United States Department of Agriculture

Draft Record of Decision Custer Gallatin National Forest Land Management Plan

Forest Service Northern Region Publication No. R1-19-07 July 2020

Custer Gallatin National Forest Title Page: Photo Credit – Mariah Leuschen-Lonergan. Top left, going clockwise – Coneflower, Echinacea, native wildflowers, Sioux Ranger District; American Flag and U.S. Forest Service Flag displayed in winter on the Hebgen Ranger District; Log Deck from East Short Pines Project, Sioux Ranger District, photo by Kurt Hansen; Bison grazing in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem with Arrowleaf Balsamroot in background; Elk Grazing on the Gardiner R.D. with sagebrush in background, foreground; Center - Close up of Indian Paintbrush, Bozeman R.D; Calf nursing from Mother (Cow), Grazing permittees are a large part of the Ashland and Sioux Ranger Districts; Close-up of native alpine wildflowers in early spring on the Beartooth R.D., Beartooth Pass; View looking into the Rock Creek drainage and Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness atop Beartooth Pass, Beartooth R.D; Aspen trees blowing in light breeze on the Yellowstone Ranger District, Suce Creek Trail.

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Draft Record of Decision for the Custer Gallatin National Forest Land Management Plan

The Custer Gallatin National Forest is located in southern Montana and northwestern South Dakota and includes 3,039,000 acres of National Forest System lands in the following counties: Carbon, Carter, Gallatin, Madison, Meagher, Park, Powder River, Rosebud, Stillwater, Sweet Grass, Montana; and Harding County, South Dakota.

Lead Agency:	**United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service**
Cooperating Agencies	**Park County, Montana** **Sweet Grass County, Montana** **South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks** **State of South Dakota**
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List of Acronyms

CFR	Code of Federal Regulations
DC	Desired Conditions
FW	Forestwide
GDL	Guideline
GO	Goal
OBJ	Objective
STD	Standard
SUIT	Suitability
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture

Introduction

This draft record of decision documents my decision and rationale for approving the Custer Gallatin National Forest Land Management Plan (plan). The decision is consistent with the Forest Service's 2012 National Forest System Land Management Planning Rule (referred to as the 2012 Planning Rule) and advances goals of the Department of Agriculture, including facilitating rural prosperity and economic development and fostering productive and sustainable use of our National Forest System lands.

The Custer and the Gallatin National Forests were administratively combined in 2014. This plan revises and replaces the two existing Custer and Gallatin National Forest Land Management Plans into one plan that covers the administratively combined national forests. The plan describes desired conditions, objectives, standards, and guidelines, as well as land suitability for project and activity decision making. The plan will guide resource management activities on the national forest for about the next 15 years, until amended or revised.

The Custer Gallatin National Forest (also referred to as the Custer Gallatin, or the national forest) has a history of multiple co-existing uses, including recreation, mining, grazing, timber, hunting, and fishing, as well as providing clean water for agriculture and communities. The plan provides the guiding framework for management of the Custer Gallatin in a manner that provides for rural prosperity through support for livelihoods and overall quality of life. It is estimated that about 5,600 jobs and $242 million in labor income are supported in association with recreation, mining, livestock grazing, and other uses of the national forest.

Forest Setting

The Custer Gallatin (the plan area) encompasses more than 3 million acres in southern Montana and the northwestern corner of South Dakota (figure 1). The Custer Gallatin is made up of a series of distinctive landscapes and "island" mountain ranges and is characterized by the transition between western mountainous terrains and eastern pine savanna areas. Stretching more than 500 miles from its westernmost to its easternmost boundaries, the national forest represents a highly diverse landscape ecologically, socially, economically, and culturally.

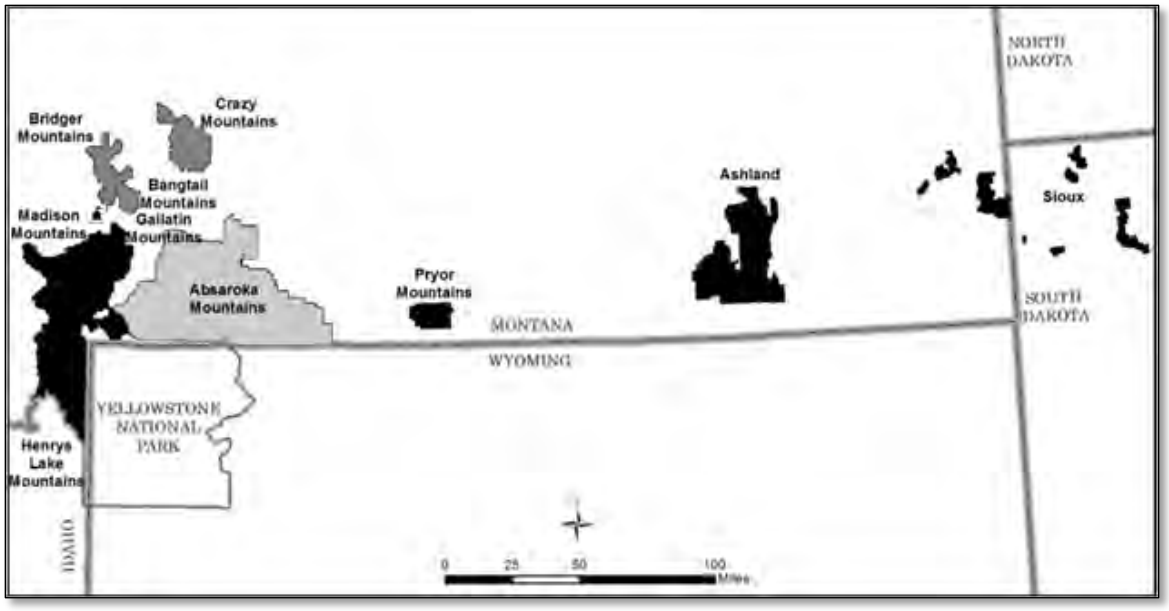

Figure 1. Location of the Custer Gallatin National Forest and geographic areas

From southwestern Montana's rugged mountain peaks, which include the highest point in Montana, east to ponderosa pine-clad hills rising over the surrounding rolling plains, the national forest is inhabited by hundreds of species of native plants, mammals, birds, fish, reptiles, amphibians, and invertebrates. This diverse ecological and geographic span contributes to the tremendous diversity of plant and wildlife species. The western three-fourths of the Custer Gallatin encompasses the northern portion of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, the largest nearly intact ecosystem in the conterminous United States.

The national forest contributes to a variety of economic enterprises including ranches, agricultural communities, outfitters and guides, destination ski and recreation areas, large mines, gateway resorts, and numerous diverse small businesses that support recreation and tourism on public lands. Grazing is critically important in rural counties, and outside of national grasslands, the Ashland and Sioux Ranger Districts together support the largest grazing programs in the National Forest System. The Stillwater Complex is the only primary producer of platinum and palladium in the United States, and one of only three such producers in the world.

Spectacular scenery, iconic and abundant wildlife, and a wide variety of recreation opportunities contribute to community quality of life and economic sustainability through ecotourism, wildlife viewing, hunting, and fishing. Given proximity to Yellowstone National Park and renowned attractions such as the Beartooth Highway and Big Sky Ski Resort, the national forest is part of an international destination. Year-round recreation opportunities include camping, hiking, rafting, climbing, ski areas, organizational camps, outfitter guide services, and motorized and non-motorized transport. More than one million acres of designated wilderness and about 844,000 acres of inventoried roadless areas provide for vast landscapes that allow for more primitive recreation experiences. Recreation is the national forest's most significant contributor to the local economies on the western portion of the national forest in terms of jobs and generated income.

Native American use of the national forest over the centuries is manifest in hundreds of archaeological, sacred sites, and other areas of traditional cultural importance, many of which are listed or eligible to be listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Significant spiritual, traditional use, and ceremonial sites are located on the national forest and are in use today by Tribal members.

Need for Change

This decision revises the 1986 Custer plan, which was approved in 1987, and 1987 Gallatin plans. The Custer plan has been amended 33 times, and the Gallatin plan has been amended 50 times. The existing plans are more than 30 years old and the social, economic, and ecological conditions on the Custer Gallatin have changed, resulting in land management plans that are not as responsive to the needs of local communities and the relevant land management challenges for the area. Since the current plans were completed, there have been major changes in ecological, social, and economic conditions in the area, including large wildland fires, development in the wildland-urban interface, considerable population growth around communities like Bozeman and Big Sky, land consolidations, spread of invasive species, and changing recreation uses and expectations. These changes in resource demands, availability of new scientific information, and promulgation of new policy, including the 2012 Planning Rule, all speak to the need for an updated land management plan that is relevant and responsive to current issues and conditions.

A draft preliminary need for change was made available for public review and feedback in November 2016. The preliminary need for change was identified based on assessments and feedback from this review. In particular, this plan revision addresses the following topics:

- Supporting local economies through both the service-based economy that includes recreation and tourism, and commodity production, including timber, permitted grazing, mining, and other multiple uses;
- Identifying areas to be managed under land allocations including recommended wilderness and eligible wild and scenic rivers, in line with new agency policy and the 2012 Planning Rule;
- Increasing demands for additional recreation opportunity and access to the Custer Gallatin;
- Providing for conservation of wildlife and aquatic habitat, including connectivity;
- Preventing aquatic invasive species and preventing disease—for example, white-nose syndrome in bats, white pine blister rust, and diseases transmitted by domestic animals to bighorn sheep;
- Incorporating new information and new science;
- Creating one unified plan for the Custer Gallatin.

Engagement with State and Local Governments, Other Federal Agencies, Indian Tribes, and The Public

Our public participation efforts ensured engagement and collaboration with a variety of stakeholders throughout the multi-year plan revision process (2016 to 2020). This provided transparency, understanding of the planning process, and regular dialogue among different groups, and resulted in a plan that is responsive to State and local governments, other Federal agencies, Indian Tribes, and the public. We will continue to work with these groups to reach our goals over the next 15 years.

Key formal milestones for engagement included:

- January 2016: public launch of plan revision.
- February 4, 2016: Federal Register notice of initiation for the assessment of the Custer Gallatin.
- January 3, 2018: Federal Register notice of intent to prepare an environmental impact statement.
- March 8, 2019: Federal Register notice of availability of the draft plan and draft environmental impact statement.

State and Local Governments and Other Federal Agencies

The Custer Gallatin worked directly with State and local governments, other Federal agencies, and Indian Tribes throughout the planning process.

Given their important management role across the broader landscape, the Custer Gallatin established an Inter-Governmental Working Group with State, County, local, and Tribal governments, and other Federal agencies. Virtual meetings held several times per year between 2016 and 2019 helped inform the participants of the planning progress, provided an opportunity for greater understanding and feedback, and allowed participants to hear from a broad range of other agency participants. We used the contributors' information to plan other public engagement efforts throughout the planning process.

Cooperating agency status was available to any interested government. Four governments or agencies requested cooperating agency status: Park County, Montana, Sweet Grass County, Montana, the State of South Dakota, and the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks. Cooperators were invited to participate (by phone) in planning team meetings and in the review of draft documents. The cooperators were also asked to provide a review of compatibility of their land use plans with the plan, so that this review was from the perspective of the cooperator. The results of this review are available in appendix E of the final environmental impact statement.

Appendix E of the final environmental impact statement documents the review of compatibility of land use plans of the cities of Bozeman and West Yellowstone, Montana; 11 counties

containing Custer Gallatin lands; Montana and South Dakota State-level plans; and adjacent Federal agencies (Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, and other national forests) that are relevant to the plan area as required by the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) in 36 CFR 219.4(b). The two Indian reservations in closest proximity to the national forest (Crow and Northern Cheyenne) do not have land use plans that can be compared to a land management plan. Because of the very different nature of a land management plan with the land use plans of other agencies, the review of compatibility focused on higher-level desired conditions and goals, rather than more specific standards, guidelines, objectives and suitable uses, unless provided by a cooperating agency review. This review found the plan largely compatible with the land use plans of other governments at the level of desired conditions and goals. However, some aspects of one county land use plan could not be accommodated, such as direction to ensure that land adjustments result in no net gain of National Forest System lands. The plan includes goals to work with county and other government agencies, which would provide opportunities to continue to work to reduce conflicts during implementation of the plan.

In addition, my staff attended meetings with county commissioners, City of Bozeman staff, State agency staff, and staff of the South Dakota State Legislature to inform these agencies and governments of planning progress and to provide an opportunity for learning and obtaining important feedback.

The planning record from these meetings demonstrates our commitment to meaningfully engage with interested and affected agencies, as well as cooperate with these entities in the development of this plan.

Several County Commissions expressed either support or opposition to certain land allocations made in the plan. I carefully considered these comments in selection of the preferred alternative, as further explained in the rationale for the decision.

The City of Bozeman expressed concern that wildlife key linkage areas would prohibit development of additional water storage facilities in the municipal watershed. Plan components were revised to accommodate carefully designed water storage facilities, so long as they would not inhibit wildlife migration.

Counties, State agencies, and other Federal agencies suggested plan components, requested additional information in the plan, requested additional analysis, and supported or opposed particular alternatives. While not every suggestion or request was accommodated, plan components were modified, information was added to the plan, and analysis was added to the final environmental impact statement in response to comments from State and local governments and other Federal agencies. Agency and Tribal letters are available in the Forest Service Comment and Analysis Response Application (CARA) electronic reading room for the Custer Gallatin forest plan revision. These comments were also carefully considered in the selection of the preferred alternative.

Examples of specific changes to plan components informed by comments from State agencies include:

- Added a 50-foot outer riparian management zone to category 2 streams (FW-STD-RMZ-01).

- Revised big game guideline FW-GDL-WLBI 01 to include year-round considerations for habitat functionality associated with conifer cover.
- Added or revised a number of goals (FW-GO-BAT 01, FW-GO-WLBHS 02, FW-GO-WLBI 01, and FW-GO-WLGB 02, 03, and 04).

We initiated consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on one endangered species (whooping crane), and four threatened species (Canada lynx, grizzly bear, northern long-eared bat, and western Glacier stonefly), and requested conferencing on one proposed species (wolverine) and one candidate species (whitebark pine).

Indian Tribes

The Custer Gallatin plan revision process has involved 19 federally recognized Indian Tribes located in North and South Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington. These Tribes are listed in section 3. of the final environmental impact statement, areas of Tribal importance.

Tribal coordination and consultation began with identification of which Tribes have aboriginal ties to treaty rights on the national forest. Contacts were made with each of these Tribes through informational meetings, including the Interagency Bison Management meetings and North Dakota Office of Transportation meetings. Letters, emails, and follow-up phone calls were made to determine if Tribes were interested in participating in plan revision. Face-to-face meetings at the reservation headquarters were also held to further engage Tribes and hear their concerns and ideas related to key stages of the revision: the review of the plan assessment, proposed action, the draft environmental impact statement and draft plan, and the final environmental impact statement and 2020 plan. The planning record from these meetings demonstrates our commitment to meaningfully engage with Tribes as well as the cooperation of Tribes in the development of this plan.

Formal letters commenting on the draft plan and draft environmental impact statement were received from the Shoshone Bannock, the Nez Perce, and the Crow Nations. Face-to-face meetings at Tribal headquarters occurred with the Shoshone Bannock, Nez Perce, Umatilla, Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, Blackfeet, Fort Peck Tribes, Eastern Shoshone, Northern Arapahoe, Crow, and Northern Cheyenne. Comments and concerns received from the Tribes included bison, bighorn sheep, treaty rights, sacred sites, traditional cultural practices, land designations, and access.

