

Response to Public Comments

The 30-day comment period for the Grouse Bear Management Unit Compliance Project Environmental Assessment ended on June 21, 2018 after a notice was posted in the *Coeur d'Alene Press* on May 22, 2018. The comments are organized below by the name, letter number and comment number. A summary of each substantive comment is followed by a response, which includes a discussion of how the comment is addressed in the environmental analysis. All of the letters and comments received are available in the project record.

List of commenters for the Boulder Creek Restoration Project

Letter No.	Commenter	Organization
1	Paul Sieracki	Alliance Wild Rockies/Selkirk Conservation Alliance
2	Jeff Cook	Idaho Parks and Recreation
3	Brad Smith	Idaho Conservation League
4	Kristin Larson	Idaho Department of Environmental Quality
5	Patrick Seymour	Idaho Department of Lands
6	Britt Madison	Stimson Lumber Company
7	Bill Hawkins	Landowner
8	Marylin McIntyre/JD Pratt	Landowner
9	Stan Myers	Landowner
10	Al Farnsworth	Landowner
11*	John McSherry	Landowner

*comment received during scoping

Response to the substantive comments received

Letter	No.	Comment Text	Response
1	1	<p>The road management proposal would not bring the Grouse Bear Unit into compliance and would be a violation of the Endangered Species Act if implemented.</p>	<p>The comment is incorrect on both counts. The Grouse BMU project would bring the BMU into full compliance with the Revised Forest Plan standards, and is in compliance with the ESA’s substantive requirement that any action authorized, funded, or carried out by Federal agencies not jeopardize the continued existence of listed species:</p> <p>From the Grouse BMU Compliance Project Biological Opinion p. 31-32:</p> <p>“Project implementation will increase Core and decrease TMRD in the Grouse BMU, at which time these criteria will meet the motorized access management standards established in the Access Amendment.”</p> <p>“Because the proposed Project will not preclude recovery and survival in any Recovery Zone, it is the Service’s opinion that the proposed Grouse BMU Compliance Project will not jeopardize the continued existence of the listed grizzly bear population in the conterminous United States.”</p> <p>As discussed in the EA, nearly half of the Grouse BMU is in non-Federal ownership. The Forest Service lacks management authority over roads on these properties, and there are legal constraints dictating how roads on NFS lands that lead to other ownerships can be managed. As a result, achieving higher core or lower road densities in this BMU would be difficult or impossible.</p> <p>Even so, under the proposed action more than 66 percent of NFS lands in the BMU would be in core habitat (with correspondingly low road densities). This is a higher percentage of NFS lands in core than in all but three other IPNF BMUs (one of which is predominantly wilderness), and all but two of the BMUs in the Cabinet-Yaak Recovery Zone.</p>

1	2	<p>Core fragments may not be suitable for use by grizzly bear and should be discounted deferring to the bear's needs and not human access wants.</p>	<p>This issue was previously addressed in the analysis for the Forest Plan Amendments for Motorized Access Management within the Selkirk and Cabinet-Yaak Grizzly Bear Recovery Zones (USDA Forest Service 2011). Currently, there is insufficient scientific justification to discount small blocks of core. Neither Wakkinen and Kasworm (1997) nor the various research conducted in the South Fork Flathead River area of the North Continental Divide Ecosystem (Mace and Manley 1993, Mace et al. 1996, Mace and Waller 1997 and 1998) established a minimum effective core block size.</p> <p>The sentence “Ninety-four percent of locations from female bears were in core polygons greater than 3.0 mi² and 89% of locations occurred in polygons greater than 4.0 mi²” is misstated in the original [Wakkinen and Kasworm (1997)]. The paragraph above this states that “...94% of [Selkirk] female radiolocations occurring in core habitat were in polygons greater than 4.0 mi² and 88% of locations occurred in polygons greater than 10 mi².” Clearly, from context the statement in question should say “Ninety-four percent of locations from [Yaak] female bears occurring in core habitat were in core polygons greater than 3.0 mi² and 89% in polygons greater than 4.0 mi².” Otherwise, how could 45 percent of Selkirk female locations, and 56 percent of Yaak female locations, occur in non-core habitat (Wakkinen and Kasworm 1997 p. 20, table 12)?</p> <p>In fact, Wakkinen and Kasworm (1997) documented grizzly bear use in core polygons as small as 0.22 square miles (141 acres) in size. While the researchers showed grizzly bear use increased with larger core habitat block size, they were ultimately unable to identify a block size below which grizzly bear use was less than expected (i.e., avoided). Lacking clear research evidence that core areas of smaller size are actively avoided by bears as non-core areas are, there is presently no biological basis or Forest Plan requirement to discount or ignore smaller blocks of core.</p> <p>The project would bring the Grouse BMU up to standard. For the reasons discussed above, no minimum core block size is specified by the Access Amendment. The Grouse BMU Compliance Project EA discloses the percent and size of individual core areas in the BMU.</p>
1	3	<p>Small core fragments are obviously the result of poor quality gis processing including boundary mismatches called slivers when combining different gis layers. This casts doubt on the accuracy of the rest of the data used in preparation of this EA.</p>	<p>The IPNF has reproduced core and road density layers for the Grouse BMU (existing condition and proposed action) and eliminated “slivers.” These data are available upon request.</p> <p>While the Forest Service uses the most current and complete data available, GIS data and product accuracy may vary. There is some inherent level of</p>

