

November 26, 2013

Natural Resources Defense Council

Dear Associate Deputy Chief (Reviewing Officer),

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Kootenai Forest's 2013 Land Management Revision (Forest Plan), its accompanying Final EIS and Record of Decision, and to file Objections to these documents. We ask that you fully consider our concerns, and incorporate the changes we recommend into a more biologically and legally defensible Forest Plan.

In the substantive comments that NRDC filed on the Draft Forest Plan, we expressed the following major concerns:

(1) The Draft Forest Plan's view was heavily skewed toward a motorized, mechanized, industrial future that would fracture the ecological integrity of the forest, while almost entirely dismissing Wilderness opportunities and the habitat connectivity that comes with them.

(2) The Plan's consideration of Inventoried Roadless Areas was guided by the Northern Region's 2003 Wilderness Needs Assessment – a document so subjective and arbitrary that its clear intent was to minimize the elevation of Inventoried Roadless Areas (IRA's) to Recommended Wilderness wherever possible.

(3) The Plan engages in a Wilderness Evaluation process that largely elevates Manager Preferences over Protecting the Wilderness resource, and in so doing, ignores the stated intent of Congress.

(4) The Kootenai's stated intention to treat insect and disease outbreaks and employ "timber harvest for resource purposes" in a number of IRA's made it clear that the Forest intended to ignore the 2001 Roadless Rule's prohibition on logging or roading in IRA's.

(5) Despite repeated references to the importance of large habitat blocks, landscape connectivity, and the role of Wilderness in achieving both, the Plan functionally leads to the exact opposite – a fractured landscape with a few comparatively small, isolated Recommended Wilderness "islands" in a sea of roads, "general forestry", and mechanized/motorized "Backcountry". Such a landscape paints a bleak picture for the future of the Cabinet-Yaak's (CYE) 42 grizzlies.

Unfortunately, our reading of the Final Plan and its supporting documents indicates that the Forest didn't seriously consider or adopt any of our recommended solutions. In fact, despite our extensive comments on grizzlies and their habitat needs, we find no reference to these in the Grizzly Bear section of Appendix G. In the following sections, we detail our concerns, our objections to the way in which the Kootenai handles these issues, and specific solutions for the future.

(I). The overarching theme of the Plan would create a Forest with little commitment to Inventoried Roadless Areas, Wilderness, wildlife security, or habitat connectivity and too permissive of roads, logging, and motorized/mechanized use of landscapes (winter and summer).

(A) Under Preferred Alternative B Modified (Alt. B) we find the following allocations of the Forest:

- * Motorized Use of the forest: 74%
- * Available for snowmobile use: 87%
- * Available for Mechanized use (Ex. Mountain bikes): 91%
- * Recommended Wilderness: 4.6% (A -0.4% decline from the DEIS)
- * Backcountry – Non-motorized: 10.4%
- * Percentage of IRA’s removed from Wilderness consideration: 86% (37 of 43).
- * General Forest: 63.5% of the Forest (A +0.2% increase from DEIS).
 - (a) Percent of the Forest Suitable/Available for “Timber Production”: 36%
 - (b) Additional percent of the Forest open to “Timber Harvest for Resource Objectives”: 41%
 - (c) Result: 77% of the Kootenai is open to some type of Logging, which also means Roads, and negative impacts to the Forest’s struggling grizzly population.
- * Under all of the above categories, Alternative C is only marginally better.

(B) The Kootenai is home to grizzlies, wolves, lynx, and wolverines. All of these species rely on big, wild, interconnected landscapes for their survival and recovery. Yet, despite the Forest’s assurance that this is what their Plan provides, one look at the above numbers, or the accompanying Alt. B Modified map, tells the exact opposite story – one of a forest landscape fractured into postage-stamp islands of security by “general forestry”, roads, motorized and mechanized trails and “backcountry”, and little if any connectivity.

(II) The Northern Region’s Wilderness Evaluation Process based upon Capability, Availability, and Need (CAN) flatly ignores the intent of Congress in the 1964 Wilderness Act; is subjective and biased; and willfully substitutes manager preferences and human recreational “wants” for ecological “needs.”

(A) In clear, simple language, the Wilderness Act of 1964 (USDA 1964) lays out the ground rules under which areas are to be judged for Wilderness:

“A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and the community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.”

“In order to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States...leaving no lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural

condition, it is hereby declared to be the policy of the Congress to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness.”

The conditions that Congress clearly intended to discourage or disallow were human dominance, settlement, overuse, or mechanization of wild landscapes. Conditions to be encouraged and guarded were untrammelled and uncontrolled landscapes and ecological processes, with areas protected and preserved in their natural condition. Finally, humans were to be temporary visitors only – not managers, manipulators, or highly mechanized recreationists.

Yet in the Wilderness Evaluation Process, we see that KNF has ignored Congressional intent, repeatedly injecting management preferences, and human recreational wants into areas where humans and their works were not to “dominate the landscape.”

In Appendix C, P: 91 we read that, “Areas qualify for placement on the potential wilderness inventory if they meet the statutory definition of wilderness. Include areas that meet either criteria 1 and 3, or criteria 2 and 3 below.”