The selected alternative incorporates Tribal requests for more proactive bison habitat management. The selected alternative incorporates Tribal requests for limits to domestic sheep and goat grazing, and public use of pack goats, to limit spread of disease to bighorn sheep. These limits do not ban all use of pack goats, and the grazing limits do not apply to the eastern portion of the national forest where bighorn sheep are not present. The selected alternative incorporates the request of Crow Tribal staff for protection of the Crazy Mountains by designating the highest elevations in this range as recommended wilderness area and backcountry area. The selected alternative also includes plan components that address treaty rights, sacred sites, traditional cultural practices, and access.

Some, but not all, Tribes requested that additional species be designated as species of conservation concern, including bison and bighorn sheep. The regional forester has not identified these species as species of conservation concern, but the plan contains specific guidance and plan components to address year-round bison presence and expansion of bison on the national forest and prevention of disease to bighorn sheep from domestic livestock.

Public Involvement

Public involvement for the Custer Gallatin plan revision was guided by the principles of transparency, inclusion, adaptability, consistency, accessibility, affordability, and finding solutions. A wide range of methods was used, including collaborative style public meetings, webinars to reach a wide geography, resource-oriented podcasts, a “Science of Forest Planning” symposium, collaborative mapping tools, email announcements, press releases, social media, and website information.

Low income and minority populations in the national forest’s social area of influence are highly correlated to Indian Reservations. Involvement of Tribal governments is discussed in the preceding section.

Youth engagement was designed for specific age groups and included a poster contest for children in grades 3 through 8, presentations at area high school biology classes, and presentations to both undergraduate and graduate classes as well as public meetings at Montana State University. Younger children were interested in trees, fire, and air. High schoolers were interested in wildlife, ecology, and recreation. College students were interested in recreation, wilderness, and Forest Service employment.

Public comments on the draft environmental impact statement and draft plan provided important information in development of the preferred alternative. The public comments and the interdisciplinary team’s responses were critical to improving the final environmental impact statement and the 2020 plan. The overall results of our public participation efforts were greater transparency, greater public understanding of the planning process, and promotion of constructive dialogue among and between different groups. See the public involvement section of chapter 2 of the final environmental impact statement for more detailed public involvement information.

Decision and Rationale for the Decision

Decision

In reaching a decision on this plan, I reviewed the environmental analysis disclosed in the final environmental impact statement, the planning record, comments from our State and local government partners, Indian Tribes, other Federal agencies, and the public, and I considered how this plan meets the identified needs for change and the requirements of the 2012 Planning Rule, 36 CFR 219. Based on this review, I have selected alternative F as my draft decision, as described in the final environmental impact statement and the accompanying Custer Gallatin National Forest 2020 Land Management Plan. This selected alternative uses alternative B from the draft environmental impact statement as a starting point, with modifications in response to

public comments and features of other alternatives. It addresses the need for change identified during the assessment and meets the requirements of the 2012 Planning Rule. This draft decision is also responsive to local government, Tribal, and public engagement, and is based upon more than 30 years of knowledge gained from implementation and amendment of the 1986 and 1987 plans.

Land management planning can be an esoteric process, with rules, procedures, and language that are difficult to understand or relate to. But at its core, this new plan is our new "contract" with the public for how this national forest will be managed into the future. In reflecting on this process over the last four years, the one area of consensus has been about the incredible value that these lands hold for so many people and for so many reasons. There is also agreement that these lands deserve our best efforts in shared stewardship.

My role as the decision maker is to put forth a plan that provides for long-term sustainability (ecological, economic, and social) and considers the richness of public interests and the uniqueness of affected communities. I also wished to develop a plan that reflects the knowledge gained through 100-plus years of management experience across the national forest and the continued and continuing evolution of our social and ecological scientific understandings.

As my staff and I have engaged with communities, partners, Indian Tribes, cooperators, and many, many people who care about this national forest, we have been humbled by the knowledge, commitment, energy, and passion that has been shared. We appreciate the respectful manner with which people have interacted with our team and with others who hold different views. The common desire is for a plan that recognizes and protects what people care about now and into the future. We are also keenly aware that there is no way to satisfy all interests, nor a way to bridge all values held by our public.

Key Elements of the Decision

Key elements of the selected alternative include:

1. A suite of plan components that provide for social, economic, and ecological sustainability; diversity of plant and animal communities; and multiple uses within the inherent capability of the Custer Gallatin.
2. Land allocations including recommended wilderness areas, backcountry areas, recreation emphasis areas, eligible wild and scenic rivers, the Stillwater Complex, and key linkage areas (see maps in plan appendix B).
3. Plan components that identify motorized and mechanized transport, communication facilities, and public rental use of the Windy Pass Cabin not suitable in areas being recommended for wilderness (FW-SUIT-RWA-02,05, and 07).
4. Plan components that identify mechanized transport suitable only on system roads and on approved system mountain bike trails in backcountry areas and key linkage areas (FW-SUIT-WL-01 and each backcountry area in plan chapter 3).
5. A plan component that identify mountain bike use as unsuitable in the Bad Canyon Backcountry Area (AB-SUIT-BCBCA-01).

6. Plan components that allow public and outfitter use of pack goats with conditions such as season of use, and number of pack goats per party (FW-SUIT-REC-01, 02; FW-STD-RECOG-01, 02).
7. Plan components that support year-round bison presence and expansion of bison on the national forest for bison habitat management (FW-DC, GO, OBJ, GDL-WLBI).
8. Plan objectives that reflect a mix of resource enhancement, moving toward forested vegetation desired conditions, timber and wood products volume, hazardous fuel treatment, road, trail, and facility maintenance, and new recreation facilities.
9. A plan component that identifies areas that may be suitable for new aircraft landing strips, pending site-specific analyses (FW-SUIT-AIRFIELDS-01).

Nature of Land Management Plan Decisions

Land management plans set the overall management direction and guidance for national forests. In contrast to site-specific Forest Service projects, land management plans do not authorize site-specific activities such as where to put a recreation trail or what timber will be harvested, but instead provide a framework to guide management activities across the national forest. A land management plan describes the desired conditions, outcomes, suitable uses, and appropriate management practices on a national forest. Carefully balancing multiple uses is an important part of land management planning to protect resources, support sustainable uses, and maintain healthy ecosystems. Planning in national forests and grasslands ensures balanced and thoughtful use and protection of the many resources of public lands.

The purpose of this plan is to guide future projects, practices, and uses to assure sustainable multiple-use management on the Custer Gallatin over the next 15 or more years. A land management plan establishes goals, desired conditions, objectives, standards, guidelines, and land suitability to assure coordination of multiple uses (such as outdoor recreation, range, timber, watershed, wildlife and fish, and wilderness) and sustained yield of products and services.

The plan does not authorize projects or activities, commit the Forest Service to take any specific action, or dictate internal operations (such as personnel matters, law enforcement, budget, or organizational changes). Management direction will be implemented through site-specific activities that must be consistent with the plan (36 CFR 219.15).

The national forest will also follow all laws, regulations, and policies that relate to managing National Forest System lands. The plan is designed to supplement, not replace, direction from these sources. The final environmental impact statement lists and considers this direction for each of the revision topics and specific resources, but the plan does not repeat laws, regulations, or program management policy, practices, or procedures.

Rationale for the Decision

Based upon my review of all alternatives, I have selected alternative F as the plan. I believe alternative F provides for a wide array of multiple uses, promotes long-term sustainability of plant and animal species, recognizes the unique role and perspectives of local elected officials and Tribal partners, puts forth a thoughtful scheme for protecting the existing character of wild

places, and provides sound scientific guidance with appropriate management flexibility for managing these lands into the future.

As further explained below, alternative F includes a range from non-motorized to motorized land allocations including recommended wilderness areas, wild and scenic rivers, backcountry areas, recreation emphasis areas, and the Stillwater Complex. This alternative includes direction to provide for unique ecological conditions and provides for uses that support local communities, including wood products, forage for livestock, the Stillwater Mine complex, municipal water supplies, and recreation uses, while protecting the clean air, clean water, spectacular scenery and iconic wildlife of this region. The mix of opportunities available for primitive recreation and non-motorized recreation experiences versus less primitive and more mechanized or motorized recreation experiences is predominantly consistent with current travel plans, with some changes due to recommended wilderness areas, backcountry areas, and key linkage areas.

I have carefully considered the requirements to avoid or minimize environmental harm in selecting alternative F. This alternative reflects the best overall arrangement of multiple uses while minimizing adverse environmental effects.

An explanation of my decision rationale is organized below by major issue areas that were identified as needing to change.

Supporting Local Communities

The plan supports local communities through both the service-based economy that includes recreation and tourism as well as commodity production, including permitted grazing, mining, timber, and other multiple uses. The plan contributes to social and economic sustainability in the following ways:

- It provides for management that will annually contribute about $242 million in labor income and 5,640 local jobs to the local communities, which is an increase of $10 million and 225 jobs as compared to recent years.
- It supports recreational use of the national forest. Recreation will annually generate more than $85 million in local income and more than 2,900 jobs.
- It supports livestock grazing, a vitally important use of the eastern portion of the national forest. Livestock grazing on the Custer Gallatin will annually contribute more than $12 million in labor income and 384 jobs.
- It recognizes the role of palladium and platinum mining with a Stillwater Complex land allocation. Mining on the national forest will annually contribute about $93 million in labor income and about 1,250 jobs.
- Forest products (primarily from timber harvest) will annually contribute about $19 million in labor income ($10 million more than under the existing plans) and 410 jobs. Supporting a local timber industry assists the national forest in achieving desired conditions while providing for the commercial sale of forest products.

Active vegetation management can contribute to resilient forests and ecosystems while providing social and economic benefits, such as enhancing the diversity of recreational

experiences and contributing to a sustainable production of timber. Although active vegetation management may have more potential for environmental effects and social conflicts, I am confident that forestwide plan components will guide management of these areas and are sufficient to mitigate and minimize the potential adverse environmental effects.

The plan contributes to social and economic sustainability with an estimated production of total wood products, which includes sawtimber and non-sawtimber, similar to or above current levels. The national forest expects to produce an estimated average sawtimber volume of 10 million board feet per year over the next decade. About 6,000 to 7,500 acres per year will be treated to achieve these outputs and improve vegetation conditions.

A number of commenters stated preferences for higher or lower plan objectives for many activities, including the plan's objectives for timber sale quantity, wood sale quality, and vegetation treatment acres. These objectives were developed in concert with all plan objectives. The plan's objectives reflect a mix of resource enhancement, moving toward forested vegetation desired conditions, timber and wood products volume, hazardous fuel treatment, road, trail, and facility maintenance, and new recreation facilities.

The higher objectives for timber sale quantity and wood sale quality in alternative E, while providing almost 170 more jobs and about $7,800,000 additional annual labor income than the selected alternative, would constrain objectives for most other activities and therefore limit noxious weed treatment, road, trail, and facility maintenance, and resource enhancement projects. The lower objectives for timber sale quantity and wood sale quality in alternative D would result in about 120 fewer jobs and about $5,600,000 less annual labor income than the selected alternative.

I find the objectives for timber sale quantity, wood sale quality, and vegetation treatment acres in the selected alternative, in concert with all plan objectives, best meets the multiple-use mission of the national forests, while providing wood products and supporting timber-based jobs and labor income.

Forestwide plan components guide permitted livestock grazing on the national forest (FW-DC/GO/STD/GDL-GRAZ). Desired conditions recognize that grazing allotments contribute to a supply of livestock forage that contributes to local ranching operation sustainability and local community economy, while maintaining or moving toward ecological desired conditions (FW-DC-GRAZ-01).

Forestwide plan components guide the national forest's energy and mineral development, in consideration of other resource values (FW-DC/GO/STD/GDL-EMIN). The Stillwater Complex land allocation recognizes the unique palladium and platinum minerals of this area.

Plan Allocations

The plan's land allocations, particularly those related to recommended wilderness areas, have been among the most controversial topics in land management planning on the Custer Gallatin, oftentimes requiring increased investment of time to engage our public and perform required analyses. Public and organizational comments received on our land allocations have fallen across the spectrum both in support of and against additional recommended wilderness.

When it comes to land allocations for this plan, most public comments and the greatest public interest have focused on generally undeveloped lands. Most of these areas are within the approximately 844,000 acres of inventoried roadless areas and therefore carry restrictions on new roadbuilding and timber management under the provisions of the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule. Some of these areas are in relatively large tracts; others are smaller but adjacent to larger undeveloped areas. Across the range of alternatives, we considered a suite of land allocations for these areas. Recommended wilderness or backcountry area allocations were used to call out those areas for which additional protective measures were desired to maintain wilderness characteristics or preserve the existing condition and current character.

In my decision, I am recommending seven recommended wilderness areas for a total of 125,675 acres. In reaching this decision, I focused on those areas that represent high-quality lands that are capable of maintaining the unique social and ecological characteristics that make them eligible for wilderness designation, while minimizing the inherent tradeoffs that come with managing these areas to maintain their wilderness characteristics. Motorized and mechanized transport, communication facilities, and public rental use of the Windy Pass Cabin would not be suitable uses in areas being recommended for wilderness (FW-SUIT-RWA-02,05, and 07).

In addition, the plan also includes 13 backcountry areas, totaling 208,957 acres. Backcountry areas are generally undeveloped or lightly developed, and the intent of this allocation is to maintain the existing backcountry character while allowing management flexibility, particularly for vegetation management. Existing motorized and mechanized recreation use would continue in 12 of the 13 backcountry areas on existing system routes and areas designated for these uses.

The plan also includes 10 recreation emphasis areas, totaling 224,608 acres. The Custer Gallatin supports a wide range of developed and dispersed recreation opportunities. Recreation emphasis areas acknowledge areas of current recreation use and future recreation emphasis. Recreation emphasis areas are designed to meet increased demands for recreation near local communities and to benefit local economies. Plan components reflect the unique recreation role of each recreation emphasis area (see plan chapter 2 for direction that applies to all recreation emphasis areas, and plan chapter 3 for unique direction for each recreation emphasis area).

One of the very few palladium mines in the world is located on the Custer Gallatin. The Stillwater Complex land allocation acknowledges this highly distinctive mineral resource.

Due to the geographic span of the national forest and highly diverse ecological, social, and economic characteristics, public and organizational comments often focused on distinct landscapes. The land allocation rationale described below is organized by landscape.

Sioux Geographic Area

The plan includes the 5,937-acre Chalk Buttes Backcountry Area and no recommended wilderness areas or recreation emphasis areas. A backcountry area land allocation will maintain the existing lightly developed character of the Chalk Buttes, while allowing management flexibility, particularly for vegetation management.

While some public comment requested the Chalk Buttes become a recommended wilderness area, existing roads disqualify this area from that allocation. Most public input, including from

Harding County, South Dakota, did not support recommended wilderness in other areas of the Sioux Geographic Area.

Ashland Geographic Area

The plan includes the Cook Mountain (9,794 acres), King Mountain (12,189 acres), and Tongue River Breaks (16,899 acres) Backcountry Areas, totaling about 39,000 acres, and no recommended wilderness areas or recreation emphasis areas. These backcountry areas have been designated as low development areas as part of the Custer plan since 1986. This plan continues the management emphasis of these areas. While some public comment requested that these areas become recommended wilderness areas, I have decided that backcountry area is more appropriate given public input from local communities and few threats to the undeveloped character of these areas.