			<p>error in any mapped feature, but the comment does not allege (or demonstrate) any systematic error that would unfairly bias the results of the analysis in favor of overestimation of core habitat. The commenter somewhat overstates their case by implying that a potential 7-acre discrepancy “casts doubt on the accuracy” of an analysis over a nearly 67,000-acre area.</p> <p>Additionally, many portions of the boundaries in question (BMU boundaries in particular) are based on indistinct features on the ground (such as watershed divides) that do not lend themselves to any sort of positional accuracy assessment. The fact is that the IPNF uses the identical feature boundaries and calculation methods as the analysis used to develop BMU standards in the Selkirk and Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystems (Wakkinen and Kasworm 1997), and reflects the same errors and biases as the original research.</p>
1	4	<p>The lack of a 500m buffer deducted from core along the border of IDL and private lands with Federal Lands is an arbitrary and capricious agency action that not take into account displacement from activities on State and private Lands.</p> <p>...the grizzly bear access amendment standards makes it appear that there is more core habitat than actually exists because disturbance effects from State and private lands are not taken into account.</p> <p>Precedent is set to apply a buffer around private property in the East West Access project in the Blue Grass Bear Unit, an ongoing EIS.</p> <p>The Scoping Notice and dEA do not list any ongoing or proposed activities for 10 years in the future on either Federal, IDL or private lands which would cause displacement of grizzly bears and core habitat reduction on adjacent Federal Lands.</p>	<p>In response to this comment, the IPNF updated data on road networks on State (IDL) and private industrial forestlands in the BMU, and recalculated the baseline (existing) core, OMRD and TMRD condition. These changes also affected the final (post-implementation) condition of the BMU compared to the draft EA. Since core, OMRD and TMRD are determined based on the presence of motorized routes, it is not necessary to buffer areas from core (regardless of ownership) where no such routes are present. There is no requirement under NEPA or ESA to assess the effects of previously undetermined or unspecified activities on any ownerships. Doing so would be speculative and somewhat “arbitrary.”</p> <p>If all non-Federal lands in the Grouse BMU were buffered from core by 500 meters, along with roads on NFS lands that are encumbered by existing permits (e.g., Twentymile Road 408) or ANILCA claims (e.g., Grouse Creek Road 280), the highest level of core attainable would be 35.7% (even in the absence of any other roads on NFS lands). Thus, if habitat were modeled in the BMU as suggested there is no way the core standard of $\geq 37\%$ could ever be met through management of motorized routes on NFS lands.</p> <p>The Forest Service disagrees with the statement that the calculation methods used for the Grouse BMU make it appear that there is more core habitat than actually exists – in fact, it is almost certainly the opposite. The IPNF assumes there are no core or low-road density areas on non-Federal lands in the BMU. However, a number of the roads on State and private lands in the area have been virtually undrivable for over a decade, and may be providing areas of core habitat even though they are not counted toward</p>