- (1) Contains 5000 acres or more
- (2) Contains less than 5000 acres, but can meet one or more of the following:
 - * Can be preserved due to physical terrain and natural conditions;
 - * Is a self-contained ecosystem, such as an island;
 - * Is contiguous to existing wilderness, primitive areas, administration-endorsed wilderness, or potential wilderness in other federal ownership, regardless of their size.
- (3) Doesn't contain forest roads or other permanently authorized roads...

Under these baseline criteria, the vast majority of the 43 IRA's should have met Capability criteria, and as pre-screened IRA's, all 43 should be considered Available.

However, the Forest Service, in direct conflict with the wording of the Wilderness Act and Congressional Intent, has filled each of the three sections with human wants, “needs”, recreational desires, and land manager preferences. In addition, if any IRA rated “Low” in any CAN (Capability, Availability, Need) section it was automatically removed from Wilderness consideration – no matter how it did in the other two. Specific problems with each section follow:

(B) Capability: This section is broken down into 19 Elements, containing 47 Criteria, listed in order of priority – as determined by Kootenai Managers and not based on the best available science.

* Criteria #3 rates an IRA High if “Recreation use is light”, while Criteria 25-38 give High marks if the area is good for a laundry list of recreation activities likely to attract lots of people, including hiking, backpacking, saddle stock, hunting, fishing, skiing/snowshoeing, and snowmobiling.

* Element #1 is “Opportunity for Solitude”, while Criteria 37 and 38 value Snowmobiling – one of the noisiest, solitude-shattering activities possible.

* Although Congress made it absolutely clear that Wilderness areas were to be regions where humans were not to “dominate the landscape”, and where they were “visitors who do not remain”, The Forest Service has created 16 of 47 Criteria that cater almost exclusively to human recreational “Wants.”

* Similarly, Criteria 12-14, 39-40, and 44-47 give preference to “Manageability” and manager preferences in areas that are supposed to emphasize wild, natural processes, untrammelled landscapes, and minimal management intrusions (see Criteria 43 as a prime example).

* Under criteria 42, an IRA is rated High for, “No active disturbance near boundary”, but under criteria 47, High ratings are given if “Human improvement is significant to physically provide a barrier, such as a road-cut slope.

With these types of conflicting statements in the Plan, it seems clear that the USFS is trying to generate criteria that will allow it to downgrade IRA’s and minimize Wilderness.

(C) Availability: As noted in Appendix C, P: 119, “The determination of availability is conditioned by the value of and need for the wilderness resource compared to the value of and need for other resources.”

In other words, despite the fact that the Forest is supposed to be engaged in a Wilderness Evaluation, and in assessing Wilderness values, the Availability section clearly examines IRA’s through a completely human-centered lens.

Since our objections from the Draft Plan and DEIS are equally pertinent here, and have been completely ignored by the Forest, our comments on Availability are included below in quotes:

“Given the Kootenai’s 50-year history of favoring massive logging projects, motorized recreation - summer and winter, and ecosystem-wide intervention in ecological processes, asking managers if they want more IRA’s to be available for Wilderness, is to set up a process so hopelessly subjective, biased, and discretionary as to make a mockery of the planning process. It gives managers a virtual license to eliminate the majority of IRA’s from contention based on little more than manager preferences for “active management” over Wilderness protection.

In fact, it appears that the Kootenai Forest still views these national public lands as little more than “commodities” to be carved up and parceled out to local communities and special interests for social, political, and economic gain, with no seat at the table for Wilderness. While we understand one of the Forest’s roles is

the provision of resources in a sustainable manner, the Kootenai seems to have once more gone overboard, confusing its role with that of the Chamber of Commerce, timber industry, or local motorized access boosters.

Essentially, forest managers are asked if each IRA should be excluded from Wilderness consideration because it's better suited to:

- * Building a dam
- * "Needs" management for wildlife or aquatic animals that MIGHT conflict with wilderness management.
- * "Needs" active aquatic restoration.
- * "Needs" active vegetative restoration (logging), including fuel reduction (logging), or suppression of insects & disease (logging).
- * Permitting mines.
- * Having unique characteristics or natural features that more people should see.
- * Lands committed through contracts/permits/ agreements to uses in conflict with wilderness.
- * The KNF doesn't have sufficient control to prevent development or irresolvable, incompatible uses.

It seems to us that only the last two categories have some validity, while the other six involve the Forest's traditional management style, making the results of this section a rather transparent foregone conclusion – Wilderness designation loses.”

In addition, we remind the Forest that building dams, active vegetative restoration, fuel reduction, and suppression of insects or disease are all activities requiring roads and logging, and are prohibited in IRA's by the 2001 Roadless Rule in nearly all cases. All activities that violate the Roadless Rule must be immediately and completely removed from the Final Forest Plan and Record of Decision.

Finally, we remind the Kootenai of the clear Congressional Intent, which contradicts nearly the entire "Availability" section, and the Forest's determination to remove 86% of IRA's from Wilderness consideration:

(D) Need: Page 130 of the FEIS notes that the Needs section includes Social and Environmental factors and, "The social factors included current levels of use in designated wilderness in the Northern Region, national and local trends in outdoor activities, and population statistics. Ecological factors included representation of vegetative cover types and ecological sections, fisheries, and wildlife."

Both of these sections have a number of problems when used as Wilderness "filters."