Pryor Mountains Geographic Area

The plan includes two recommended wilderness areas (about 18,000 acres), two backcountry areas (about 18,700 acres), and no recreation emphasis areas in the Pryor Mountains.

The plan reflects recommendations from the Pryors Coalition for management of the Pryor Mountains, namely inclusion of the Bear Canyon Recommended Wilderness Area (10,366 acres), continued inclusion of a slightly larger Lost Water Canyon Recommended Wilderness Area (7,692 acres), and plan components to protect the unique plant communities of this mountain range. The Lost Water Canyon Recommended Wilderness Area continues the allocation of the 1986 Custer plan, although I have decided to enlarge this recommended wilderness area by about 800 acres to include more of Crooked Creek Canyon.

The Pryors Coalition requested that Big Pryor and Punch Bowl also be recommended wilderness areas, and also requested a larger Lost Water Canyon Recommended Wilderness Area. I have selected a backcountry allocation for Big Pryor (12,610 acres) and Punch Bowl (6,097 acres) so that existing motorized and mechanized transport can continue but not expand, and to retain flexibility for future vegetation management.

I have selected a manageable boundary for the Lost Water Canyon Recommended Wilderness Area. I have decided not to extend this recommended wilderness area further to the east and south where it would overlap the Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Territory because of limitations inherent in recommended wilderness area management. I believe that there is value in retaining more management options for the lands within the wild horse territory.

Absaroka Beartooth Mountains Geographic Area

The plan includes one recommended wilderness area (about 800 acres), one backcountry area (about 18,700 acres), four recreation emphasis areas (about 42,000 acres), and the 102,000-acre Stillwater Complex in the Absaroka Beartooth Mountains.

I have decided to continue the recommended wilderness area allocation for the 800-acre Timberline Recommended Wilderness Area (formerly termed Red Lodge Creek or Hellroaring) because it is nearly surrounded by designated wilderness. A recommended wilderness area allocation allows for continuous management for wilderness characteristics. I have decided not to continue to recommend as wilderness four other areas recommended within the 1986 Custer

plan. Much of the current Mystic Lake Recommended Wilderness Area is within a Federal Energy Regulatory Commission inundation zone, and removing this area from recommended wilderness will allow better flexibility for resource protection actions (for example, sanitation) to address impacts of current high-density recreation uses. The current Republic Mountain, Line Creek, and Burnt Mountain Recommended Wilderness Areas of the Custer plan adjoin but do not add significant value to existing designated wilderness. As I reviewed each of these three areas, I found that there is no threat of development to these rugged inaccessible landscapes. Therefore, I decided there is no value to a recommended wilderness allocation because in the long term, there would be no real value with a boundary adjustment to the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness or North Absaroka Wilderness, and no new protection afforded by doing so.

The approximately 18,700-acre Bad Canyon Backcountry Area will maintain the existing lightly developed character of this area. I have decided that mountain biking is no longer a suitable use in this backcountry area in order to maintain the remote backcountry character of this area (AB-SUIT-BCBCA-01). Mountain bike opportunities are maintained in areas adjacent to the Bad Canyon area. About 14 miles of trail would no longer be suitable for mountain bike use.

This decision also creates four new recreation emphasis areas within the Absaroka Beartooth Mountains Geographic Area totaling more than 42,000 acres: Main Fork Rock Creek (8,803 acres), Boulder River (7,367 acres), Cooke City Winter (24,130 acres), and Yellowstone River (2,166 acres). The Main Fork of Rock Creek is a popular destination for visitors from Billings, Montana's largest city. The Boulder River corridor hosts many organizational camps and includes the unique Natural Bridge geologic feature. The community of Cooke City, Montana, is highly reliant on winter sports, including snowmobiling and cross-country skiing. Fishing and both personal and commercial whitewater rafting are popular in the Yellowstone River corridor.

The plan also includes the nearly 102,000-acre Stillwater Complex in this geographic area, to acknowledge this area's unique mineral resources.

Bridger, Bangtail, and Crazy Mountains Geographic Area

The plan includes one recommended wilderness area (about 10,000 acres), two backcountry areas (about 32,600 acres), and one recreation emphasis area (about 13,000 acres) in the Bridger, Bangtail, and Crazy Mountains.

Bridger Mountains

I decided not to add any recommended wilderness areas in the Bridger Range because it would detract from the management flexibility needed to balance the complexity of recreation uses and the need for protection of infrastructure (such as homes, ranches, and ski areas). I appreciate the value of this landscape as an important wildlife corridor between the Greater Yellowstone and Northern Continental Divide Ecosystems. Protection of wildlife connectivity is addressed through guidance as a key linkage area. The approximately 4,600-acre Blacktail Peak Backcountry Area will maintain the existing lightly developed character of the area while allowing management flexibility, particularly for vegetation management.

The plan includes the nearly 13,000-acre Bridger Recreation Emphasis Area, which encompasses the popular Bridger Bowl Ski Area, Crosscut Mountain Sports Center Nordic Ski Area, and popular trails, campgrounds, and rental cabins near fast growing Bozeman, Montana.

Crazy Mountains

Within the Crazy Mountains, the plan includes an approximately 10,000-acre recommended wilderness area split between Park and Sweet Grass Counties. This recommendation considers the input from Park and Sweet Grass Counties, many organizations and individuals, and the Crow Tribe. The Crow Tribe holds the Crazy Mountains sacred because of significant cultural and historical connections and longstanding treaty rights. Although Sweet Grass County indicated that they don't support additional recommended wilderness, particularly in the Crazy Mountains, the boundaries of the South Crazy Mountains Recommended Wilderness Area were delineated considering Sweet Grass County's specific concerns about checkerboard land ownership, grazing access, and mineral development. Another approximately 28,000 acres in the Crazy Mountains is allocated as a backcountry area, with direction to retain the existing semi-primitive non-motorized character on the east side of the range.

The Crow Tribe and the public expressed considerable interest in higher levels of protection of lands in the Crazy Mountains, a highly valued landscape. Given the current complex checkerboard ownership pattern, the time isn't right for further recommended wilderness in the Crazy Mountains. The focus should be to work toward land consolidation over time. A decision to designate recommended wilderness interspersed with private lands would not likely be conducive to progress in this regard.

Madison, Henrys Lake, and Gallatin Mountains Geographic Area

The plan includes three recommended wilderness areas (about 96,500 acres), four backcountry areas (about 96,300 acres), and five recreation emphasis areas (about 170,400 acres) in the Madison, Henrys Lake, and Gallatin Mountains.

Gallatin and Madison Mountains

Many individuals and groups provided input on recommended wilderness areas, and I reviewed and found information and insights of value in all of them. For this landscape, I found the work of the Gallatin Forest Partnership to be the most compelling. This was due to the area-specific recommendations combined with local knowledge, and the outreach and coalition-building across diverse interests that accompanied their proposal. Indeed, the Gallatin County Commission, Park County Commission, and Madison County Commission have all endorsed the Gallatin Forest Partnership proposal, which included recommended wilderness areas in the Gallatin Mountains and the Taylor Hilgard area of the Madison Mountains.

The Gallatin Forest Partnership proposal recommended Cowboy Heaven (about 15,500 acres) as recommended wilderness. After much review and internal consideration, I decided to manage this area under a backcountry designation. Almost the entire Cowboy Heaven Backcountry Area is within an inventoried roadless area. Our desire to protect the characteristics of this place is shared with the Gallatin Forest Partnership proposal, but I felt that this designation affords better flexibility to manage the rustic administrative cabin, primitive road, and grazing infrastructure and retains more options for future fuel and restoration work in the area. In their letter, the Gallatin County Commissioners also expressed hesitancy with endorsing Cowboy Heaven as recommended wilderness.

In sum, the plan includes the 77,631-acre Gallatin Crest, 14,461-acre Sawtooth, and 4,466-acre Taylor Hilgard Recommended Wilderness Areas. It also includes the 26,496-acre Buffalo Horn, 17,620-acre Cowboy Heaven, and 22,613-acre West Pine Backcountry Areas.

The recreation emphasis area allocation recognizes the recreational role of five areas: Hyalite (33,269 acres), Storm Castle (34,620 acres), Gallatin River (16,474 acres), Hebgen Winter (70,924 acres), and Hebgen Lakeshore (13,886 acres). The Yellowstone River recreation emphasis area is also partially within this geographic area. Hyalite Canyon is rapidly becoming Bozeman's recreational backyard. Storm Castle provides potential for growth of motorized recreational opportunities. The Gallatin River Canyon is popular for fishing, camping, and whitewater rafting. Large lakes are rare in southwestern Montana, and Hebgen Lake offers boating and lakeshore camping opportunities. Winter sports in the Hebgen basin are critical to the community of West Yellowstone, Montana.

Lionhead (Henrys Lake Mountains)

I gave considerable thought to the decision for the Lionhead area. It has been managed under the 1987 Gallatin plan as a recommended wilderness area for more than 30 years. During this time, it also contains about 18 miles of mountain bike trails into the core of the area. Lionhead is valued by wilderness advocates and enthusiasts of both quiet recreation and mountain biking. In general, the wilderness characteristics of the place have been retained through the years, even with this use. Given my decision that continued mechanized uses would not be suitable in recommended wilderness areas and the desire to retain the longstanding and popular, though not heavily used, mountain bike trails in Lionhead, I have decided to manage this as a 27,266-acre backcountry area. This will protect the current character of the area and will allow existing uses to continue as long as they do not degrade the character of the area. No new uses that would detract from the area's character would be allowed.

Recreation

The plan supports recreation demands and contributes to the recreation economy while addressing desired ecological conditions for soils, water, fish, and wildlife. Forestwide plan components guide the national forest's sustainable recreation, including recreation settings, opportunities, access, and scenic character. The plan establishes objectives for increasing and enhancing recreational opportunities and establishes focused recreation emphasis areas (plan components for recreation settings, opportunities and access, and for recreation emphasis areas). Sustainable recreation is partly derived by the mapping of desired recreation opportunity spectrum classes that range from primitive to rural settings as well as through forestwide recreation management plan components (maps in plan appendix B). This integrated direction contributes to social, economic, and ecological sustainability. There are a number of objectives to increase and enhance recreational opportunities, such as improving accessible design of recreation sites, adding shoreline access day use sites, converting unsustainable dispersed campsites to more highly developed campgrounds, adding loop trail connections, and acquiring new road or trail rights-of-way for access to public lands.

The plan also established 10 recreation emphasis areas that can provide additional opportunities to meet increased demands for recreation (maps in plan appendix B). The focus of each recreation emphasis area varies, including high visitor use areas such as Hyalite, motorized areas

such as Storm Castle, winter recreation-oriented areas such as Cooke City and the Hebgen Basin, and river-oriented areas such as the Gallatin and Yellowstone Rivers. Management of these areas is intended to be responsive to changing conditions and changing use patterns and demands.

The plan continues to maintain the opportunity for wheeled motorized vehicle use (suitable on designated roads and trails) on about 1,445 miles of National Forest System roads, and about 1,140 miles of National Forest System trails are open to summer public motorized transport, for a total of about 2,585 miles. Nearly 500 miles of trail are operated as winter trails maintained for snowmobiles. Motorized over-snow vehicle use is suitable on 43 percent of the national forest. The plan provides access to public lands through mechanized transport (for example, mountain bikes) on an additional approximately 714 miles of authorized summer mountain bike trails.

Wildlife and Aquatic Habitat

Bison

The plan must include plan components to maintain or restore ecological integrity and the diversity of ecosystems and habitat types, as required by the 2012 Planning Rule (36 CFR 219.9). Bison have a key ecological role and are considered a "keystone species" in eastern pine savanna area and grassland ecosystems.

In response to public and Tribal input, including from the Nez Perce, Umatilla, and Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, the plan incorporates plan components that support proactive management of bison habitat toward desired conditions. Plan components include a desired condition that bison are present year-round with sufficient numbers and adequate distribution to provide a self-sustaining population on the Custer Gallatin (FW-DC-WLBI-04), and an objective to complete three bison habitat improvement projects for the purpose of creating or connecting suitable bison habitat every three years (FW-OBJ-WLBI-01). Based on comments received, a goal in the plan was modified to clarify the intent to work with partners to reduce conflict with livestock and private property (FW-GO-WLBI-01).

The Montana Department of Livestock supported alternative E because this alternative favors livestock in bison-livestock conflicts. The Montana Department of Livestock opposed alternative D’s support for a year-round bison population in an area beyond the Interagency Bison Management Plan management area and stated that the Forest Service should defer to the established Interagency Bison Management Plan collaborative process.

The Forest Service acknowledges the importance of the interagency partnership within the Interagency Bison Management Plan. However, as this plan sets long-term management direction, it is appropriate to set guidance that allows for expanded tolerance of bison on the national forest in the future. Plan direction recognizes the lead role that the State of Montana will play in these determinations. This plan direction allows the national forest to be more proactive in addressing potential barriers to bison on the landscape in areas that may be under consideration for expanded tolerance in any future State process, thus affording more flexibility and options for any State decision on how and where to manage for bison populations.

Bighorn Sheep

In response to public, State, and Tribal input, including from the Nez Perce, Umatilla, and Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, the plan incorporates plan components to prevent disease transmission from domestic sheep and goats to bighorn sheep. Permitted grazing with domestic sheep and goats will not be allowed (except for targeted weed control) where bighorn sheep now occur, nor in the Bridger, Bangtail, and Crazy Mountains (FW-STD-GRAZ-02). In response to comments from goat packers, including the North American Pack Goat Association, I have added plan components that allow public and outfitter use of pack goats with a number of conditions such as season of use, and number of pack goats per party (FW-SUIT-REC-01 and 02 and FW-STD-RECOG-01 and 02). I find that these conditions reduce potential exposure of bighorn sheep to pack goats.

Grizzly Bear

I have decided to adopt modified grizzly bear developed site standards between draft and final environmental impact statement. Changes to the Conservation Strategy for Grizzly Bears in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem are pending consideration by the Yellowstone Ecosystem Subcommittee. By incorporating these changes into this plan at this point, we have evaluated the impacts of these developed site standard changes. While these changes may have minor impacts on individual bears, they would contribute to grizzly bear recovery by concentrating human use in areas where grizzly bears have become accustomed to such conditions, while accommodating increased demand for visitor facilities to help regulate unmanaged dispersed use.

Connectivity

The plan also includes plan components that foster habitat connectivity forestwide, and delineate key linkage areas in the most critical path between the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem and the North Continental Divide Ecosystem. Key linkage areas are a plan allocation with plan components that limit new barriers and periodically limit disturbance to allow for movement of wide-ranging species between these iconic ecosystems (FW-DC-WL 05, 06, and 07; FW-STD-WL 02; FW-GDL-WL 01, 02, 03, 04, and 05; and FW-SUIT-WL 01). Because riparian habitats provide important travel corridors for a wide range of terrestrial species, the plan's riparian management zones serve to maintain or restore habitat connectivity (FW-RMZ plan components).

Invasive Species and Disease

In addition to plan components to prevent disease transmission by domestic animals to bighorn sheep, the plan includes a number of plan components to prevent disease transmission to bats (FW-GDL-WLBAT-03,FW-DC-EMIN-05), to support resilient whitebark pine in the face of blister rust and other threats (FW-DC-PRISK-02, FW-GO-PRISK-01, FW-GDL-PRISK-02), and to prevent the introduction and spread of aquatic invasive species (FW-STD-WTR-03, FW-STD-INV-03).