			<p>the core standard. Additionally, several roads on State and private lands in the Twentymile and Trail Creek drainages are currently gated, so the “actual” OMRD in the BMU is lower than is being reported.</p> <p>There is no direction to buffer all non-federal ownerships by 500 meters for core purposes, and this was only done in Blue Grass BMU due to exceptional mitigating circumstances. There was known and proposed road building on private lands at the eastern end of the BMU, and aerial photographs showed obvious linear features throughout the extent of the Continental Mine property that may currently serve as motorized routes. Therefore, these lands were buffered in their entirety, as this result was little different than buffering the actual roads.</p> <p>From a practical standpoint, the Blue-Grass and Grouse BMUs are dissimilar at several levels. In the 1990s, Blue-Grass was designated by the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee (IGBC) Selkirk/Cabinet-Yaak Subcommittee as a Priority 1 BMU (areas consistently used by grizzly bears) while Grouse was designated a Priority 3 BMU (areas where grizzly bear use was intermittent or absent). Presumably this designation was also a reflection of the relative value of various units to grizzly bear recovery.</p> <p>Additionally, the Blue-Grass BMU is 97% Federally administered, situated near the center of the Selkirk Recovery Zone, and has been continuously occupied by grizzly bears since at least the 1980s. By contrast Grouse BMU contains only 54% Federal ownership, is located at the western edge of the Cabinet-Yaak Recovery Area, and grizzly bear use has generally been limited to subadult males and translocated females in recent years (and was virtually nonexistent prior to 2003). The importance of the Blue-Grass BMU to the recovery of the Selkirk grizzly bear population has been well documented. While the McArthur Lake Linkage Zone adjacent to Grouse BMU may have been “identified as important by many factions and bills,” there is scant empirical evidence that this corridor is extensively used by grizzly bears due to the presence of a busy highway, two railroads, and numerous residences and other developments in the corridor.</p>
1	5	High road densities and forest management activities on IDL and private lands in the Grouse Bear Unit increase mortality risk and constitute a taking under the ESA.	It is not the mission, nor within the authority, of the U.S. Forest Service to regulate potential take occurring on non-Federal ownerships.
1	6	HCP's can and should be developed for IDL and private timber lands in the bear unit.	See response to comment 1.5. Habitat Conservation Plans are entered into by the Fish and Wildlife Service and non-federal parties, and do not involve Forest Service participation.

1	7	<p>The Scoping Notice and dEA do not provide a map of seasonal habitats or of quality habitat complexes if not seasonal to assist in core area location and to assist in commenting on the road closure proposals, handicapping biologists and commentators.</p>	<p>Researchers have constructed a preliminary grizzly bear habitat model of the Cabinet Mountains – based on use data from collared females – for the spring, summer and fall seasons. We mapped habitat for the Grouse BMU, concentrating on areas the model identified as “high use” and “very high use.” These data are available on request.</p> <p>The results for spring use identified approximately 31,330 acres of the BMU as high/very high use, of which 12,284 acres were in core habitat in 2018. The proposed action would add an additional 2,174 acres of high/very high use habitat to core. About 10,500 acres of high/very high use habitat were on non-Federal lands. Patterns were similar for summer and fall habitats.</p> <p>Most of the high/very high use seasonal habitats are either already in core habitat or are on (or within the influence zone of roads on) non-Federal ownerships, with additional such acres being added to core through the proposed action. While the habitat model can be useful in identifying areas where road closures would be most beneficial to bears, the fact remains that the IPNF is limited to few options for road closures in the Grouse BMU (see EA p. 10 and response to comment 3.1.).</p>
1	8	<p>The USFS should consider a major reroute of road 280, keeping it at least 500m away from the riparian area of Grouse Creek. The existing road and proposed reroute still causes disturbance to grizzly bears that might exploit the quality riparian habitat of Grouse Creek.</p> <p>In addition it is not clear if Grouse Creek supports Kokanee Salmon in addition to West Slope Cutthroat and Bull trout.</p>	<p>The project proposes to decommission 1.4 miles of the Grouse Creek Road (FSR 280) adjacent to the stream.</p> <p>IDFG has stocked both kokanee and Rainbow Trout in Grouse Creek. These events have been isolated and infrequent in recent history. Early spawning kokanee were stocked around Pend Oreille in several tributaries during that window (2013) primary due to a shortage in late spawning kokanee, the typical type. Early kokanee are typically stream spawning fish and are generally believed to be less dependable because streams are dynamic. Although these kokanee did return to many of the streams in which they were stocked, they generally did not result in self maintaining populations of significance. As a result, it is uncertain whether you’ll consistently find kokanee in Grouse Creek. As for recent stocking of rainbows, this was also an isolated event. Rainbows have occupied Grouse Creek probably since the 1950s. The recent stocking event represented an effort to work with anglers to evaluate introduction of new “Gerrard genetics” into the Lake Pend Oreille population. IDFG worked with the Lake Pend Oreille Idaho Club to test the validity of stocking Gerrard Rainbow Trout into the Lake. General conclusions were 1) The Rainbows in the lake are the Rainbows that were in the lake (“genetically speaking”), 2) Growth is driven by kokanee availability and not genetics (because of conclusion 1), 3) Stocked fish (marked prior to stocking) were not highly</p>