(1) Social Needs:

* Once again, this section totally ignores the will of Congress to provide Wilderness so that the social, economic, recreational, and political needs and wants of a growing population do not simply overwhelm the last vestiges of the nation's untamed, wild land.

* While the goal of Congress was clearly to provide a Wilderness legacy for the American people, the “Needs” section suggests the Kootenai feels it must protect Americans from too much Wilderness, lest too much be designated in too many places. While this might be the opinion of the local logging and motorized recreation community, Congress expressed no such minimalist intent.

* The statement that “...social factors included current levels of use in designated wilderness in the Northern Region...” implies that if these levels are low, there’s no “Need” for more Wilderness.

We remind the Kootenai that under its “Capability” section, the “feeling of being alone; possibility of meeting another party is remote; and recreation use is light” were all attributes to be rated “High.” Wilderness is not a “commodity” to be cranked out to meet ever expanding human wants, it is first and foremost an ecological savings account to preserve and protect big wild landscapes in their natural, “untrammelled” condition.

* As part of the Regional Needs Assessment, KNF selected Libby as the center of a 100-mile radius, and Kalispell, 88 miles away as its single population center. There continue to be a number of problems with these choices, as follows:

(a) There’s no logical reason to have used 100 miles. The Forest could have just as easily chosen 50 miles or 150 – it’s totally arbitrary, and open to manager discretion – and bias.

(b) By choosing 100 miles and Kalispell with literally millions of acres out its back door, the Kootenai was able to show there was plenty of Wilderness, and little need for more. Had the number chosen been 150 miles, it would have included Spokane with little nearby Wilderness, and given a significantly different “needs” snapshot.

(c) However, by selecting either of these distances or nearby communities, the Forest signals that it is improperly viewing the Kootenai as a state or regional park to be managed for the wants and needs of the local people. The Kootenai is a National Forest, with 310 million owners and potential users, and should be evaluated as such.

In the last two years, Yellowstone National Park has experienced record visitation of over 3 million, while Glacier National Park has set new records above 2 million for three years. From personnel experience, we can tell you that many of these folks express a deep hunger for big, wild places, and the big, wild animals that rely on them for survival. The reason is simple – most Americans don’t have any Wilderness within 1000 miles of them, and they count on the National Parks and National Forests to ensure that there are more than scraps of Wilderness left for them and their children.

That’s the “population center” that the Kootenai should be focusing on, rather than trying to prevent too much Wilderness from being designated in certain areas.

(2) Ecological Needs:

* While it’s appreciated that the Kootenai has belatedly include this category, its coverage is so minimalist that it is robbed of its effectiveness. Although fish are included

– including the non-native Yellowstone Cutthroat (with an unconvincing reason in Appendix G) – and plants are covered in two of the six categories, there’s no category for Threatened and Endangered species, especially the grizzly bear, and no specific category for vital Linkage Zones/Habitat Connectivity.

* Category 3 under Ecological Need is divided into two parts, (a) Adjacent to existing wilderness, and (b) Could be combined to form large habitat patches, with each IRA rated on one or the other criteria, but not both – despite the fact that both apply in many cases and are equally important.

Prime examples include IRA’s 26 and 27 which are immediately adjacent to IRA 25 and the Cabinet Mountain Wilderness (CMW); IRA’s 24, 31, 33, 34, and the south end of 22 which together form a large block and in several cases touch the CMW; and IRA’s 14, 15, and 17, all adjacent to IRA 16, Roderick Mountain. Yet all of these were excluded from Recommended Wilderness.

In addition, based on the IRA’s that were ultimately chosen forest-wide as Recommended Wilderness, it’s not clear that the Kootenai took either of these “ecological need” categories seriously – since at least 24 IRA’s (56%) to which one or both apply were eliminated anyway.

(III) Despite the Kootenai National Forest’s key role on the Cabinet-Yaak/Selkirk Grizzly Bear Subcommittee and IGBC Linkage Taskforce, the Final Forest Plan and FEIS fail to provide the habitat connectivity and home range security vital to recovering grizzlies in this ecosystem and the Lower 48 states.

The Endangered Species Act (USFWS 1973) requires all federal agencies to conserve listed species and the ecosystems upon which they depend; to avoid creating “Jeopardy” to listed species; and “Harm” to these species and their habitat. Yet the Plan and FEIS fail to do all three.

Boyce and Servheen (2001) reported that populations of 20 grizzlies have a 100% probability of extinction over 100 years. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Biological Opinion on the Forest Plan (USFWS 2013) reports that the current population estimate for the Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem (CYE) is 42 grizzlies – 21 in the Cabinets, and 21 in the Yaak.

Obviously, if the CYE population is to survive and recover, these two populations must be connected, as demonstrated by a regular exchange of males and females. Yet since Wayne Kasworm of FWS began his research in 1983, only one subadult male has crossed from the Yaak to the Cabinets, and there is still no evidence of successful movement and gene flow between the populations (W. Kasworm 8/24/13 pers.comm.).

The best opportunity for the Kootenai to prove its commitment to habitat connectivity is by providing this absolutely vital linkage through the Flagstaff IRA (#18) and the north portion of the Cabinet Face East IRA (#22). Unfortunately, the Plan caps the north end of

IRA 22 with a strip of Motorized Backcountry, and cuts IRA 18 in half between a smaller portion of Non-motorized Backcountry, and a larger section of Motorized Backcountry – Winter. As detailed below, this is not an isolated mistake.