Requirements of the 2012 Planning Rule

The plan has been prepared in compliance with the 2012 Planning Rule at 36 CFR 219. The plan meets the specific Rule requirements at sections 219.8 through 219.12 as follows.

219.8 Sustainability

I have reviewed the plan and determined that it provides plan components for social, economic, and ecological sustainability within the inherent capability of the Custer Gallatin.

Ecological Sustainability

The plan provides ecological sustainability by including plan components that address ecosystem integrity: air, soil, and water, and riparian areas. The plan includes plan components that address the composition, structure, function, and connectivity of vegetation types. The plan also describes management direction focused on potential vegetation types, system drivers, ecological processes, and stressors and threats (see plan chapter 2, ecosystems).

Plan components are designed to provide for the maintenance and improvement of vegetation conditions within the fire-adapted ecosystems that are prevalent on the national forest. Plan components promote vegetation and landscape conditions that reflect the natural range of variation and are resilient in the face of future stressors and threats such as fire, drought, or invasive species (2020 plan, terrestrial vegetation section). For example, plan direction emphasizes managing for large trees that can survive low to moderate fire severities and contribute to the regeneration of the national forest after disturbance, thereby promoting resilience and providing long-term structural diversity and wildlife habitat.

Multiple resources, including wildlife, fish, soil, and water benefit from managing for vegetation conditions for a natural range of variation and resiliency. Plant and animal species benefit by providing healthy and sustainable habitat that supports the full diversity of native species, including federally designated threatened, endangered, candidate, and proposed species and species of conservation concern (see appendix C of the final environmental impact statement for lists of these species). Forestwide plan components address maintaining and (or) restoring key ecosystem characteristics associated with terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems and rare aquatic and terrestrial plant and animal communities.

The plan will maintain the existing high quality of the water, wildlife, and forest resources across the entire national forest. Large, relatively undeveloped areas will be maintained, mainly within designated wilderness, inventoried roadless areas, recommended wilderness areas, and backcountry areas, which together comprise about 64 percent of the national forest. These areas have limited human impacts, and the vegetation will continue to be influenced largely by natural disturbances such as fire or insect activity. Accordingly, these disturbances will largely determine the vegetation conditions and patterns that will exist, and the associated wildlife habitat conditions and diversity. The plan articulates the role of fire, including both planned and unplanned ignitions, as a tool to achieve desired vegetation and wildlife habitat conditions, and provides direction related to its use and management. The plan also provides direction for fuel management to protect identified values, such as in wildland-urban interface areas.

Social and Economic Sustainability

The plan contributes to social and economic sustainability by addressing social, cultural, and economic conditions; sustainable recreation; multiple uses that contribute to local, regional, and the national economy; ecosystem services; areas of Tribal importance, and cultural and historic uses.

Plan direction is designed to manage for resilient and resistant forest conditions so forests can adapt to whatever pressures and uncertainties the future may hold. Resilient forest conditions also provide important social and economic benefits, including enhancing the diversity of recreational opportunities, maintaining scenic integrity objectives, and contributing to a sustainable production of timber and other forest products.

The benefits to people (the goods and services provided) include clean air, water quality and quantity, carbon sequestration, and climate regulation; forest products such as timber and firewood; forage for livestock; minerals; outdoor recreation; scenery; cultural and heritage values, inspiration, spiritual values and solitude; habitat for fish and wildlife; hunting, trapping, fishing, and wildlife viewing; and research and education, income, and jobs. More specifically, the plan responds to public desires that include:

- Recreation opportunities, which are addressed by the array of recreation and infrastructure components, as well as the inclusion of 10 recreation emphasis areas (2020 plan, recreation settings opportunities and access; infrastructure; designated areas and plan allocations sections).
- Wilderness and primitive recreation experiences, which are provided by designated wilderness, inventoried roadless areas, a wilderness study area, and seven recommended wilderness areas (2020 plan, designated areas and plan allocations sections).
- Forest products that contribute to the economic sustainability of local economies and support socioeconomic initiatives in the region. The plan includes components that establish suitability areas for timber harvest and harvest of forest products. These components support an increase in forest products from the national forest that will enhance local economies and support socioeconomic initiatives in the region (2020 plan, timber section).
- Continuation of opportunities for grazing to support rural economies and heritage, open space, and sense of place through plan components that contribute to the supply of livestock forage and maintain existing allotments for livestock grazing (2020 plan, permitted livestock grazing section).
- Mineral and energy development through plan components that support availability of these resources (2020 plan, minerals, energy and areas of geologic interest; designated areas, and plan allocations sections).
- Improved public access, which is met through plan components that emphasize consolidated land ownership and improved access to National Forest System lands (2020 plan, land status and ownership, access sections).
- Diverse recreation opportunities that contribute to local and regional economics are supported by plan components that describe the multiple-use opportunities of Custer Gallatin's recreational settings (2020 plan, recreation opportunities section).
- Protection of Tribal resources and Tribal uses through plan components that support Tribal rights and consultation with Indian Tribes on management of important Tribal landscapes (2020 plan, areas of Tribal importance section).
- Protection of cultural and historic resources is provided through plan components designed to avoid potential damage or impacts to these sites, but also plan components designed to

educate and foster public appreciation of them (2020 plan, cultural and historic resources section).

219.9 Diversity of Plant and Animal Communities

The plan provides for the diversity of plants and animals and provides for ecological integrity by:

- Supporting ecological integrity through plan components designed to maintain or restore key ecological characteristics for ecosystem composition, structure, ecological processes, and connectivity within the natural range of variation, as well as providing for the retention of key features such as old growth, snags, large trees, and coarse woody debris (2020 plan, terrestrial vegetation, wildlife, and soils sections).
- Supporting the recovery and persistence of the 7 threatened, endangered, proposed, or candidate species (5 animal, 1 aquatic, and 1 plant species) and 29 species of conservation concern (2 animal, 2 aquatic, and 25 plant species) through plan components that promote the necessary habitat conditions and minimize threats and stressors (2020 plan, watershed, aquatic, and riparian ecosystems, terrestrial vegetation, and wildlife sections).
- Including species-specific plan components to support or promote species whose needs may not be met by ecosystem-level plan components, such as bats, big game, bighorn sheep, bison, Canada lynx, greater sage-grouse, grizzly bear, prairie dogs, wolverine, and whitebark pine (2020 plan, terrestrial vegetation and wildlife sections).

The plan uses the tiered approach to conserve and maintain species diversity, which first involves an analysis of the ecosystems on the national forest and the species whose habitats are dependent on them. The plan then further supports species-specific approaches, which include the protection of sensitive habitats such as riparian zones and wetlands and habitat for threatened and endangered species. I find that the plan has the appropriate components to restore and maintain the diversity of ecosystems. The desired conditions, objectives, standards and guidelines were developed based on best available scientific information and will restore or maintain key habitat characteristics for all vegetation groupings.

The Northern Region regional forester identified 29 species of conservation concern on the national forest. Species of conservation concern are species known to occur in the plan area and for which there is substantial concern for the persistence of the species. Most habitat needs for these species are met through the plan components for aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems and those that promote the key ecosystem characteristics required by each species. For some species or species groups, plan components to meet species-specific habitat needs are included in accordance with 36 CFR 219.9(b).

After review of the plan and final environmental impact statement, I find that the plan components will provide the ecological conditions necessary to maintain viable populations of all identified species of conservation concern within the plan area, with the exception of:

- two terrestrial species: greater sage-grouse and white-tailed prairie dog;
- two aquatic species: westslope cutthroat trout and western pearlshell mussel; and
- seven plant species: annual Indian paintbrush (*Castilleja exilis),* English sundew (*Drosera anglica*), beaked spikerush (*Eleocharis rostellata*), spiny hopsage (*Grayia spinosa*), meesia

moss (*Meesia triquetra)*, northwestern thelypody (*Thelypodium paniculatum*), and Barratt's willow (*Salix barrattiana).*

Given the range of these species and effects to their range-wide habitats, I find it beyond the authority of the Forest Service and not within the inherent capability of the plan area to maintain or restore the ecological conditions necessary to maintain a viable population of these 11 species of conservation concern in the plan area. However, I find that the plan includes plan components to maintain or restore ecological conditions within the plan area to contribute to maintaining viable populations of these species within their range. These conclusions are based on the biological analysis and evaluation documented in the final environmental impact statement in section 3.4, watershed, aquatic species and habitat, and riparian ecosystems; section 3.5, at-risk plant species; and section 3.10.3, wildlife species of conservation concern.

219.10 Multiple Use

The plan provides integrated resource management for multiple uses (219.10(a)) by including plan components at the forestwide level and the geographic-area scale that establish suitability for a variety of compatible uses. Each geographic area has unique characteristics, and specific plan components provide for and manage multiple uses within that area. The plan emphasizes working closely with partner agencies, Indian Tribes, Federal, State, and county government, universities, permittees, nongovernmental organizations, and private landowners to achieve joint management goals. The plan provides for multiple uses by:

- Supporting a variety of multiple uses and ecosystem services across the national forest and in each geographic area through an array of plan components that establish suitability for various uses and guide those uses in order to be compatible with each other as well as ecosystem integrity and social and economic sustainability (2020 plan, chapter 2, benefits to people).
- Providing clean water and water quantity, as well as improving watershed conditions where needed, through plan components that support aquatic ecosystem integrity and limit potential negative impacts to these resources, support important ecological and social services such as productive soils, plant and animal diversity, wildlife habitat, and water supplies (2020 plan, watershed, aquatic and riparian ecosystems sections).
- Recognizing and protecting historical, cultural, and Tribal uses associated with the Custer Gallatin (2020 plan, areas of tribal importance; and cultural and historic resources sections).
- Providing rangeland for livestock grazing to support livelihoods while also supporting ecological integrity of rangelands and riparian management zones (2020 plan, permitted livestock grazing section).
- Providing a supply of forest products in a sustainable manner, which in turn supports local economies and communities, through plan components that establish suitability and guide the extraction of timber from National Forest System lands (2020 plan, timber section).
- Providing opportunities for the development of mineral resources, where appropriate (2020 plan, minerals, energy, and areas of geologic interest sections).
- Including plan components that guide the management of infrastructure (2020 plan, infrastructure section).

- Providing economically, socially, and ecologically sustainable recreation opportunities though an array of plan components that support a variety of recreation uses. Recreation opportunities also considered tourism, ecosystem integrity and capacity, recreation access, and changes in local demographics (2020 plan, recreation settings opportunities and access; designated areas and plan allocations sections).
- Providing opportunities for wildlife viewing, hunting, and fishing along with associated cultural and socioeconomic benefits (2020 plan, watershed, aquatic, and riparian ecosystems; and wildlife sections).
- Including plan components that establish desired scenic integrity (2020 plan, scenery section).
- Including plan components that emphasize consolidated land ownership and improved access to National Forest System lands (2020 plan, land status and ownership, and access sections).
- Maintaining the wilderness character of the two existing designated wilderness areas, the wilderness study area, and the seven recommended wilderness areas through plan components that support the regulations in the Wilderness Act of 1964 and the Montana Wilderness Study Act of 1977 (2020 plan, designated areas section).
- Protecting the free-flowing nature and outstandingly remarkable values of 1 designated and 30 eligible wild and scenic rivers (2020 plan, designated areas section).

219.11 Timber Requirements Based on the National Forest Management Act

The plan identifies lands suited and not suited for timber production (36 CFR 219.7(c)(2)(vii) and 219.11). The lands suitable for timber production and the role of timber harvest in meeting ecosystem management and social and economic objectives has changed since the Custer Gallatin's 1986 and 1987 plans were developed. The plan presents new plan components for lands suitable for timber production and for timber harvest. These plan components will facilitate an active vegetation management program that meets both ecosystem and socioeconomic objectives.

Lands suitable for timber production were determined following 36 CFR 219.11(a) and Forest Service Handbook direction (1909.12 chap. 61). First lands are identified that *may be suitable* for timber production and are those that are legally available and technically feasible for harvest (forested lands with no potential for irreversible soil or watershed damage and where regeneration can be ensured). Then, identification of lands that are suited and not suited for timber production is based on compatibility with desired conditions and objectives stated in the plan (plan components). In lands suitable for timber production, active vegetation management and some regular flow of timber products is expected to occur. Unless prohibited by other plan components, timber harvest may occur on lands unsuitable for timber production to meet other resource objectives.

Under the plan, about 565,000 acres (19 percent of the national forest) are suitable for timber production, with the remaining approximately 2,480,500 acres not suitable for timber production. Of the 2,480,500 acres not suitable for timber production, 540,000 acres (18 percent

of the national forest) are suitable for timber harvest for such purposes as fuel reduction or wildlife habitat enhancement.

The 2012 Planning Rule requires that land management plans provide information regarding possible actions that may occur on the plan area during the life of the plan, including the planned timber sale program, timber harvesting levels, and the proportion of probable methods of forest vegetation management practices expected to be used (16 U.S.C. 1604(e)(2) and (f)(2)). The plan addresses this requirement through establishing objectives reflecting anticipated budget levels, and description of possible management actions and strategies (see appendix A of the plan).

Timber harvest is conducted to provide for societal goods and to maintain or move vegetation on the national forest toward desired conditions. Under the plan, the projected timber sale quantity for the first decade is 10 million board feet per year and the projected wood sale quantity is 18 million board feet per year.

As required by the 2012 Planning Rule, the estimated timber outputs take into account the fiscal capability of the planning unit and are consistent with all plan components. They are based on the national forest's average budget levels for fiscal year 2014 through fiscal year 2017. However, the estimates of timber outputs may be larger or smaller on an annual basis, or over the life of the plan, if budget or other constraining factors change in the future. I remain concerned that our ability to meet identified outputs will be difficult in the face of declining budgets and the increasing cost of litigation related to forest management activities. However, opportunities for shared stewardship, additional legislative authorities, or partnerships could potentially increase the timber output capacity. Modeling of the projected timber sale quantity under an *unlimited budget* and consistent with all plan components resulted in an average annual volume output of 23 million board feet.

Maximum Quantity of Timber

The plan also identifies the maximum quantity of timber that may be removed from the plan area (36 CFR 219.7 and 219.11 (d)(6)). Based on Forest Service Handbook direction (1909.12 chap. 64.3), this maximum is termed the sustained yield limit and is the volume of timber that could be produced in perpetuity on lands that *may be suitable* for timber production. The timber suitability analysis used in plan development identified about 680,100 acres on the national forest that *may be suitable* for timber production. The calculation of the sustained yield limit is not limited by plan desired conditions, other plan components, or the national forest's fiscal and organizational capabilities. The sustained yield limit is determined to be 38.25 million board feet (8.08 million cubic feet) average annual volume.

219.12 Monitoring

I have reviewed and determined that the plan provides adequate monitoring to inform the progress of meeting plan goals, objectives, and desired conditions (plan chapter 4). The monitoring plan addresses the eight requirements of the 2012 Planning Rule in the form of questions, indicators, data sources, collection frequency, and associated plan components that are all included in chapter 4 of the plan. The monitoring plan addresses what I believe to be the most critical components that inform management and is within the financial and technical

capability of the agency. Every monitoring question links to one or more of the desired conditions, objectives, standards, or guidelines. However, not every plan component has a corresponding monitoring question.