			present in the fishery, and 4) generally didn't work to improve fishing opportunity.
1	9	Due to the interspersed personal, private timberland and IDL lands, there is ample opportunity for late season snowmobilers to enter grizzly core areas, negating the disturbance free core habitat. Please provide snowmobile use documentation for the bear unit.	The purpose of the project is to bring the Grouse BMU into compliance with the 2015 Revised Forest Plan standards originally developed in the Access Amendment. These standards are specific to wheeled motorized use. Oversnow vehicle use is currently being analyzed under the Kaniksu Oversnow Vehicle Use Plan. There are no groomed oversnow routes or designated play areas in the Grouse BMU, although the Trail Creek Road (FSR 404) is recognized as an ungroomed snowmobile route.
1	10	In addition because of climate change, please extend the bear year from April 1 to March 15 to provide an additional layer of disturbance free protection for early emerging grizzly bears.	Currently, there is insufficient research to justify changing the dates for the active (non-denning) bear year to adjust for potential effects of climate change, and project-level analysis at the scale of a single BMU is an inappropriate forum to do so. Changes of this nature would take place at the recommendation of grizzly bear researchers and the IGBC, and would require a Forest Plan amendment if justified.
2	1	The EA should closely look at how summer public access will change with the project's implementation. The EA should also look at how the project will impact winter recreation opportunities as well.	Since nearly all of the road miles proposed for storage or decommissioning are unavailable for public wheeled motorized use during the summer, effects to this user group would be minor. The proposal's effects to non-motorized summer recreation would vary: some of the roads in question (e.g. FSR 215) currently have drivable surfaces that easily lend themselves to foot, bicycle or equestrian travel, while others (e.g. FSR 2636) are heavily vegetated and difficult to traverse on foot. Following implementation, non-motorized travel may become more difficult on the former class of roads (particularly for bicycles and equestrians), but would not be greatly impacted for the latter. The Forest Service is unaware of considerable amounts of use of any of these roads by bicyclists or equestrians, and foot travel (hikers, hunters and berry pickers) would still be possible – although somewhat more challenging – after the roads are stored. There are no groomed snowmobile routes or designated play areas in the Grouse BMU. While several arterial roads traversing the BMU receive some level of snowmobile use (Twentymile, Trail and Grouse creek roads), they would not be affected by this proposal. The roads proposed for storage generally receive infrequent (if any) snowmobile use, so winter