(A) Linkages:

The recovery of grizzly bears south of Canada is based on achieving viable populations in six Recovery Zones or Ecosystems and linking them together into one “Metapopulation.” The federal Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan (USFWS 1993) recognizes the importance of linked populations as follows:

“It is widely accepted in conservation biology that island populations of any species are subject to high rates of extinction and that these rates are directly related to the size of the island. Wide ranging mammals are particularly sensitive to the detrimental effects of insular distribution... Ideally, preserving linkage between populations is a more legitimate long-term conservation strategy than are attempts to manage separate island populations... Linkage zones enhance the viability of populations that are separated by some distance by facilitating the exchange of individuals and maintaining demographic vigor and genetic diversity.”

USFWS Grizzly Recovery Coordinator Chris Servheen and members of the Cabinet-Yaak/Selkirk Grizzly Subcommittee have repeatedly discussed the importance of linking the small, isolated CYE & SE populations to each other, to Canadian populations, and as the closest links to the Selway-Bitterroot Ecosystem (USDI 2001). During 2004-2005 Servheen chaired an IGBC Linkage Taskforce that looked specifically at potential linkages across Hwy. 200 and I-90 south of the Cabinets, and Hwy. 2 between the Cabinet and Yaak portions of the Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem (CYE).

Yet in its Wilderness Evaluation process, the Kootenai chose as Recommended Wilderness virtually none of the IRA's that could provide the linkage called for in that research, or discussed by the Task Force – of which the Forest was a key member. For example:

- * IRA's providing vital links to the Selway-Bitterroot Ecosystem (SBE) include # 24, 30, 31, 33, 34 and 35-42. Only #30 was recommended for Wilderness.
- * IRA's providing potential links W-NW to the Selkirk Ecosystem (SE) include #12, 13, and 14 – 17. Only #16 was recommended for Wilderness.
- * Potential linkages to British Columbia include IRA # 2, 3, 4, 9, 10, 11, and 12. Only # 3 & fractured slivers of #2 were recommended.
- * IRA's needed to promote linkage E-NE to the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem are # 6 7, 8, 22, 23, and 24. Only small fragmented portions of #22 were chosen, with the majority sacrificed as Motorized Backcountry.
- * In addition, P: 74 of the Wildlife Specialist's Report (USFS 2013a), Figure 5, shows that the Plan manages the entire NE quadrant of the Forest as the West Kootenai and Tobacco BORZ (Bears Outside Recovery Zones) - areas where Open and Total Motorized Route Density are well beyond levels that grizzlies can tolerate/survive long-

term. The presence of a handful of grizzlies in these heavily roaded areas shows the resilience of the bears short-term, not that these conditions promote survival, recovery, or connectivity long-term.

As noted earlier, the 1993 Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan (USFWS 1993), and its success or failure at recovering grizzlies, is based upon achieving a linked “metapopulation” connecting all six recovery zones. Because of its central location bridging the N-S gap between British Columbia and the Selway-Bitterroot Ecosystem (SBE), as well as E-W between the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE) and the Selkirks (SE), the Cabinet-Yaak is the keystone holding the metapopulation, and recovery together.

Yet the Kootenai Plan/FEIS, with its near total failure to protect key linkage IRA’s as Wilderness, or even as Non-Motorized Backcountry in many cases, puts the future of grizzly recovery in doubt. The token inclusion of linkage as criteria #22 of 47 under “Capability” has obviously done nothing to address, much less reverse, this dangerous outcome.

* It’s critical that the Forest Plan include an MA 8: “Landscape Level Wildlife Linkage Zones”. In addition, the Kootenai needs to add an absolutely essential Category 7 to this Needs Assessment and give it the high priority it deserves – “IRA provides or helps complete key Linkage Zones and Habitat Connectivity within the Forest and/or to adjacent ecosystems.” Without such a category, the chances of restoring ecosystem health to a Kootenai fractured by decades of excessive logging and roading are extremely low.

Appendix G claims that the KNF commitment to “connectivity” is proven, because the term is used more than 300 times in the Wildlife Specialists Report (USFS 2013a), thereby confusing mere words with actual deeds. The Kootenai’s Preferred Alternative B eliminates 37 of 43 IRA’s from Wilderness contention (86%), motorizes 74% of the Forest in summer, and 87% in winter. In addition, Table 118, P: 456 of the FEIS designates 153,844 acres (24%) of IRA’s as Backcountry – Motorized Year-round. Lip service for Linkages is not enough.

(B) Grizzly Home Range Protection:

The EIS states: “The likelihood of bear-human interaction or human activity-causing disturbance to a bear decreases with increasing distance from roads. Therefore, it is useful to have areas such as wilderness, roadless areas, and other places with limited motorized access in order to provide habitat for bears and other wildlife that are sensitive to disturbance.”

We agree, but once again, given the Kootenai’s minimal selection of IRA’s as Recommended Wilderness, while motorizing 24% of IRA’s year round, these statements do nothing for real habitat protection.

We’ve reviewed Wayne Kasworm's (USFWS 2011) report on grizzly research for the Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem (CYE) in which he presents home range maps for every grizzly

he's collared and followed since 1983. Taking just the grizzly home ranges from 2005-2010, we compared their home ranges to the locations of the various IRA's to check for overlap. Here's what we found:

* There were home range maps for 16 KNF grizzlies (2005-2010) - 5 Male and 11 Female.