The monitoring plan was designed to be cost effective and can be implemented during rising and falling budget cycles. Incorporating monitoring data from other agencies and partners will help ensure that our program is more independent and objective than solely relying on Custer Gallatin staff that often have other program priority work.

This monitoring program is not intended to depict all monitoring, inventorying, and data-gathering activities undertaken on the national forest, nor is it intended to limit monitoring to just the questions and indicators listed. Consideration and coordination with broader-scale monitoring strategies adopted by the regional forester, multi-party monitoring collaboration, and cooperation with state and private forestry or research stations will increase efficiencies and help track changing conditions beyond the national forest boundaries. In addition, project and activity monitoring may be used to gather information for the plan monitoring program if it will provide relevant information to inform adaptive management.

Preliminary Administrative Recommendations

There are two types of administrative designations included in this plan that correspond to a subsequent congressional authority: recommended wilderness areas and eligible wild and scenic rivers. It is important to understand that the decisions in the plan to recommend these areas are administrative only. The plan provides direction for how these areas will be managed. However, only Congress has the authority to make final decisions on wilderness designation as part of the National Wilderness Preservation System or on designation of rivers as part of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

Recommended wilderness areas

This recommendation is a preliminary administrative recommendation that will receive further review and possible modification by the Chief of the Forest Service, the Secretary of Agriculture, and the President of the United States. The Congress has reserved the authority to make final decisions on wilderness designation. Plan implementation is not dependent upon subsequent action-related recommendations for wilderness designation.

The 2012 Planning Rule directs the responsible official to “inventory and evaluate lands that may be suitable for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System.” (36 CFR 219.7(2)(v)) There is no obligation to recommend acres for wilderness to Congress. The information considered in making this preliminary administrative recommendation for each area recommended for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System is available in appendix D of the final environmental impact statement. The inventory, evaluation, and recommendation process followed direction in chapter 70 of Forest Service Handbook 1909.12.

I am recommending 125,675 acres of the national forest for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System. In making this decision, I focused on those areas that represent high-quality lands that are capable of maintaining the unique social and ecological characteristics that

make them eligible for wilderness designation while minimizing the inherent tradeoffs that come with managing these areas to maintain their wilderness characteristics.

The areas being recommended for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System are in four of the six geographic areas across the Custer Gallatin (maps in plan, appendix B). These recommended wilderness areas include:

- Bear Canyon (Pryor Mountains), 10,366 acres
- Lost Water Canyon (Pryor Mountains), 7,672 acres
- Timberline (Absaroka Beartooth Mountains), 802 acres
- South Crazy Mountains (Bridger, Bangtail, Crazy Mountains), 10,257 acres
- Gallatin Crest (Madison, Henrys Lake, Gallatin Mountains), 77,631 acres
- Sawtooth Mountain (Madison, Henrys Lake, Gallatin Mountains), 14,461 acres
- Taylor Hilgard (Madison, Henrys Lake, Gallatin Mountains), 4,466 acres

I arrived at my decision on recommended wilderness after extensive engagement with my staff, local governments, Indian Tribes, and many other interested stakeholders. Some would prefer additional recommended areas because they value specific places on the national forest or because they believe recommended wilderness management is the best strategy to protect wildlife and aquatic resources. There are others who prefer I don't recommend any additional areas because they believe recommended wilderness management restricts access and use of the Custer Gallatin and its resources.

I considered the current allowable uses and protections afforded by other management overlays. In most areas, I felt that existing recreational uses should continue. Therefore, I decided on a recommended wilderness designation for those areas that are manageable, currently have few to no uses inconsistent with wilderness designation, and would truly add value if they were designated wilderness through a congressional decision in the future. Other protective management designations and direction, specifically the backcountry area designation, recreation opportunity spectrum guidance, key linkage area direction in the Bridger and Gallatin Mountains, and application of the Roadless Rule afford high levels of protection for the vast majority of these currently undeveloped lands.

This plan includes management direction to maintain and protect the social and ecological characteristics that provide the basis for each area's suitability for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System. I have decided to include a plan component that motorized and mechanized transport is not suitable in recommended wilderness areas (FW-SUIT-RWA-02). This decision preserves the wilderness characteristics, including the undeveloped nature, and opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation in recommended wilderness. There are currently limited inconsistent land uses and mechanized and motored uses that will be excluded within the recommended wilderness area boundaries. Management direction in alternative F is specifically designed to best protect wilderness characteristics by constraining motorized and mechanized uses, so as to maintain the potential of these areas for consideration and possible designation to the National Wilderness Preservation System.

Although a number of commenters expressed concern that the management of recommended wilderness creates “de facto wilderness areas” in lieu of action by Congress, the plan does not create wilderness. The Forest Service has an affirmative obligation to manage recommended wilderness areas for the social and ecological characteristics that provide the basis for their recommendation until Congress acts. The plan does not allow for continued uses that would affect the wilderness characteristics of these areas and possibly jeopardize their designation as wilderness in the future.

It is important to note that this programmatic plan decision does not authorize any activities or prohibit public uses. Rather, it will guide the future site-specific decisions needed to make progress toward the desired conditions found throughout the plan. The areas I have recommended do not currently have extensive existing mechanized transport use; of the approximately 10 affected miles of bicycle trails, almost 9 miles are not accessible to mountain bikers. Based on recreation opportunity spectrum mapping, about 10,128 acres would no longer be suitable for motorized over-snow vehicle use, but this mapping did not assess current legal access, suitable topography, or consistent snow. However, I will initiate site-specific planning per the plan’s suitability direction as soon as practicable from the date of this decision.

The overall wilderness inventory process considered an estimated 1,173,617 acres. Alternative B recommended 113,703 acres, alternative C recommended 145,777 acres, alternative D recommended 711,425 acres, alternative E recommended no acres, and alternative F recommended 126,675 acres (4 percent of the national forest). The majority of recommended wilderness areas are within existing inventoried roadless areas.

Much of the wilderness inventory that I am not recommending for wilderness is inventoried roadless area. Although there will be some motorized recreation activity and limited vegetation management with inventoried roadless area, the final environmental impact statement demonstrates that management will protect headwater habitats, contribute to high water quality on the national forest (section 3.4), and contribute to high levels of habitat security for grizzly bears and other wildlife (sections 3.10.2 and 3.10.3). Forestwide, geographic area, and in some cases other land allocation plan components provide management direction for those lands in the wilderness inventory that are not recommended for wilderness. Therefore, these lands will not be managed specifically to protect wilderness characteristics. The information considered in making this administrative recommendation for each area recommended for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System is available in chapter 3 and appendix D of the final environmental impact statement.

Wild and Scenic Rivers

The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (PL 90-542), created by Congress in 1968, was developed to preserve rivers with outstanding natural, cultural, and recreational values in a free-flowing condition for the enjoyment of present and future generation. This Act was amended in 1975 (PL 93-621). The 1986 and 1987 plans, as amended, identified 12 streams totaling about 183 miles as eligible for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. The plan includes 30 eligible wild and scenic rivers totaling about 433 miles based on an eligibility study (appendix E of the plan).

Selected river segments are preserved for possessing outstandingly remarkable values, which include scenic, recreational, geologic, fish and wildlife, historic, cultural, and other similar values. Designated rivers or river segments are preserved in their free-flowing condition and are not dammed or otherwise impeded. Designation as a wild, scenic, or recreational river does not confer the same type of protection as a wilderness area designation. However, wild, scenic, and recreational designation protects the water quality and free-flowing nature of rivers in non-Federal areas, something the Wilderness Act and other Federal designations cannot do.

Eligible wild, scenic, and recreational rivers, or river segments, are assigned one or more preliminary classifications: wild, scenic, or recreational. Preliminary classifications are based on the developmental character of the river on the date of designation and dictate the level of interim protection measures to apply. The most remote and undeveloped classification is wild. Rivers classified as scenic are free of impoundments, with shorelines or watersheds still largely primitive and shorelines largely undeveloped, but accessible in places by roads. Rivers classified as recreational may have many access points and nearby bridges, railroads, and roads. Recreational rivers also may have some impoundment or diversion in place. The classification of a river is not necessarily related to the outstandingly remarkable value.

I have determined that the following 30 rivers (table 1) are free-flowing and have outstandingly remarkable values and are eligible wild and scenic rivers or river segments (see plan appendix E for maps of individual eligible rivers).

Changes Between Draft and Final Environmental Impact Statement

The Council on Environmental Quality's regulations for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act require an agency to assess and consider comments on a draft environmental impact statement, both individually and collectively; and for the final environmental impact statement, respond to substantive comments by:

1. modifying alternatives,
2. developing and evaluating new alternatives not previously given serious consideration,
3. supplementing, improving, or modifying the analyses,
4. making factual corrections, or
5. explaining why comments do not warrant further agency response.

After carefully considering the comments received on the draft environmental impact statement, minor adjustments were made to plan components in all alternatives; and the analyses were clarified or corrected as needed and described in the individual resource sections of chapter 3 in the final environmental impact statement. In addition, alternative F was developed for the final environmental impact statement based on alternative B, including features from all alternatives considered in the draft environmental impact statement.

Table 1. Eligible wild and scenic rivers

River Name	Location	ORVs	Preliminary Classifications
Bark Cabin Creek	Gallatin Mountains	F	Wild
Bear Creek	Pryor Mountains	W	Scenic
Big Creek	Gallatin Mountains	F	Wild
Big Timber Creek	Crazy Mountains	R, S	Recreational
Boulder River	Absaroka Beartooth Mountains	R, S, G, H	Recreational
Cabin Creek	Madison Mountains	F, S	Scenic
Cave Creek	Pryor Mountains	G, S	Wild
Clarks Fork Yellowstone River	Absaroka Beartooth Mountains	S	Wild, Recreational
Crooked Creek	Pryor Mountains	G, S, H, F	Wild, Scenic
Gallatin River	Gallatin and Madison Mountains	R, S, H	Recreational
Hyalite Creek	Gallatin Mountains	R, S	Scenic
Lake Abundance Creek	Absaroka Beartooth Mountains	F	Wild
Lake Fork of Rock Creek	Absaroka Beartooth Mountains	R, S	Wild, Recreational
Lost Water Creek	Pryor Mountains	S, G, H	Wild
Madison River	Madison Mountains	R, G, S, H, W	Recreational
Maid of the Mist Creek	Gallatin Mountains	R, S	Scenic
Middle Fork Cabin Creek	Madison Mountains	F	Scenic
Pine Creek	Absaroka Beartooth Mountains	R, S	Wild, Recreational
Rock Creek	Absaroka Beartooth Mountains	R, H, S	Recreational
Rock Creek	Absaroka Beartooth Mountains	F	Wild
Shower Creek	Gallatin Mountains	R, S	Scenic
Slough Creek and unnamed tributaries	Absaroka Beartooth Mountains	F	Wild, Scenic
Stillwater River	Absaroka Beartooth Mountains	R, S	Wild, Recreational
West Boulder River	Absaroka Beartooth Mountains	R	Wild
West Fork Rock Creek	Absaroka Beartooth Mountains	H, S	Wild, Recreational
West Fork Stillwater River	Absaroka Beartooth Mountains	S	Wild
West Rosebud Creek	Absaroka Beartooth Mountains	S, R	Wild
Woodbine Creek	Absaroka Beartooth Mountains	R, S	Wild, Recreational
Wounded Man Creek	Absaroka Beartooth Mountains	F	Wild
Yellowstone River	Absaroka Beartooth Mountains and Gallatin Mountains	R, S, H	Recreational

ORV = Outstandingly remarkable values: F = Fisheries, R = Recreation, S = Scenery, G = Geology, H = Heritage; W = Wildlife.

I find the variations in alternative F and the other alternatives are minor, and are qualitatively within the spectrum of alternatives discussed in the draft environmental impact statement. Appendix F of the final environmental impact statement includes the summary response to the substantive comments received. The following is a summary of the key changes to the final environmental impact statement and the 2020 plan, excluding minor editorial and organization changes, clarifications, and typographical errors.

- Additional plan components tailored to specific areas of Tribal importance (SX-DC/GO/GDL-TRIBAL, AL-DC/GO/GDL-TRIBAL, PR-DC/GO/GDL-TRIBAL, BC-DC/GO/-TRIBAL).
- Addition of a 50-foot outer riparian management zone to category 2 streams so that all stream and water body types have both an inner and outer riparian management zone (FW-STD-RMZ-01).
- Addition of plan components to ensure restoration and maintenance of ecological conditions necessary to support the long-term persistence of whitebark pine, a keystone species in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem and a candidate species under the Endangered Species Act (FW-DC-PRISK-02 and FW-OBJ-PRISK-02).
- Modified plan components for wildlife key linkage areas to address human disturbance, to distinguish new recreation facilities from other new facilities, and to limit mountain bike use to approved system mountain bike routes (FW-DC-WL 07); FW-GDL-03, 04; FW-SUIT-WL-01).
- Modified grizzly bear developed site standards to use 1998 baseline developed site footprints and within 300 meters of primary roads, rather than 1998 baseline developed site capacity (FW-STD-WLGB-04,05).
- Modified plan components that set conditions for public and outfitter use of pack goats such as season of use, and number of pack goats per party (FW-SUIT-REC-01 and 02 and FW-STD-RECOG-01 and 02).
- Addition of plan components for the historic OTO ranch that guide the public's use of this property (AB-GO/STD/GDL/SUIT-OTO).
- Modified land allocations and plan components in alternative C to better represent commenters' intent for this alternative.
- Updated analyses throughout the final environmental impact statement using updated data layers, such as new ownership and trails layers.

Alternatives Considered

In addition to the selected alternative, I considered five other alternatives, alternatives A through E, which are discussed below. Alternative F was the environmentally preferred alternative. A more detailed comparison of these alternatives can be found in the final environmental impact statement, chapter 2, alternatives.

Alternatives Analyzed in Detail

The range of alternatives developed and presented is based on a preliminary evaluation of the information gathered from public and internal comments and the purpose and need for the

project. Although all alternatives provide a wide range of ecosystem services and multiple uses, some give greater emphasis to selected resources based on the theme of the alternative and response to revision topics.

The revised plan alternatives were developed based on the national forest's assessment (2017), the need for change, desired conditions, implementation and monitoring of the current plans, public meetings, and comments received during the public involvement period, interagency meetings, and meetings with Tribal partners. The alternatives represent a range of possible management options from which to choose. Each alternative emphasizes specific land and resource uses and de-emphasizes other uses in response to the planning issues. Some components may vary among alternatives to address the issues identified during scoping; see the description of the alternatives for specific details. Plan direction for desired conditions, standards, and guidelines typically remains constant for all revised plan alternatives, with the exceptions noted.

In addition to the no-action alternative (A) and the proposed action that was scoped (B), three additional alternatives (C, D, and E) were developed based on the identified issues raised during the scoping period. Alternative F, the preferred alternative, was developed after the comment period ended for the draft plan and draft environmental impact statement. The alternatives span the range of forest management practices and uses of available resources. The general theme and intent of each alternative is summarized below. A limited number of plan components varied by alternative in the draft environmental impact statement. The plan contains the plan components for the preferred alternative only. Plan components that vary by alternative are described in the final environmental impact statement, chapter 2, alternatives.