			recreation opportunities would not be greatly affected by the proposed action.
3	1	<p>The sole action alternative would store another 7.7 miles of roads that are currently open to motor vehicle (wheeled) travel from December 1 to March 31. However, these roads are already closed to motor vehicle use during the active bear season (this is also the time of year when traveling these roads in a wheeled vehicle is not possible due to snow). Consequently, this change would do nothing to improve the situation for grizzly bears.</p> <p>The remaining miles of roads proposed for storage (20.1 mi) are not presently open to public motor vehicle travel. As such, these miles would result in no meaningful change on the ground as far as grizzly bears are concerned.</p> <p>If this population is to be recovered, then the agency must take more meaningful steps to improve grizzly bear habitat than storing roads that are already off-limits to the public during the active bear season. We recommend that the Forest Service consider an additional action alternative that results in a greater amount of open road closures in the Grouse BMU.</p>	<p>Research conducted in both the South Fork of the Flathead River (Mace and Manley 1993) and the Selkirk/Cabinet-Yaak ecosystems (Wakkinen and Kasworm 1997) demonstrated an avoidance response from grizzly bears of both open and gated roads, but not for vegetated or barriered roads. This research has formed the basis for the core and motorized route density (open and total) standards in the IPNF Revised Forest Plan.</p> <p>While some of the roads proposed for storage are undrivable due to vegetation, several others are drivable and currently receive some level of administrative and occasional illegal use. Storage is intended to eliminate all motorized use of these roads, and ensure they remain so for at least ten years. Based on this, we would argue that the proposed action does in fact improve the situation for grizzly bears by reducing miles of road capable of accommodating motorized traffic.</p> <p>While rendering currently gated roads to an undrivable condition (storage or decommissioning) may not considerably reduce the risk of direct bear mortality, anecdotal information indicates that hunters are more likely to walk an intact road prism (and subsequently increase risk to bears) than one that is partially ripped and has drainage structures removed. Additionally, as time passes the road would become less recognizable as such, and grizzly bears would be less likely to avoid surrounding habitats. The proposed action would increase habitat available to grizzly bears, reduce displacement from occasional (administrative) motorized use, and slightly decrease direct mortality risk indirectly associated with motorized access.</p> <p>In looking at the proposed action map (Figure 2) on page 6 of the EA, it is apparent that there are only a few open roads available to be closed on NFS lands in the Grouse BMU, and with a few exceptions each of these is encumbered by agreements with other entities (e.g. Twentymile Pass Road 408 provides access to numerous permit holders at the Black Mountain communications site) or provides access to State Lands or private inholdings (e.g. Grouse Creek, Trail Creek and Rapid Lightning Creek roads). The unfortunate reality is that further reductions in motorized access in the BMU (as currently aligned) are unlikely given ownership patterns and associated management activities by other landowners within the BMU.</p>

4	1	The Idaho Department of Environmental Quality supports the US Forest Services intentions to reroute a section of Forest System Road 280 and storage and decommissioning of other road systems. These actions will result in sediment load reductions to Grouse Creek and contribute to the trend toward beneficial use support. Continued efforts toward road storage will assure long-term benefits toward water quality and aquatic life in North Fork and mainstem Grouse Creeks.	Thank you for your comment
4	2	Road storage efforts in this watershed [Rapid Lightning Creek] will likely contribute to much-needed sediment load reductions in this watershed.	The Forest Service proposes storage of approximately 12.4 road miles within the Rapid Lightning Creek watershed (FSR 2636, 2695, 2742, 2743 and 2743A), which would result in an overall net decrease in sediment yield to the watershed (EA p. 28).
5	1	Storing roads in Sec. 18, Twp. 60N, Rge. 2E, would leave more roads open in the Kootenai Valley Fire Protection District and may better align with providing core habitat.	Thank you for your comment. The roads in question have recently been placed into storage, as they were previously analyzed under the Twentymile Creek EA.
6	1	We would also ask that you leave the west half of the 2636 open.	Unfortunately, presence of the FSR 2636 “loop” road removes considerable acreage from core habitat in the BMU, and leaving even the west half as a restricted road represents a more than 200-acre core loss. If this loop were left in place, the Forest Service would be unable to meet the core standard with the proposed action – and would have few other options to compensate for the loss. Forest Service records do not show any easements, permits or other authorizations for access across NFS lands on this road, and it is believed that Stimson has reasonable access to Section 29 via an alternate route.
7	1	I’m a trail user so like the idea of more remote areas, but at the same time realize by storing roads now the majority of human forest activity puts even more pressure on the few remaining open roads and resulting over exploiting of those resources.	The Forest Service agrees that limiting human use of a resource inevitably results in increased use of other, more accessible resources. This is one of the paradoxes of natural resource management. Since grizzly bears generally fare better in relatively undisturbed (by humans) habitats, it is usually beneficial for this species to concentrate human impacts in fewer areas, rather than disperse them out over a larger portion of the landscape (to the extent practical).