* Grizzly home ranges relied on portions of 27 of the 43 IRA's (63%).

* Just 6 of the 27 IRA's providing home range habitat were recommended for Wilderness, while 21 were not.

(1) Portions of IRA's Recommended for Wilderness, and the number of home ranges they support:

IRA 16 = 2

IRA 21 = 4

IRA 22 = 4

IRA 25 = 5

IRA 28 = 6

IRA 29 = 4

Home Ranges Supported = 25

(2) IRA's Not Recommended for Wilderness and the number of home ranges they support:

IRA's 6, 9, 10, 13, 14, 15, 18, 34, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41 = 1 each

IRA 11 = 4

IRA 12 = 3

IRA 19 = 4

IRA 20 = 4

IRA 24 = 4

IRA 26 = 6

IRA 27 = 4

Home Ranges Supported = 43

(3) Fate of Non-Wilderness IRA's:

Equally important to consider are the KNF's plans for grizzly home range IRA's not recommended as Wilderness under Alternative B. An analysis, based on the Forests own Alternatives Maps follows, with the number of grizzly home ranges supported in parentheses:

IRA 6 (1): Some wild river/mostly recreational river; Mostly Backcountry – motorized in winter, and surrounded by General Forest.

IRA 9 (1): Backcountry non-motorized, but cut off on three sides by General Forest.

IRA 10 (1): Backcountry non-motorized, but surrounded by General Forest, cutting it off from IRA 9 to the north, and IRA 6 & 15 to the south.

IRA 11 (4): Some wild river; mostly backcountry non-motorized - bracketed and isolated N, S, and E by General Forest.

IRA 12 (3): Large “special area” bracketed by Backcountry – Motorized in winter, plus a Backcountry – non-motorized.

IRA 13 (1): Half Backcountry – Motorized in winter, and half Backcountry – non-motorized. Cut off by General Forest from the large IRA block of 14-17.

IRA 14 (1): Backcountry – non-motorized, surrounded and isolated by General Forest.

IRA 15 (1): Small “special area”; mostly Backcountry – Motorized in winter.

IRA 18 (1): North ½ is Backcountry – Motorized winter, South ½ is Backcountry – non-motorized; cut off on the south by Motorized Backcountry. This is the critical linkage zone between the Cabinets and the Yaak.

IRA 19 (4): ½ Backcountry – non-motorized and ½ Backcountry – Motorized winter. Part of a key CYE to Selkirks linkage.

IRA 20 (4): Small wild river section; Central portion of Non-motorized Backcountry cut off on the north and south by Backcountry – Motorized winter. Part of a key CYE to Selkirks linkage.

IRA 24 (4): Motorized Backcountry. NOTE: This designation totally severs a known carnivore linkage acknowledged by the Kootenai and FWS in this FEIS and Biological Opinion (USDI 2013), and running SW to NE to the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (Jim Williams FWP, personal communication). This linkage is referenced in the Montanore Mine SDEIS (USDA 2011) and the Motorized Access Management FSEIS (USDA 2012), but completely compromised here by the Kootenai.

IRA 26 (6): Backcountry non-motorized - with General Forestry to the E & SE potentially imperiling a key linkage between the Cabinet Mountain Wilderness and Scotchman Peaks and the six grizzlies (5 female) who rely on this habitat as part of their home ranges.

IRA 27 (4): Backcountry non-motorized with General Forestry N, S, and E with the same potential linkage-cutting problems as IRA 26.

IRA 34 (1): Backcountry - Motorized with a sliver of General Forestry. NOTE: This Motorized designation goes a long way toward severing a key linkage possibility to the

Selway-Bitterroot Ecosystem (SBE) – a distinction it shares with IRA’s 31 & 33, also sacrificed as Backcountry – Motorized.

IRA’s 36 – 41 (1 Grizzly Home Range Each): All Backcountry – Motorized. NOTE: These designations, along with similar ones for IRA’s 31, 33, and 34 above, dramatically increase the probability that few, if any, CYE grizzlies will reach the Selway-Bitterroot Ecosystem alive. Alternative C also contains all of these connectivity-destroying designations.

These final 7 Backcountry - Motorized designations are in the exact location that the IGBC Linkage Zone Task Force examined to develop prototype linkages across Hwy. 200 and I-90 - with the USFS Carnivore Biologist, and the Kootenai Forest Biologist as full participants. The Forest must understand, and reverse, the dire ecological consequences of these damaging motorized designations.

IRA 2: Although the Ten Lakes Area is outside the Kasworm study/mapping area, it’s well known by state and federal biologists to contain numerous grizzlies (Tim Manley, personal communication, Kate Kendall (2009)), and serves as a vital linkage to Canadian populations (Weaver 2001). Yet the Kootenai Preferred Alternative fractures it into irregular pieces with large, Motorized Backcountry intrusions on its NE, SE, and central portions, at the same time the Forest has allowed illegal snowmobile use in the Wilderness Study Area (WSA).

(IV) Despite the well-known requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Forest Plan and FEIS fail to provide a reasonable range of alternatives.

