boundary to create a Wildlife Safety Corridor. In response, the FS dropped this treatment from the project. In the interest of finding a solution to wildlife fatality on that section of road, the CGWG was the catalyst in organizing a meeting involving Montana Dept. of Transportation (MDoT), YNP, Custer Gallatin National Forest, MFWP, Montana Highway Patrol and the Gallatin county Commission. As a result of that meeting, MDoT is already in the process of implementing a seasonal nighttime speed restriction. In addition, representatives will continue to explore and consider other options that are reasonable in cost and have high success ratio such as signage, lighting, education and real time alerts to the public and truckers.

- CGWG raised concern of the miles of temporary roads planned for construction and the way these roads would be decommissioned. In response to those concerns, the FS is reducing the number of miles of temporary roads from 21.1 down to 15.6, resulting in a reduction of 5.5 miles. The FS will be accomplishing this by eliminating one helicopter treatment and changing three helicopter treatments to hand treatments, which will not significantly affect the viability or commercial potential of the entire project. The FS is taking a stronger approach to decommissioning temporary roads because of the concern of the effectiveness of closure of these roads in the past. In this project, the FS is committed to adequately using closure devices and decommissioning methods that will impede travel to unauthorized use when the timber contract is completed.

- Because the unique whitebark pine stands in the area are an important indicator of general forest health and an important indicator of habitat of wildlife especially Grizzly bears, CGWG has from the outset advocated for long-term monitoring of these treatments to insure that data obtained from this project can help in the design of future projects. CGWG is currently expending resources and coordinating a project between the FS, Rocky Mountain College and CGWG. This project would establish baselines and monitor the effect of the treatment on these stands with a citizen science monitoring and educational component.

-CGWG had great concern over the proliferation of invasive weeds because of this project and a perceived lack of commitment from the FS to manage any weed increase long-term. In response to CGWG comments, the FS is writing into the document a quantitative commitment to keep the weed level at or below 3% of the landscape in the project area. CGWG will also work with the FS and the Gallatin County Weed district to revitalize the Upper Madison Weed Management District to insure that noxious weeds are not passing from the project to private land and vice versa.

-CGWG has provided financial help that funded many activities which lead to the letter of support for the North Hebgen Project. CGWG and its members provided in-kind match of \$8450 through donated time, travel, rooms, etc. A grant of \$15,000 is being secured from FIF of which approximately \$8000 will be used for white bark pine monitoring in the North Hebgen District. The engagement of the CGWG helped to secure \$75,000 through Forests in Focus funding to assist with the North Hebgen project.

CGWG thanks the National Forest Service for their close working relationship to help our members and the public in understanding and analyzing the project. The comments submitted resulted in changes and adjustments to the project, which the CGWG considered improvements to the project.

Approved by CGWG Membership on January 24, 2017