Given the extensive public engagement and environmental review completed for the travel management decisions in the national forest, I did not identify broad changes in motorized or mechanized suitability as a need for change during this plan revision effort. Therefore, motorized and non-motorized recreation opportunity settings do not vary widely from what is reflected by the current designated route system. However, in response to public comment, I did consider some modifications in desired recreation opportunity settings in the mix of areas considered for recommended wilderness or backcountry allocations. This was to respond to public interest in either additional motorized recreation opportunities or additional protection for the wild character of specific areas of the national forest. Current travel management plans are generally consistent with all revised plan alternatives, except where a land allocation may identify certain existing routes or areas of motorized and mechanized transport as no longer suitable uses. Site-specific travel decisions needed to bring travel plans into compliance with the plan would occur subsequent to the plan decision.

Elements Common to All Alternatives

All alternatives adhere to the principles of multiple use and the sustained yield of goods and services required by 36 CFR 219.1 (b). All alternatives are designed to:

- meet law, regulation, and policy;
- contribute to ecological, social, and economic sustainability;
- provide sustainable levels of products and services;

- provide integrated direction as included in the plan components;
- allow reasonable access and mineral development for private mineral rights (locatable mining claims, reserved and outstanding rights) and existing oil and gas leases on the Custer Gallatin and consistent with subject laws and regulations;
- retain the existing decisions for the Northern Rockies Lynx Management direction and Grizzly Bear Conservation Strategy direction;
- manage the Hyalite-Porcupine-Buffalo Horn Wilderness Study Area consistent with the Montana Wilderness Study Act of 1977 (unless released by Congress);
- manage all inventoried roadless areas consistent with the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule (Roadless Rule);

Elements Common to All Revised Plan Alternatives

All revised plan alternatives (B, C, D, E, and F) are designed to be consistent with the 2012 Planning Rule and associated directives and to emphasize adaptive management and the use of best available scientific information.

- Plan direction would be consistent with the 2012 Planning Rule and associated directives and would emphasize adaptive management and consider the best available scientific information.
- Plan direction would meet the purpose and need for change and address one or more significant issues.
- Designations and plan components would remain constant for designated wilderness; the designated East Rosebud Wild and Scenic River; Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Territory; research natural areas; special areas including national natural landmarks; Earthquake Lake Geologic Area; national scenic, historic, and recreation trails; and the Beartooth Highway.
- Thirty eligible wild and scenic rivers and their plan components would remain constant.
- A range of options would be provided if the Hyalite-Porcupine-Buffalo Horn Wilderness Study Area were released by Congress. Inventoried roadless area direction would continue to apply in this area.
- Plan components that provide the ecological conditions to support the persistence of species of conservation concern remain constant for all revised plan alternatives.

Alternatives

Alternative A, the no-action alternative, reflects the 1986 Custer and 1987 Gallatin plans, as amended, and accounts for current laws and regulations. The no-action alternative retains the 1986 and 1987 management direction, as amended, including management area prescriptions. This alternative serves as the baseline for comparison with the revised plan alternatives.

Alternative B is the modified proposed action for the draft plan that was developed in response to public involvement efforts that began in 2016 and was subsequently modified based upon comments received during scoping. This alternative emphasizes moving toward desired conditions, while providing a balance of ecological, social, and economic sustainability. Plan

objectives reflect a mix of resource enhancement, moving toward forested vegetation desired conditions, timber and wood products volume, hazardous fuel treatment, road, trail, and facility maintenance, and new recreation facilities. Alternative B proposes nine recommended wilderness areas (4 percent of the national forest), nine backcountry areas (4 percent of the national forest), eight recreation emphasis areas (6 percent of the national forest), the Stillwater Complex for minerals, and wildlife key linkage areas. Nineteen percent of the national forest would be suitable for timber production.

Alternative C has more acres of recommended wilderness and backcountry areas than alternative B and has similar plan objectives. Motorized use and mechanized transport would not be suitable in recommended wilderness areas, the Bad Canyon Backcountry Area or the backcountry areas in the Pryor Mountains. Alternative C proposes 9 recommended wilderness areas (5 percent of the national forest), 12 backcountry areas (10 percent of the national forest), 8 recreation emphasis areas (5 percent of the national forest), the Stillwater Complex for minerals, and wildlife key linkage areas. Nineteen percent of the national forest would be suitable for timber production.

Alternative D emphasizes natural processes and restoration, undeveloped recreation opportunities, higher objectives for restoration, and less land suitable for timber production. Motorized use and mechanized transport would not be suitable in recommended wilderness areas. Alternative D proposes 39 recommended wilderness areas (23 percent of the national forest), 1 backcountry area (0.2 percent of the national forest), and 4 recreation emphasis areas (1 percent of the national forest), and wildlife key linkage areas. It does not include the Stillwater Complex for minerals. Eighteen percent of the national forest would be suitable for timber production.

Alternative E supports a higher level of human presence and use of the Custer Gallatin, additional recreation emphasis areas, increased timber production from the national forest, additional motorized and mechanized recreation opportunities, and no recommended wilderness areas. Alternative E proposes 2 backcountry areas (6 percent of the national forest), 12 recreation emphasis areas (7 percent of the national forest), and the Stillwater Complex for minerals. It does not include wildlife key linkage areas. Twenty percent of the national forest would be suitable for timber production.

Alternative F, **the selected alternative,** represents a mix of recommended wilderness areas, backcountry areas, recreation emphasis areas, and lands identified as suitable for timber production. Plan objectives reflect a mix of resource enhancement, moving toward forested vegetation desired conditions, timber and wood products volume, hazardous fuel treatment, road, trail, and facility maintenance, and new recreation facilities. Motorized use and mechanized transport would not be suitable in recommended wilderness areas. Alternative F proposes 7 recommended wilderness areas (4 percent of the national forest), 13 backcountry areas (7 percent of the national forest), 10 recreation emphasis areas (8 percent of the national forest), and the Stillwater Complex for minerals. Nineteen percent of the national forest would be suitable for timber production.

Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Study

Federal agencies are required by the National Environmental Policy Act 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). Public comments received in response to the proposed action and the draft environmental impact statement provided suggestions for alternative methods of achieving the purpose and need. Some of these may have been outside the scope of what can be included in the plan, or duplicative of the alternatives considered in detail. Twenty-two alternative(s) were considered but eliminated from detailed consideration for the reasons summarized below.

- The alternative was not consistent with law, regulation, or policy, including the 2012 Planning Rule and FSH 1909.12.
- The alternative would not meet the multiple-use mandate of the Forest Service.
- The suggested alternative is represented in the range of alternatives considered in detail.
- Suggested land allocations may have been beyond the authority of a land management plan, been inconsistent with the intent of a plan land allocation, or resulted in an unmanageable land allocation. Inadequate detail was provided by public comments for some suggestions, and in some cases, forestwide plan direction adequately covered a suggested land allocation.

Environmentally Preferable Alternative

National Environmental Policy Act regulations require agencies to specify the alternative or alternatives that are considered to be environmentally preferable (40 CFR 1505.2(b)). The environmentally preferable alternative is "the alternative that will best promote the national environmental policy as expressed in section 101 (42 U.S.C. 4321 of the National Environmental Policy Act). Ordinarily, the environmentally preferable alternative is that which causes the least harm to the biological and physical environment; it is also the alternative which best protects and preserves historic, cultural, and natural resources" (36 CFR 220.3).

I find, based upon the laws and regulations guiding national forest management, that **alternative F is the environmentally preferred alternative**. When compared to the alternatives analyzed in detail, it best contributes to, and moves the Custer Gallatin toward, ecological, social, and economic sustainability and desired conditions that will benefit future generations (see the explanation of how the plan components meet the requirements of the 2012 Planning Rule, in the section titled "Findings required by other laws and regulations" of this record of decision). Although alternative D would allow the fewest acres available for mechanical ground-disturbing activities and the fewest acres suitable for motorized transport, and has the highest objectives for resource enhancement, it does not address the six goals of the National Environmental Policy Act as well as alternative F does. I base my finding on the following comparison showing how the alternatives address the goals of section 101 of the National Environmental Policy Act.

1. ***Fulfill the responsibilities of each generation as trustees of the environment for succeeding generations.***

Alternative F emphasizes moving forest conditions toward desired conditions, while contributing to ecological, social, and economic sustainability. Alternative F, as well as alternatives B and C, provides a balanced set of plan objectives that enhance aquatic, vegetation, wildlife, cultural, recreation, and infrastructure resources while providing movement toward vegetation desired conditions and sustainable levels of timber harvest similar to or greater than current levels. While alternative D proposes higher resource enhancement objectives and the highest acreage of recommended wilderness, this alternative also proposes a lower Forest sustainable share of products and uses demanded by the public, and the lowest percentage of the national forest in which to actively move toward vegetation desired conditions. There are more acres suitable for timber production in alternative E, with an expected higher level of management intensity and more timber production. However, because of an emphasis on production of wood products, it does not move toward vegetation desired conditions as much as alternative F.

Alternative A would provide the least improvement toward desired conditions. Alternative F provides more acres of recommended wilderness area than alternative E and provides plan components to protect the wilderness characteristics of these areas.

2. Assure for all Americans safe, healthful, productive, and aesthetically and culturally pleasing surroundings.

Alternative F achieves maintenance of a safe, healthful, productive, and aesthetically and culturally pleasing Forest better than the other alternatives because it provides the best mix of resource utilization, active and passive management, and motorized and non-motorized recreation uses along with the safeguards provided by standards and guidelines for maintaining water quality, scenery, and wildlife habitat. Alternative F provides recommended wilderness areas that incorporate the suggestions of the public. Alternative F provides timber harvest levels similar to or greater than current alternative A levels. Alternative F provides for more motorized and mechanized recreation access than alternatives C or D, but less than alternatives A, B, or E. Although alternative E provides higher levels of timber harvest and access opportunities, it does not provide the levels of recommended wilderness areas that are currently enjoyed and desired on the national forest.

3. Attain the widest range of beneficial uses of the environment without degradation, risk to health or safety, or other undesirable and unintended consequences.

The beneficial uses that are most varied between alternatives and that I considered in this finding are: wood fiber production, resource enhancement, and a reasonable range of motorized and non-motorized recreation opportunities.

Alternative F provides a balanced set of objectives that enhance aquatic, vegetation, wildlife, cultural, recreation, and infrastructure resources while providing movement toward vegetation desired conditions and sustainable levels of timber harvest similar to or greater than current levels. Alternative F has greater impact on existing motorized and mechanized recreation access than alternatives A or B, but less than alternatives C and D.

Alternative E provides higher levels of wood fiber production and motorized recreation allocations, but it does so at the expense of objectives for resource enhancement.

Alternative D provides higher levels of objectives for resource enhancement and the highest acreage of recommended wilderness, but the lowest percentage of the national forest in which to actively moved toward vegetation desired conditions. Alternative D has the greatest impact on existing motorized and mechanized recreation access.

4. ***Preserve important historic, cultural, and natural aspects of our national heritage and maintain, wherever possible, an environment that supports diversity and variety of individual choice.***

   Part of preserving our historic and cultural national heritage is recognizing that humans are a natural aspect of our national heritage—humans have utilized the physical and cultural resources offered by the national forest for thousands of years. Recognizing this, I find that the best way to preserve this heritage, and an environment that supports diversity and variety of choice, is to manage the national forest to provide for physical resource use and the appropriate protection of cultural resources. Based on the final environmental impact statement, I find that alternative F meets this goal better than the other alternatives. It improves on alternative A and provides the best assortment of multiple uses between alternative D's emphasis on wilderness values and alternative E's emphasis on achieving desired conditions through mechanical means.

5. ***Achieve a balance between population and resource use, which will permit high standards of living and a wide sharing of life's amenities.***

   The public demands a variety of products and uses from their national forests. National Forest System lands and resources are important local resources that contribute in many ways to the quality of life in the region. The final environmental impact statement alternative analysis compares the various public values that define quality of life, varying from economic resource extraction values (timber harvest and minerals) to less tangibly defined resources such as wilderness character and semi-primitive recreation opportunities. The challenge is in defining the balance sought in this goal, and I find that alternative F achieves that balance. Alternative F provides more resource use than alternative D but more opportunities for semi-primitive non-motorized recreation opportunities than alternative E.

6. ***Enhance the quality of renewable resources and approach the maximum attainable recycling of depletable resources.***

   I find that alternative F enhances the quality of renewable resources and provides sustainable use of renewable resources. The standards and guidelines and the land allocations under alternative F provide for levels of resource use that are similar to current levels of alternative A while providing protection measures for backcountry and recommended wilderness areas. Alternatives C and D emphasize a greater amount of backcountry and recommended wilderness but do so at the expense of resource utilization.

Best Available Scientific Information

The 2012 Planning Rule (36 CFR 219.6(a)(3) and 219.14(a)(4)) requires the responsible official to use the best available scientific information to inform the development of the assessment, proposed plan, including plan components, the monitoring program, and plan decisions.

The initial foundation used to develop plan components was based upon the expertise of the planning team members, who have a combined level of professional experience of several hundred years working for the Forest Service. A number of team members have been specialists and managers on the national forest for more than 20 years each. This interdisciplinary team of resource professionals compiled and evaluated the relevant information for the assessment of the national forest (2017) and the best available scientific information and analyses contained therein. From this foundation, the interdisciplinary team used the best available scientific information to develop the proposed action (January 2018), the alternatives, and the analysis and comparison of alternatives in the draft environmental impact statement (March 2019) and final environmental impact statement (July 2020).

Team members used resources that included peer-reviewed and technical literature, databases and data management systems, modeling tools and approaches, professional knowledge and experience, local knowledge and experience of the ecosystems in the plan area, scientific knowledge from local experts, information obtained from collaborations, and information received during public participation periods. Resource specialists considered what is most accurate, reliable, and relevant in their use of the best available scientific information. The best available scientific information used to inform the plan is appropriately cited throughout the final environmental impact statement and listed in the literature cited or references sections of the Custer Gallatin's assessment and the draft environmental impact statement, as well as any additional information that was used, updated, or included in the final environmental impact statement or the planning record prior to the record of decision. The final environmental impact statement documents the best available scientific information used to inform planning, the plan components, and other plan content, including the plan monitoring program (36 CFR 219.3). The final environmental impact statement also includes science that is discussed in order to address opposing science, as required by the National Environmental Policy Act.

A number of Forest Service databases were utilized, including the Forest Service infrastructure database (INFRA), the management activity tracking system (FACTS), the natural resource management database (NRM), the fire severity database (MTBS), the threatened, endangered, and sensitive plants and invasive plants database (TESP-IS), the northern regional forest inventory and analysis summary database, and data from the PACFISH, INFISH biological opinion (PIBO) monitoring program, Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem grizzly bear access model, and national visitor use monitoring (NVUM) program.

Information was obtained from other agencies including Montana and South Dakota State Natural Heritage Programs, State wildlife management agencies, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team, and the Bureau of Land Management.

The interdisciplinary team utilized and updated a geographic information system database to evaluate complex spatial effects resulting from implementation of the alternatives (such as the

recreation opportunity spectrum and effects to wildlife habitat by species). The interdisciplinary team used an optimization model to estimate the long-term flow of timber from the plan area. This type of model is widely used by private and State land managers and is widely accepted as an accurate way of modeling timber harvest schedules.

Much of the information with respect to social and economic conditions and trends contained in the assessment and final environmental impact statement was taken from the Economic Profile System-Human Dimensions Toolkit (Headwaters Economics), developed in partnership with the Bureau of Land Management and the Forest Service. This database uses published statistics from Federal data sources, including but not limited to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the U.S. Census Bureau. An analysis of the contribution of Forest programs and expenditures to jobs and labor income utilized Forest Service corporate data and data from IMPLAN (an economic impact model) for the year 2018. Public comments and expert input contributed to the development of plan components related to social and economic conditions.