Under FEIS “Alternatives Considered But Eliminated From Detailed Study”, KNF correctly notes:

“ Federal Agencies are required by NEPA to rigorously explore and objectively evaluate All reasonable alternatives and to briefly discuss the reasons for eliminating any alternatives that were not developed in detail (40 CFR 1502.14).” – emphasis added. Unfortunately, this definition is the only example of “rigorous exploration” or “objective evaluation” we see in the Forest Plan or FEIS.

We are not suggesting that the Forest evaluate all possible alternatives, as that would be unreasonable, and is not required by the law. However, if we assume that the 43 Inventoried Roadless Areas were developed by skilled staffers with the required eye to selecting those with the most future Wilderness potential, the current Plan’s elimination of 86% from further consideration is clearly based on something other than rigorous, objective criteria – and the absence of a true Conservation Alternative is glaring.

While Alternative A provides the status quo option, All Action Alternatives promote logging, motorized use (year-round), mechanization of the forest, and do not protect Wilderness areas, Non-motorized areas, or wildlife, particularly when it comes to T&E species. Even the “Best” of the bad alternatives (Alt. C) would open up 67% of the forest

to motorized vehicles, 82% to snowmobiles, 86% to mechanized use, and 58.7% to general forestry, while grudgingly allowing a mere 4.6% as Recommended Wilderness.

* A “Conservation Alternative” is briefly mentioned in two paragraphs and then dismissed out of hand with – “The IDT felt that the conservation emphasis outlined in this proposed alternative were adequately addressed in Alternatives B and C” – a statement so demonstrably false that it cannot be taken seriously.

* The “Wilderness/Roadless Related Alternatives” are dispatched with an analysis that is flawed from start to finish. First, KNF mentions that all 43 IRA’s have been through the Capability/Availability/Need (CAN) process and the handful of survivors “represents the maximum potential for wilderness recommendation.” As detailed earlier, the CAN effort, rather than being the “rigorous and objective” process required by NEPA, is completely subjective, biased, and arbitrary – and violates the clear Intent of Congress.

Second, the analysis notes that the Forest Plan is being developed under the 1982 planning procedures and that these “...require alternatives to be distributed between the minimum and maximum resource potential to reflect, to the extent practicable, the full range of major commodity and environmental resource uses and values that could be produced from the Forest.” – emphasis added.

Such a world-view largely disregards ecological integrity, habitat quality and security, linked landscapes, and the demonstrated needs of Threatened and Endangered Species and instead, sees the forest as little more than “products” for human consumption.

* The “Defenders of Wildlife Alternative” referenced in the Plan would have stressed “habitat connectivity on landscape and regional scales” and recommended specific MA’s with their own set of goals, objectives, and standards to achieve this. Despite the fact that such an alternative is absolutely vital to wildlife viability generally, and grizzly recovery specifically, it’s summarily dismissed in the DEIS with the demonstrably false claim that all action alternatives move in this direction. “Moving in that direction” comes nowhere near meeting the intent of this Alternative, or the needs of listed species, since the Kootenai’s Forest Plan “movement” is virtually imperceptible.

Absent from the DEIS is a true “Conservation Alternative” which would include:

* All, or a substantial majority of IRA’s recommended as Wilderness;

* The majority of IRA’s not recommended for Wilderness assigned to Non-Motorized Backcountry – Year round;

* Significantly smaller portions of the forest given over to motorized vehicles and mechanization, and a specific plan to reduce (Right-Size) the Forest’s bloated road system to bring it in line with environmental concerns, as well as current and likely future budgets. FEIS P: 407 shows that System Roads total 7863 miles, with 2832 miles motorized yearlong, and 721 miles motorized seasonally, for a total of 3553 miles.

* Immediate removal of illegally sanctioned snowmobile use in the Ten Lakes Wilderness Study Area;

* High priority given to protecting or restoring wildlife linkages – internally and to other ecosystems and a separate MA dedicated to that task;

* And a Wilderness Evaluation system based on objective, measurable criteria, ecological principles, and the Intent of Congress.

The failure of the Kootenai to provide such a true Conservation Alternative places the Forest at odds with NEPA.

(V) It appears that the Forest Plan and FEIS would sanction logging and roading in IRA's in violation of the 2001 Roadless Rule. In addition, such proposals would further stress a Kootenai Forest budget already incapable of maintaining the current road system.

In October 2011, the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the 2001 Roadless Rule (Wyoming v. USDA, 2011), which prohibits logging and roads in most IRA's. Yet from entries in FEIS Table 60, P: 139-141 under Suitability Determinations, it appears that KNF intends to ignore the Rule and violate the law, as follows:

* IRA's 28, 30, 36, 39, and 40 all mention the need for treatment of Douglas Fir bark beetle – which involves logging and is done from road networks, some of which would have to be new to reach affected stands. Besides violating the Roadless Rule, this also ignores the fact that generally insect outbreaks are the sort of natural ecological events that are an integral part of healthy ecosystems and don't require human intervention – particularly in IRA's.

* IRA #20 is mentioned as having “fuels needing treatment.” Once again this involves both roads and logging, and we aren't told if these stands are ecologically overstocked based on the “historical range of variation”, or if the assessment is based upon a manager's desire to thin stands to his/her notion of correct stocking levels. Again, both the logging and roads would violate the law.