8	1	We are in favor of moving the road away from Grouse Creek and closing or storing as many roads as possible to prevent further erosion and habitat intrusion by motorized vehicles.	Thank you for your comment. The proposed action has been designed to reroute the road away from Grouse Creek and reduce road densities in the area.
9	1	I think the USFS needs to stand back and consider whether the grizzly bear management unit policies are now really needed, but certainly, instead of closing or storing more roads, a better option would be to at least, make no changes, leave the access at it is now.	Thank you for your comment. We understand that some members of the public desire greater motorized access on NFS lands. However, the IPNF revised Land Management Plan requires the Forest Service to meet motorized access standards for the Grouse BMU – which requires the reduction of motorized routes described in the EA.
10	1	Try to enhance firefighting access.	<p>Thank you for your comment. The Forest Service is required to balance the needs of multiple resource areas – occasionally pitting one against another. In this case, compliance with the revised Land Management Plan requires the reduction of motorized routes to meet motorized access standards for the Grouse BMU.</p> <p>Though no direct effects to the fire and fuels resource as a result of these activities are anticipated, an indirect effect would be less timely access by fire personnel in the event a wildfire occurs. Putting currently drivable roads into storage would result in reduced vehicle access (including by fire engines) in the event of a wildfire in those areas, and has the potential to affect suppression response times, fire growth and size, and fire costs. However, several roads proposed for storage are either not currently accessible or provide only minimal land access, so storing them are of little concern from a fire management perspective.</p> <p>Although access may be reduced with either storage or decommissioning, storage is preferred for the fire/fuels resource; even though both activities have the same positive benefit for aquatics, wildlife and other resources, a stored road remains part of the road system whereas a decommissioned road does not. Therefore, a stored road can be reopened and made drivable again in the future if a need arises, especially in an emergency such as for wildfire suppression.</p>
		It is inaccurate to state that “this section of the [Grouse Creek] road floods annually.” The handful of times this has occurred has only been in relatively recent times, and the last flooding is directly attributable to the latest attempt by the USFS to introduce greater organic content into the riverine environment to enhance fishery habitat. The rerouting of Forest Road 280 over such high terrain,	Thank you for your comments. The sentence in the scoping notice and draft Environmental Assessment regarding flooding of FSR 280 likely overstated the case, and was corrected in the final EA. However, it is true that this particular section of road has recently had more frequent issues with flood damage. The IPNF has documented flood damage of FSR 280, ranging from minor surface damage to extensive road and bank loss, in 2006, 2011, 2012, and 2015.

	<p>and through private land, seems excessive in both cost and practicality.</p>	<p>This flood damage is directly attributable to the fact that the road is in the flood plain of Grouse Creek. This has made this section of the road more vulnerable to past and recent attempts by the Forest Service to use woody debris to enhance channel function to accelerate hydrologic processes that add sinuosity and stream length. It is true that these projects, over time have impacted the road by causing the stream to meander closer to and compromise certain sections of the road. However, these processes have been trending that way for the last couple decades, ever since the Forest Service started restoration projects in Grouse Creek in 1994 for the benefit of bull trout and proper channel function. The frequency of flooding will continue to be a problem and relocating the road would likely be the most cost effective and ecologically sound solution for the Grouse Creek watershed and bull trout.</p> <p>The Forest Service will work closely with the residents of Upper Grouse Creek to ensure that access to their homes is not cut off or compromised at any time. The existing route of road #280 would not be closed until the reroute is fully completed. A small portion of the reroute would be through private land while most would be constructed on NFS Lands. Negotiations are ongoing to reach an agreement on the final road alignment. About one half mile of the reroute would utilize an existing old road prism that runs westward from the Wylie Creek trailhead. The Forest Service would continue to work with Grouse Creek residents and update them as the project moves forward.</p>
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