The planning team's wildlife biologist, vegetation ecologist, and team leader collaborated with the nonprofit Center for Large Landscape Conservation on a modelling approach to incorporate wildlife connectivity into plan revision under the 2012 Planning Rule (Williamson et al. 2020). The modeling effort informed development of a "key linkage area" land allocation in the plan.

Planning team members collaborated with partners from universities, non-governmental organizations, and other Federal agencies in a series of workshops in 2018 to assess climate vulnerability of forest vegetation and to evaluate management options in support of the Custer Gallatin plan revision (Hansen et al. 2018).

For all these reasons, based on my review of the final environmental impact statement and the planning record, I have determined that the most accurate and reliable scientific information available that is relevant to the issues considered in this plan revision has been used to inform the planning process and has been applied to the issues considered in the revision, as required by 36 CFR 219.3.

Findings Required by Other Laws

The Forest Service manages the Custer Gallatin in conformance with many laws and regulations. I have considered the statutes specific to individual resources as described in the final environmental impact statement, and I find that this decision meets our obligations to the current statutory duties of the Forest Service. Following are summaries of how the plan addresses the relevant laws and regulations.

American Indian Religious Freedom Act

Federal agencies must make a good faith effort to understand how Indian religious practices may come into conflict with other Forest uses and consider any adverse impacts on these practices in their decision making. The Forest Service consulted with 19 federally recognized Indian Tribes in the Custer Gallatin plan revision: Blackfeet, Cheyenne River Sioux, Crow Creek Sioux, Northern Cheyenne, Confederated Salish and Kootenai, Crow, Eastern Shoshone, Ft. Peck Sioux and

Assiniboine, Lower Brule Sioux, Nez Perce, MHA (Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara), Northern Arapahoe, Pine Ridge Sioux, Rosebud Sioux, Shoshone-Bannock, Standing Rock Sioux, Umatilla, and Yakama.

No effects on American Indian social, economic, or subsistence rights are anticipated as a result of the plan. Regardless of which alternative is chosen, the Forest Service is required to consult with Tribes when management activities may impact treaty rights, cultural sites, or cultural use. Desired conditions for areas of Tribal importance for all revised plan alternatives are:

1. In recognition of Federal trust responsibilities, healthy and sustainable plant and animal habitats support the availability of Tribal reserved rights resources for traditional cultural practices. See FW DC-TRIBAL-01.
2. Tribal members have access to sacred sites, scared places, and Tribal cultural landscapes within the Custer Gallatin for the exercise of reserved treaty rights and traditional cultural practices. See FW DC-TRIBAL-02.
3. Rituals and ceremonies at sites identified as sacred by Tribes and practitioners of native traditional religions can be conducted in privacy and without disruption. See FW DC-TRIBAL-03.

Therefore, I find the plan is compliant with this Act.

Archaeological Resources Protection Act

This Act provides protection to archaeological resources found on public lands and Indian lands of the United States. The legislation provides civil and criminal penalties for those who remove or damage archaeological resources in violation of the prohibitions contained in the Act. The Act prohibits the removal of archaeological resources on public lands or Indian lands without first obtaining a permit from the affected Federal land manager or Indian Tribe and requires Federal agencies to develop plans to survey lands under their management to determine the nature and extent of archaeological and cultural resources. The act also protects the confidentiality of the nature and location of archaeological resources on Federal land.

The plan is strategic and programmatic in nature, providing guidance and direction to future site-specific projects and activities. Plan components include provisions that take into consideration American Indian rights and interests and cultural resources. Therefore, I find that the plan is compliant with this Act.

Clean Air Act

In accordance with the Clean Air Act of 1990 and the Organic Administration Act of 1897, the Forest Service has the responsibility to protect the air, land, and water resources from the impacts of air pollutants produced within the boundaries of National Forest System lands and to work with states to protect air resources from degradation associated with the impacts of air pollution emitted outside of National Forest System lands. Section 3.2, air quality, of the final environmental impact statement addresses and discloses potential impacts to air resources from program activities, including the use of prescribed fire.

The plan includes plan components for maintaining air quality (2020 plan, air quality section). Conformity determinations and more detailed air quality impact analyses will be made at subsequent levels of planning and analysis where emissions can be more accurately quantified, reasonably forecasted, and where local impacts can be assessed. Therefore, I find the plan to be in compliance with the Clean Air Act.

Clean Water Act

The Clean Water Act (33 U.S.C. 1251 et seq.) establishes the basic structure for regulating discharges of pollutants into the waters of the United States and regulating quality standards for surface waters.

Implementation of the plan is expected to maintain and improve water quality and satisfy all State water quality requirements. This finding is based on direction contained in the plan, application of "best management practices" specifically designed to protect water quality, and the discussions of water quality and beneficial uses addressed in section 3.4 of the final environmental impact statement. Management direction protecting water quality can be found in many locations throughout the plan, including watershed, aquatic and riparian ecosystems; permitted livestock grazing; energy, minerals, and geologic areas of interest; infrastructure; recreation settings, opportunity and access; and land status and ownership, access and land uses. project-level analysis required for Plan implementation will be required to demonstrate compliance with the Clean Water Act. I find that the plan is compliant with this Act.

Endangered Species Act

The purpose of the Endangered Species Act is to provide for the conservation of endangered species by conserving the ecosystems these species rely on. Section 7(a)(1) of the Act requires Federal agencies to carry out programs for the conservation of listed species. In addition, the Endangered Species Act requires Federal agencies to ensure that any agency action does not jeopardize the continued existence of the species (Endangered Species Act, section 7(a)(2)). The Act also requires the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Forest Service to base their biological opinion and subsequent agency action, respectively, on the use of the best scientific and commercially available information (916 U.S.C. 1536(a)(2)).

In June 2019, the Custer Gallatin requested from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service a list of threatened and endangered species, species proposed for Federal listing, and candidate species to be considered in the biological assessment for the plan. In October 2019 the national forest received a letter from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that identified threatened and endangered species along with designated critical habitat, as well as proposed and candidate species that may be present on the Custer Gallatin National Forest.

In accordance with section 7(c) of the Act, a biological assessment was prepared to assess the effects of implementing the plan on the seven federally listed threatened, endangered, proposed, and candidate species and designated critical habitat identified by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as known or suspected to occur on the national forest. The biological assessment determined that implementation of the plan *may affect, and is likely to adversely affect,* the threatened Canada lynx and designated critical habitat for lynx, as well as the threatened grizzly bear. The biological assessment determined that implementation of the plan

may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect, the threatened northern long-eared bat or the endangered whooping crane, and would have *no effect* on the threatened western glacier stonefly. Finally, the biological assessment determined that implementation of the plan *may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect,* the wolverine, which is proposed for listing, or whitebark pine, which is a candidate for federal listing.

The Forest Service is expecting a biological opinion from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in July 2020, at which time it will be posted on the Custer Gallatin National Forest website. In response to the Forest's biological assessment determinations for Canada lynx, designated critical habitat for Canada lynx, and grizzly bear, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biological opinion may include an incidental take statement, which may specify "reasonable and prudent measures" and "terms and conditions" necessary or appropriate to minimize the impact of any "incidental take" of listed species resulting from implementation of the plan. Reasonable and prudent measures identified in a biological opinion, along with terms and conditions for meeting such measures, are nondiscretionary and must be met by the Forest Service in compliance with Section 7 (o)(2) of the Endangered Species Act. Therefore, such measures need not be directly incorporated into the plan by repeating them as plan components.

The plan includes ecosystem-based and species-specific desired conditions, standards, guidelines, objectives, and suitability statements, which provide broad and specific management direction that will contribute to the recovery of threatened and endangered species, while conserving proposed and candidate species, thereby meeting our responsibilities under section 7(a)(1) of the Endangered Species Act. These plan components are consistent with the scientific basis for management outlined in recovery plans and conservation strategies for federally listed species and designated critical habitat that may be present on the Custer Gallatin National Forest. For these reasons, I find the plan to be in compliance with the requirements of the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

Environmental Justice: Executive Order 12898

Executive Order 12898, Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations, requires that all Federal actions consider potentially disproportionate effects on minority and low-income communities, especially if adverse effects to environmental or human health conditions are identified. Environmental justice populations, which consist of minority and low-income populations, are present in the areas surrounding the national forest. Several environmental justice communities were identified in a social area of influence that extends 50 miles from any boundary of the Custer Gallatin. The bulk of these communities are on the eastern side of the national forest and many are associated with an Indian Reservation. No populations in the plan area will experience significant adverse human health impacts or environmental effects due to management actions proposed under any of the alternatives considered. Therefore, I find that the plan is in compliance with this executive order.

Federal Land Policy and Management Act

The Federal Land Policy and Management Act allows for the granting of easements across National Forest System lands. The plan is strategic and programmatic in nature. It provides guidance and direction to future site-specific projects and activities. The plan does not create,

authorize, or execute any site-specific activity, although it does provide for the consideration of granting easements and rights-of-way. Therefore, I find that the plan is consistent with this Act.

Invasive Species

Executive Order 13751, which amends Executive Order 13112, directs Federal agencies to prevent the introduction of invasive species, detect and respond rapidly to and control populations of such species in a cost-effective and environmentally sound manner, monitor invasive species populations accurately and reliably, provide for restoration of native species and habitat conditions in ecosystems that have been invaded, conduct research on invasive species and develop technologies to prevent introduction, provide for environmentally sound control of invasive species, and promote public education on invasive species and the means to address them. All of these actions are subject to the availability of appropriations to support this work. Forest Service Manual 2900, Invasive Species Management, sets forth Forest Service policy, responsibilities, and direction for the prevention, detection, control, and restoration of effects from aquatic and terrestrial invasive species (including vertebrates, invertebrates, plants, and pathogens).

The plan is strategic and programmatic in nature, providing program-level guidance and direction for future site-specific projects and activities. The plan does not create, authorize, or execute any ground-disturbing activity, although it does provide for the consideration of certain types of activities that may have the potential to affect the dispersal of invasive species. The plan includes forestwide desired conditions, objectives, and management approaches that stress the use of best management practices to limit the introduction of new species and limit the spread of existing populations due to management activities. Additionally, other direction provides protection of watershed, soil, riparian, and aquatic conditions in ways that will reduce management-related disturbances that might introduce new populations or increase existing ones. Plan monitoring also includes indicators associated with invasive species, and the effectiveness of treatments. Therefore, I find that the plan is compliant with this Executive order.

Migratory Bird Treaty Act

Executive Order 13186, Responsibilities of Federal Agencies to Protect Migratory Birds, was issued in furtherance of the purposes of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Acts, Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act, Endangered Species Act, and National Environmental Policy Act. This order requires including the effects of Federal actions on migratory birds as a part of the environmental analysis process. On December 8, 2008, the Forest Service signed a memorandum of understanding with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to complement the Executive order (USDI-USFWS, 2008), and the Forest Service agreed to incorporate migratory bird habitat and population objectives and recommendations into the agency planning process, in cooperation with other governments, State and Federal agencies, and non-Federal partners, and strive to protect, restore, enhance, and manage the habitat of migratory birds, and prevent the further loss or degradation of remaining habitats on National Forest System lands. The Council for the Conservation of Migratory Birds was established in 2009 by the Secretary of the Interior to oversee Executive Order 13186. More than 20 Federal agencies, including the Forest Service, currently participate in and have representation on the Council for the Conservation of Migratory Birds.

The plan includes forestwide direction related to key stressors for migratory birds and their habitats, including direction to maintain or improve habitat resilience, water quality, and vegetative composition, structure, and function. The plan also includes direction to protect raptor nests from disturbance as well as protect airborne species from wind energy development (FW-GDL-WL 06 and 07). Future site-specific activities or projects with the potential to impact migratory bird habitat will be analyzed with site-specific analysis under the National Environmental Policy Act process and will comply with plan direction. Therefore, I find that the plan is compliant with the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and Executive Order 13186.

Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act

The Forest Service manages National Forest System lands to sustain the multiple use of its renewable resources in perpetuity while maintaining the long-term health and productivity of the land. Resources are managed through a combination of approaches and concepts for the benefit of human communities and natural resources. As demonstrated in the final environmental impact statement and as required by the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act of 1960 (16 U.S.C. 528-531), the plan guides sustainable and integrated management of Forest resources in the context of the broader landscape, giving due consideration to the relative values of the various resources in particular areas. Therefore, I find that the plan is compliant with the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act.

National Environmental Policy Act

The National Environmental Policy Act requires that Federal agencies prepare detailed statements on proposed actions that may significantly affect the quality of the human environment. The Act's requirement is designed to serve two major functions:

- provide decision makers with a detailed accounting of the likely environmental effects of proposed actions prior to adoption
- inform the public of, and allow comment on, such efforts.

The Forest Service has developed, gathered, and reviewed an extensive amount of information regarding the potential effects of each of the alternatives considered in the final environmental impact statement. This information expands and refines the data, analyses, and public input described in the National Environmental Policy Act documents associated with the draft plan and draft environmental impact statement. My decision also considers the large amount of public input, including public meetings, comments on the website, and comments received during the 90-day comment period for the draft environmental impact statement.

All substantive written comments made in regard to the draft environmental impact statement have been summarized and responded to in appendix F of the final environmental impact statement. I find that the environmental analysis and public involvement process that the final environmental impact statement is based on complies with each of the major elements of the requirements set forth by the Council on Environmental Quality regulations for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (40 CFR 1500-1508). My conclusion is supported by the following findings.

- The final environmental impact statement considered a range of reasonable alternatives based on the issues identified during scoping. The six alternatives considered in detail in the final environmental impact statement cover a range of possible management allocations based on revision topics identified through public involvement and scoping.
- The final environmental impact statement reflects consideration of cumulative effects of the alternatives by evaluating past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions in the plan area, including Federal, State, Tribal, and private lands. The environmental effects analysis estimates the potential effects of timber activities and timber-associated activities. The analysis of effects to wildlife was based on the assumption that these activities would take place with management constraints to ensure habitat availability. Moreover, although non-Federal lands are outside the scope of this decision, effects from their management have been considered, to the extent practicable, in the final environmental impact statement.
- The final environmental impact statement uses scientific integrity to support the conclusions made. The decision here does not authorize timber sales or any other specific activity on the national forest. Site-specific decisions will be made on projects in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act, Endangered Species Act, and other environmental laws following applicable public involvement and appeal procedures.

National Forest Management Act

The National Forest Management Act requires the development, maintenance, amendment, and revision of land management plans for each unit of the National Forest System. Because these land management plans help create a dynamic management system, an interdisciplinary approach to achieve integrated consideration of physical, biological, economic, and other sciences will be applied to all future actions on the unit. Under the Act, the Forest Service is to ensure coordination of the multiple uses and sustained yield of products and services of the National Forest System.

The National Forest Management Act requires the Secretary of Agriculture to promulgate regulations for developing and maintaining land management plans. On April 9, 2012, the Department of Agriculture issued a Final Planning Rule for National Forest System land management planning (36 CFR 219; refer to the Federal Register at 77 FR 68, pp. 21162-21276).

As discussed in detail in the requirements of the planning rule section of this document, my review of the planning process, the final environmental impact statement, and the information provided in the draft record of decision, the plan and its preparation meet requirements for revising plans under the provisions of the 2012 Planning Rule and are compliant with the National Forest Management Act.