* Existing or “potential” mining is mentioned for IRA's 20, 22, 24, 25, 27, 29, 30, and 31. While such considerations might be appropriate for existing, operating mines or those with valid operating permits, they clearly are not for old non-permitted, non-operating mines because someone, someday, might want to mine them.

* Road repair/restoration is mentioned under IRA's 19, 20, and 26. However, since roads are not permitted in IRA's there should be none to repair or restore, unless these are very old road prisms that are being recontoured to natural gradient, revegetated, and permanently decommissioned – none of which should disqualify them as Wilderness.

* “Existing over snow motorized use” is listed as a factor for IRA’s 1, 2, 3, 6, 12, 13, 14, 15, 20, 27, 30, 34, and 36. While the Forest Service has gotten away for years (decades) with treating snowmobiles differently than cars, trucks, and OHV’s, it’s clear that they are motorized vehicles with the potential for disrupting wintering wildlife.

This is true in particular for grizzly bears, which are winter-sleepers rather than true hibernators. If high density motorized routes are known to disturb, displace, habituate, and raise mortalities among grizzlies in spring, summer, and fall, there’s no logical, or scientific reason to believe they don’t do the same to sleeping bears in winter. Yet federal and state agencies have been slow to sponsor the necessary research on impacts.

* FEIS P: 522, Table 135 (IRA Acres Suitable for Timber Production) is divided into 2 sections, (a) Allowable Sale Quantity (ASQ) Unconstrained by current Budget shortfalls – what the Kootenai would cut if it had the money, and (b) Predicted Volume Sold, which is constrained by current Budgets. Under the ASQ section, KNF clearly wants to log 1.3 – 9.5 mmbf per year for the first decade in IRA’s, if funding becomes available - depending on alternative. Under Projected Volume Sold - constrained only by inadequate funding, the Forest shows zero cut. Clearly, the Kootenai must restate its commitment to following the 2001 Roadless Rule – regardless of funding.

* In addition, logging and roading in IRA’s makes absolutely no fiscal sense. When the 2001 Roadless Rule was originally put in place, the U.S. Forest Service was already reporting that its national maintenance backlog on Arterial and Collector roads alone was between \$8-10 Billion (Dombeck 2001). And the Kootenai DEIS, P: 364, Table 48, suggests that the situation has not improved, with just 20% of Open Roads “Maintained to Standard” between 2007 and 2009.

Given these budget realities, the Kootenai must recognize that maintenance costs in IRA’s and Wilderness are dramatically lower than in the industrialized, motorized, mechanized landscape proposed in the FEIS and Forest Plan. And the historic economic downturn of 2008-2012 and its impacts on all federal budgets – now and for years to come – only makes the Forest’s Action Alternatives even more unrealistic.

Our Recommendations:

The FEIS and Forest Plan documents will not pass scientific, legal, or economic muster. The choice for the Forest then, is whether it wants to continue looking at forest management through the rear view mirror - with more decades of gridlock the likely result – or embark on a new course grounded firmly in following the science and obeying the law. We recommend the following:

(1) The Kootenai needs to revisit and revise its list of Action Alternatives to provide the rigorous exploration and objective evaluation of All reasonable alternatives required by NEPA, rather than the current options, which are skewed toward industrial and motorized uses of the landscape. Specifically, KNF needs to address and correct the following facts reported in the DEIS (USFS 2012) that:

* While 49.3% of users say they drive for pleasure, only 1.4% participate in motorized trail activity and only 1.0% participate in OHV use. Therefore, 67%-81% of the Forest should not be opened to wheeled motorized vehicles.

* Despite the fact that only 1.9% of users say they ride snowmobiles, with just 1.2% saying it's their "primary use", the Forest would open up 82%-90% of the Kootenai to this small user group.

* DEIS Table 55, P: 272 shows that road construction would be allowed on 83%-91% of the Forest (with & without conditions) – None of which is compatible with grizzly, bull trout, or lynx recovery, let alone elk habitat security, water quality – or the Kootenai's budget. A comprehensive Needs Assessment for the Forest's entire road system is an absolute requirement.

* Although 46.3% of users participate in viewing wildlife, 44.7% in walking or hiking, 26.5% in relaxing, and 6.1% in nature study, the Kootenai Forest Plan would recommend only 1.6%-9.7% of the Forest as Wilderness and would eliminate 86% of IRA's from Wilderness contention under Preferred Alt. B Modified.

(2) A True Conservation Alternative must be developed and presented for public comment under a Supplemental Revised Forest Plan and Supplemental FEIS, and should include the following:

(a) The current Cabinet Mountain Wilderness (CMW) is central to grizzly bear survival and recovery in the CYE, yet its small size and long thin shape make that objective nearly impossible. Under the Conservation Alternative, all IRA's contiguous to the CMW should be Recommended Wilderness.

(b) Given the Kootenai's stated preference for large unroaded blocks of habitat adjacent to Wilderness and other IRA's, the Roderick Mountain Complex (IRA 14, 15, 16, & 17) should all be Recommended Wilderness. The same is true of the Scotchman Peak Complex (IRA 25, 26, & 27) and the Ten Lakes/Whitefish Divide Complex (IRA 1, 2, 3, & 4).

In the Ten Lakes/Whitefish Divide case, all areas shown as Non-motorized Backcountry would be included as Recommended Wilderness; and areas around FR 114 and 319 currently shown as Motorized Backcountry would become Non-motorized Backcountry, with the exception of a 100 yard buffer along the roads themselves. The same is true of the area shown as Motorized Backcountry between Mt. Gibraltar, Scotty, and Stahl Peak.

(c) We agree with the Kootenai and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USDI 2013) that habitat connectivity is extremely important, particularly as it relates to grizzly bears. - Therefore, Alternative C options for IRA's southeast of the CMW should be adopted, with IRA 31 as Recommended Wilderness and IRA's 32, 33, and 34 as Non-motorized Backcountry.

- IRA's 35-42 are key to connectivity with the Selway-Bitterroot Ecosystem and lower 48 grizzly recovery, and should all be designated Non-motorized Backcountry. Sole exceptions would be FR 151 and FR 149 to the first trailhead, both buffered by 100 yards from non-motorized.
- IRA's 6 & 8 are important to linking the Roderick Mountain Complex to the grizzly source population of the NCDE, and as shown in Alternative C should be Recommended Wilderness.
- IRA's 11-13 plus 19 & 20 are key to breaking the CYE's virtual isolation from the Selkirk Ecosystem and British Columbian grizzly populations, and must be entirely Non-motorized Backcountry.
- As noted earlier, without connectivity between the Cabinet and Yaak portions of the CYE, these two grizzly subpopulations will not survive (Boyce and Servheen 2001). The most critical linkage needed to avoid that is IRA 18, and it must be designated 100% Non-motorized Backcountry. To complete that connection, the north end of IRA 22 along Highway 2 must be included as Recommended Wilderness.
- All remaining IRA's (5, 7, 9, 10, 32, and 43) should be Non-motorized Backcountry – year round. Given the Kootenai's current road inventory, showing 3553 miles of road open yearlong or seasonally, the Forest must clearly justify any decision to provide Backcountry – Motorized in any IRA. We remind the Forest of research by Mattson (1996, Attached) showing that grizzly mortality is a function of Frequency of human contact and Lethality of that contact – with Motorized Backcountry promoting both.

(3) The Kootenai, in concert with the Northern Region office and other Region1 forests, must completely review and revise the subjective and biased Capability, Availability, Need Criteria and the 2003 Wilderness Needs Assessment they are based on. New standards must be developed based on the clear, unambiguous language of the Wilderness Act, and the Congressional Intent that Wilderness and its ecological values were to be the primary driving force in designations – not USFS manager preferences.

(4) Given a half-century of excessive logging, roading, and habitat fragmentation by KNF, restoring landscape connectivity is a critical need. To begin that process, the Forest Plan must establish and give high priority to establishing an MA-8: Landscape Linkages and Habitat Connectivity. Key Wildlife Linkage Zones must then be identified, mapped, and protected in the Revised Forest Plan.

In addition, the Forest must revisit and designate as Recommended Wilderness or Non-motorized Backcountry all IRA's providing Linkages to the Selkirks, Selway-Bitterroot, and Northern Continental Divide Grizzly Recovery Zones – and to larger Canadian bear populations to, and beyond, Highway 2.

As an example, the Kootenai, in concert with Plum Creek and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, must explore concrete ways to protect the known carnivore linkage zone running SW – NE through Sedlak Park on Hwy. 2 and connecting Barren, Kenelty, Fritz, and Calx Peaks, on the way to the large grizzly source population of the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE).

(5) One area where the Kootenai should put habitat restoration and connectivity into practice is the Ten Lakes Wilderness Study Area (WSA) and Contiguous Area. Both Alternatives B and C show unacceptably wide swaths of Motorized Backcountry on either side of FR 319, the Therriault Lakes Road, completely fracturing the ecological integrity of the entire Ten Lakes area.

Since DEIS P: 273 makes it clear that no cross country/OHV travel is allowed here, this wide motorized zone is completely unnecessary. We recommend that KNF make only FR 319 and Upper Grave Creek Road themselves Motorized Backcountry – perhaps with a 100-yard buffer – while all the remaining Ten Lakes/Whitefish Divide area is designated as long-overdue Wilderness Study Area and Recommended Wilderness.

All illegal snowmobile use sanctioned by the Kootenai in the Ten Lakes area must be removed immediately. This would have the added benefit of protecting a vital transboundary linkage zone (Weaver 2001 and 2011), as well as the headwaters of Wigwam Creek - matching similar actions by British Columbia, and protecting a critical bull trout spawning stream.

(6) As part of this Forest Planning process, the Kootenai must engage in a comprehensive reassessment of its entire System Roads network – both from the standpoint of management need, environmental consequences, and affordability. In addition, the Supplemental Revised Forest Plan must contain a firm commitment to the 2001 Roadless Rule, and remove all management references which would recommend roading and logging in IRA's. Finally, the Forest must seriously re-evaluate the policies that have resulted in a maze of more than two-dozen "Primary Access Routes" fracturing the entire forest and known grizzly linkages between Lake Kooconusa on the west, and Eureka, Fortine, and Dickey Lake on the east.

Conclusion:

As noted earlier, we urge the Kootenai to break from its historic management of the Forest as an industrialized, motorized, mechanized landscape and adopt a new perspective that includes Wilderness, non-motorized IRA's, landscape connectivity, and adherence to science and law. We look forward to having our substantive comments, objections, and solutions considered and adopted, and working with you as you move toward implementation.

Sincerely,

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