National Historic Preservation Act

Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act requires each Federal agency to take into account the effects of its actions on historic properties, prior to approving expenditure of Federal funds on an undertaking or prior to issuing any license, while section 110 of the Act outlines the Federal agency responsibility to establish and maintain a preservation program for

the identification, evaluation, and nomination to the National Register of Historic Places, and protection of historic properties.

The plan is a programmatic-level planning effort that will not directly authorize any ground-disturbing activities or projects. The plan includes desired conditions, goals, objectives, standards, guidelines, management strategies, and monitoring requirements for managing and protecting cultural resources listed or eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

Site-specific projects that are undertaken as a result of direction in the plan will comply with laws and regulations that ensure protection of heritage resources. Significant cultural resources will be identified, protected, and monitored in compliance with the Act. Any consultation that will occur for proposed activities will be coordinated with the Montana and South Dakota State Historic Preservation Offices. Therefore, I find that the plan is in compliance with this Act.

Roadless Area Conservation Rule

Management direction for inventoried roadless areas is compliant with the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule (36 CFR 294 subpart B, published at 66 FR 3244-3273). The 2001 Roadless Conservation Rule includes a prohibition on road construction and road reconstruction in IRAs and prohibitions on timber cutting, sale, or removal except in certain circumstances. The plan is a programmatic-level planning effort and does not directly authorize any road construction, reconstruction, or timber removal. Therefore, I find that the plan is compliant with the Roadless Area Conservation Rule.

Travel Management Regulations

Travel management regulations that apply to the Custer Gallatin include subparts A, B, and C of 36 CFR 212. Subpart A of these regulations establishes requirements for administration of the transportation system on National Forest System lands, including roads, trails, and airfields, and contains provisions for acquisition of rights-of-way. Subpart A also requires identification of the minimum road system needed for safe and efficient travel and for administration, utilization, and protection of National Forest System lands and use of a science-based roads analysis at the appropriate scale in determining the minimum road system. This portion of the rule is intended to help ensure that additions to the National Forest System network of roads are those deemed essential for resource management and use; that construction, reconstruction, and maintenance of roads minimize adverse environmental impacts; and, finally, that unneeded roads are decommissioned and restoration of ecological processes are initiated (66 Federal Register 3206, Jan. 12, 2001).

The Custer National Forest and the Gallatin National Forest completed forest-scale road analyses prior to initiation of plan revision as required by subpart A. The analyses provide an assessment of the transportation infrastructure on National Forest System lands and a set of findings and opportunities for change to the Custer Gallatin transportation system. Those findings are being used under the current plan and will continue to be used under this revised plan to prioritize ongoing management of the transportation system and inform project development as the Custer Gallatin works to effectively manage an efficient transportation system.

Together with the assessment, the travel analysis report was used to inform the plan components such as the objectives for miles of roads and trails to be maintained (FW-OBJ-RT-01 and 02). Objectives such as these provide measurable actions the Custer Gallatin may take over the life of the plan per the findings in the travel analysis report, consistent with subpart A of the Travel Management Rule.

Subparts B and C describe the requirements for designating roads, trails, and areas for motor vehicle use; and for identifying designated roads, trails, and areas on a motor vehicle use map and an over snow vehicle use map. It's important to note that subparts B and C of the Travel Management Rule and the associated Executive Order 11644, Use of Off-Road Vehicles on the Public Lands, as amended by Executive Order 11989, apply to site-specific designations of motor vehicle use. As stated in the 2012 Planning Rule, the plan does not authorize projects or activities or commit the Forest Service to take action (36 CFR 219.2(b)(2)), nor does it either designate or prohibit public uses such as motor vehicle use.

Prior to this revision, the Custer Gallatin published comprehensive travel management decisions that designated the specific roads, areas, and trails for the use of motor vehicles that are displayed on the motor vehicle use map as required by 36 CFR 212 subpart B. The Gallatin Travel Plan decision designated motor vehicle use that is displayed on the over snow vehicle use map as required by 36 CFR subpart C. Additional site-specific planning is needed within the Hyalite Porcupine Buffalo Horn portion of the Gallatin Geographic Area to meet the requirement of 36 CFR subparts B and C. Site-specific planning to meet 36 CFR subpart C has not been completed on the Beartooth, Sioux, or Ashland Ranger Districts.

Although the plan identifies landscape-level suitability for motor vehicle use (including over snow), this programmatic plan decision does not *designate* any additional roads, trails, or areas for motor vehicle use, or prohibit existing motor vehicles uses; therefore, those maps remain unchanged. Alone, plan suitability does not mandate off-road vehicle use or indicate that an area is subject to unmanaged off-road vehicle use. Public use must continue to adhere to the current motor vehicle use map, over snow vehicle use map, and interim orders for the Hyalite Porcupine Buffalo Horn portion until site-specific planning is completed.

I recognize that site-specific changes in current motor vehicle use designations will occur over the life of this plan. I expect that the landscape-level suitability plan components, together with the suite of desired conditions, standards, and guidelines that provide for ecological integrity and sustainable recreation will provide the guidance that will be used when considering the effects on (with the objective of minimizing) forest resources and recreation conflicts as described at 36 CFR 212.55. These include the plan components associated with the recreation opportunity settings, infrastructure, and those that address management risks and stressors to wildlife habitat, connectivity, soil productivity, and aquatic resources.

Therefore, I find that this decision complies with the Travel Management Rule to the extent it applies at the land management planning level; that is, the plan will appropriately guide future site-specific decision making per the requirements of subparts A, B, and C.

Wetlands and Floodplains

Executive Orders 11990 (Protection of Wetlands) and 11988 (Floodplain Management) require Federal agencies to avoid, to the extent possible, short- and long-term effects resulting from the modification or destruction of wetlands and the occupancy and modification of floodplains. Forestwide standards and guidelines are provided for soil, water, wetlands, and riparian areas to minimize effects to wetlands and floodplains. Therefore, I find that the plan is compliant with these Executive orders.

Wild and Scenic Rivers Act

The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act establishes a National Wild and Scenic Rivers System with three classifications of rivers: wild, scenic, and recreational. The purpose of the Act is to protect the designated rivers "for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations" and to preserve the rivers' free-flowing condition, water quality, and outstandingly remarkable values. Analysis of the designated wild and scenic rivers was included in section 3.21.5 of the final environmental impact statement. Direction in the plan provides protection for the water quality, free-flowing conditions, and outstandingly remarkable values identified for designated wild and scenic rivers.

In addition, the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act requires an evaluation of eligible wild, scenic, or recreational rivers in land management planning. This was completed, and the 30 eligible rivers (plan appendix E) identified through the eligible wild and scenic river study process were analyzed in section 3.22.3 of the final environmental impact statement. Management direction in the plan provides protection of free-flowing conditions and the outstandingly remarkable values identified for the eligible segments of rivers on the national forest. Therefore, I find that the plan is compliant with the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

Wilderness Act

The Wilderness Act of 1964 established a National Wilderness Preservation System to be administered in such a manner as to leave these areas unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness. It provides the statutory definition of wilderness, how areas are assessed for addition to the wilderness preservation system, and management requirements for congressionally designated areas.

Evaluation of existing designated wilderness areas was included in section 3.21.2 of the final environmental impact statement. The plan provides direction for designated wilderness through goals, desired conditions, standards, guidelines, and suitability that preserves the wilderness character of designated wilderness (2020 plan, designated areas and plan allocations section). Therefore, I find that this plan is compliant with this Act.

Plan Implementation

Existing Authorizations

Resource plans (example travel management plans) developed by the Custer Gallatin that apply to the resources or land areas within the planning area must be consistent with the plan

components. Resource plans developed prior to this plan decision will be evaluated for consistency with the plan and updated as soon as practicable.

Authorizations for occupancy and use made before this plan approval may proceed unchanged until time of reauthorization. At time of reauthorization, all permits, contracts, and other authorizing instruments must be made consistent with the plan, subject to existing valid rights, as provided at 36 CFR 219.15(d).

Plan components applicable to livestock grazing (including the end of season stubble height guideline) will be incorporated through permit modification(s), reissuance of existing term permits, issuance of new term grazing permits, or as allotment management plan revisions and sufficiency reviews occur. Monitoring data will be used to prioritize both allotments and stream reaches. It is expected that all allotments will be managed under the plan direction within the first decade.

National Environmental Policy Act analysis will be necessary to consider closure of eight vacant allotments: Cottonwood, Lion Creek, Mill Creek (Gardiner Ranger District), Section 22, Lost Cabin, Main Boulder, Deep Creek South, and East Rosebud.

Project and Activity Consistency

As required by National Forest Management Act and the 2012 Planning Rule, subject to valid existing or statutory rights, all projects and activities authorized by the Forest Service after approval of this plan must be consistent with the applicable plan components (16 U.S.C. 1604(i)) as described at 36 CFR 219.15. Previously approved and ongoing projects and activities are not required to meet the direction of the plans and will remain consistent with the direction in the 1986 and 1987 plans, as amended.

All project or activity approval documents made after the effective date of the plan will describe how the project or activity is consistent with the applicable components of the plan. When a proposed project or activity would not be consistent with the applicable plan components, the responsible official shall take one of the following steps, subject to valid existing or statutory rights:

1. Modify the proposed project or activity to make it consistent with the applicable plan components;
2. Reject the proposal or terminate the project or activity;
3. Amend the plan so that the project or activity will be consistent with the plan as amended;
4. Amend the plan contemporaneously with the approval of the project or activity so that the project or activity will be consistent with the plan as amended. This amendment may be limited to apply only to the project or activity.

Maintaining the Plan

A land management plan is an integral part of an adaptive management cycle, including assessment, plan revision or amendment, and monitoring. This adaptive management cycle enables the national forest to identify and respond to changing conditions, changing public

desires, and new information, such as that obtained through research and scientific findings. The plan monitoring program is an integral part of this adaptive management cycle, consisting of monitoring questions and indicators (see chapter 4 of the plan for additional information about the monitoring plan).

A land management plan may be amended at any time based on a preliminary identification of the need to change the plan, which may be based on a new assessment, plan monitoring, or other documentation of new information, changed conditions, or changed circumstances. The amendment and administrative change process is described at 36 CFR 219.17(b)(2) of the 2012 Planning Rule.

Implementation Date

The plan becomes effective 30 calendar days after publication of the notice of its approval in the Federal Register (36 CFR 219.17(a), 2012 Planning Rule). This approval will not occur until the pre-decisional review process is complete and a final record of decision is issued.

Administrative Review

The decision to approve the plan for the Custer Gallatin National Forest is subject to the objection process identified in 36 CFR Part 219 subpart B (219.50 to 219.62). The responsible official who will approve the final record of decision for the Custer Gallatin National Forest Land Management Plan is Mary Erickson, Forest Supervisor for the Custer Gallatin National Forest, 10 East Babcock, Bozeman, Montana 59715 (406) 587-6701. The regional forester is the reviewing officer for the revised plan since the forest supervisor is the responsible official (36 CFR 219.56(e)(2)).

Objections, including attachments, must be filed within 60 days of the publication date of the legal notice published in the newspapers of record; the Bozeman Daly Chronicle (Bozeman, Montana), the Billings Gazette (Billings, Montana), and the Rapid City Journal (Rapid City, South Dakota). Objections, including attachments, received after the 60-day objection period will not be considered. The publication date in the newspapers of record is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an objection. Those wishing to object should not rely upon dates or time frame information provided by any other source. It is the responsibility of the objector to ensure that the reviewing officer receives the objection in a timely manner. The regulations prohibit extending the length of the objection filing period.

An objection must include the following (36 CFR 219.54(c)): (1) The objector's name and address along with a telephone number or email address if available—in cases where no identifiable name is attached to an objection, the Forest Service will attempt to verify the identity of the objector to confirm objection eligibility; (2) A signature or other verification of authorship upon request (a scanned signature for electronic mail may be filed with the objection); (3) Identification of the lead objector when multiple names are listed on an objection. The Forest Service will communicate to all parties to an objection through the lead objector. Verification of the identity of the lead objector must also be provided if requested; (4) The name of the Custer Gallatin plan or the Custer Gallatin species of conservation concern being objected to and the name and title of the responsible official; (5) A statement of the issues or parts of the plan

revision to which the objection applies; (6) A concise statement explaining the objection and suggesting how the proposed plan decision may be improved. If the objector believes that the 2020 plan is inconsistent with law, regulation, or policy, an explanation should be included; (7) A statement that demonstrates the link between the objector's prior substantive formal comments and the content of the objection, unless the objection concerns an issue that arose after the opportunities for formal comment; and (8) All documents referenced in the objection (a bibliography is not sufficient), except that the following need not be provided: a. All or any part of a Federal law or regulation, b. Forest Service Directive System documents and land management plans or other published Forest Service documents, c. Documents referenced by the Forest Service in the planning documentation related to the proposal subject to objection, and d. Formal comments previously provided to the Forest Service by the objector during the plan revision comment period.

This is also an opportunity to object to the regional forester's list of species of conservation concern for the Custer Gallatin National Forest. The Custer Gallatin has provided the regional forester with public comments received on species of conservation concern. The regional forester considered comments received and reviewed the documentation, rationale, and best available scientific information. If necessary, changes were made to the list. The identification of the species of conservation concern list is subject to a separate objection process. The Chief of the Forest Service is the reviewing officer for species of conservation concern identification since the regional forester is the responsible official (36 CFR 219.56(e)(2)). Information about species of conservation concern is available at http://bit.ly/NorthernRegion-SCC.

Electronic objections must be submitted to the Objection Reviewing Officer via the CARA objection webform at https://cara.ecosystem-management.org/Public/CommentInput?project=50185.

Electronic submissions must be submitted in a format that is readable with optical character recognition software (for example, Word, PDF, Rich Text) and be searchable. Please be explicit as to whether the objection is for the Custer Gallatin plan or the Custer Gallatin species of conservation concern.

The following address should be used for objections submitted by regular mail, private carrier, or hand delivery: Objection Reviewing Officer, USDA Forest Service, Northern Region, 26 Fort Missoula Road, Missoula, MT 59804. Office hours are Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., excluding Federal holidays. Objections can be faxed to the Objection Reviewing Officer at (406) 329–3411. The fax coversheet must include a subject line with ''Custer Gallatin Plan Objection'' or ''Custer Gallatin Species of Conservation Concern'' and should specify the number of pages being submitted.

Contact Person

For additional information concerning this draft decision or the objection process, please contact Virginia Kelly, Plan Revision Team Leader, Custer Gallatin National Forest Supervisors Office, 10 East Babcock, Bozeman, MT 59715 or by phone at (406) 587-6701.

Signature and Date

_____ _____

Mary C. Erickson DATE
Forest Supervisor
Custer Gallatin National Forest

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Hansen, A. J., T. Olliff, G. Carnwath, B. W. Miller, L. Hoang, M. Cross, J. Dibenedetto, K. Emmett, R. Keane, V. Kelly, N. Korb, K. Legg, K. Renwick, R. D., D. Thoma, A. Adhikari, T. Belote, K. Dante-Wood, D. Delong, B. Dixon, T. Erdody, D. Laufenberg, and B. Soderquist. 2018. Vegetation climate adaptation planning in support of the Custer Gallatin National Forest Plan revision. Montana State University, Landscape Biodiversity Lab, Bozeman, MT.

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