United States Department of Agriculture
Forest Service
Lewis and Clark National Forest
Rocky Mountain Ranger District
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File Code: 1950
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Dear Interested Party,

The Rocky Mountain Ranger District of the Lewis and Clark National Forest is seeking public comments on several alternatives to address major structural problems on the Gates Park Pack Bridge. The bridge crosses the North Fork Sun River in the Bob Marshall Wilderness, and is located on the North Fork Sun River Trail #110 adjacent to its junction with the Beartop Trail #129. The legal location is Township 23 N, Range 10 W, Section 5, in Lewis and Clark County, Montana.

A Brief History: The existing Pack Bridge was constructed in 1964 after the floods washed out the previous bridge. Trail 110 has been recorded as a linear historic site and is potentially eligible, though it remains unevaluated, for the National Register of Historic Places. The bridge does not contribute to the eligibility of the trail route, as it is not a historic structure (over 50 years old).

The bridge design was not constructed with high enough tolerances for the maximum range of snow loads in that area, as determined by engineering standards. Over the last 41 years, the sills have started to crush, the abutments are failing, the needle beams (deck supports) are listing, and with enough snow loads the deadmans (cable anchors) may mobilize which will result in shifting of the bridge. The combined effect of these structural problems will not result in a catastrophic failure, but the bridge will keep settling and tilting until it is unsafe to use. It is likely the bridge has a 3-5 year useable lifespan remaining. "However, it has been on "probation" for the last 3 years. This "probation" means that a certified structural engineer from the Forest has performed an in-depth inspection annually to ensure public safety during the continued use of the bridge.

A Minimum Required Decision Guide compiled by the District Trail Manager and the Regional Structural Engineer, has identified four possible alternatives to deal with the failing bridge, while continuing to allow travel to the area currently accessed by the existing pack bridge. Here is a summarized explanation of each alternative and approximate cost. These cost estimates are preliminary and should be considered accurate to only 30%.

1. Repair Existing Bridge - This alternative is to rebuild the bridge and increase the snow load tolerances, however, the bridge would still be under-designed for recommended snow load tolerances. It would likely require helicopter transport of materials, and an onsite generator for approximately four weeks of construction. Appropriate approval would be necessary for those actions within the Wilderness. After approximately 17 years the bridge would require additional

work to repair parts that did not require replacement during the initial repair phase. Site-specifc analysis would be completed when the second phase of parts replacement was necessary. Approximate cost $130,000 initially, $75,000 for subsequent repair after 17 years. This would give the structure a 50 year lifespan from first phase of repair work. .

2. Replace Current Bridge with Similarly Designed Bridge - This new structure would be the same design as the old bridge, but with new materials. It would be constructed to tolerate potential snow loads, as recommended by engineering standards. It would likely require helicopter transport of materials, and an onsite generator for approximately eight weeks of destruction/construction. Appropriate approval would be necessary for those actions within the Wilderness. Approximate cost $266,000 with a 50 year lifespan.

3. Replace Current Bridge with Modern Design and Materials - The new design would be chosen with consideration given for blending the bridge with its natural surroundings. It would be constructed to tolerate potential snow loads, as recommended by engineering standards. This would require helicopter transport of materials, and likely an onsite generator for approximately three weeks of destruction/construction. Appropriate approval would be necessary for those actions within the Wilderness. Approximate cost $204,000 with 75 year lifespan.

4. Remove Current Bridge and Construct Ford - This alternative would require the removal of the current bridge without motorized assistance. A ford would be constructed about one eighth of a mile downstream from the current bridge site. This ford has been evaluated the last two years and has proved a safe crossing except in some of the more extreme circumstances during peak spring runoff and winter ice-up, however, continued analysis is being conducted to determine the past history of fording conditions and duration of peak flows. Approximate cost $70,000 with minimum future maintenance and indefinite lifespan.

At this point the Forest Service has not chosen a Preferred Alternative. An alternative will be selected following public comment and further environmental analysis. The analysis will proceed following public comment and a decision will be made in 2006-2007. The decision time frame is dependent upon a large number of variables in the analysis process. The resulting decision will be ready for implementation, which will be based upon the information gathered during the bridge's annual spring inspections. This decision would potentially remain in effect for up to 10 years, barring any significant changes in effects or extraordinary circumstances. The main factors that a decision will be based upon are public safety, natural resource protection, wilderness character, and cost. In regards to cost, the Gates Park Bridge is part of a network of major bridges, primarily suspension bridges, which provide access throughout Region 1 Wilderness areas. With limited funding available for trail structures the Forest Service is reviewing these bridges at a District, Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex, and Regional level in regards to the Forest Service's ability to maintain this network of bridges at its current level. Scoping among Forest Service Specialists regarding water quality, fisheries, wildlife, and wilderness character is currently in process.

The responsible official for this project is Michael A. Munoz, Rocky Mountain District Ranger. If you have issues, comments, or questions about this project, please send written correspondence (hard copy) to Michael Munoz, District Ranger, Rocky Mountain Ranger District, and P.O Box 340, Choteau, MT 59422. E-mail comments should be sent to: comments-northern-lewisclark-rocky-mtn@fs.fed.us Comments should include a physical mailing address for future correspondence.

Comments will be used in refining the proposal and identifying mitigation measures for project development. Please submit your written comments no later than April 1, 2006. All comments should include project name, your name/organization and return address. Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who provided input, will be considered part of the public record on this proposed action and will be available for public inspection. Comments received prior to the official comment period will also be included as part of the public record.

This project complies with Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.15 Chapter 30, Section 31.2, Category 1, "Construction and Reconstruction of Trails." If the analysis indicates no significant effect to extraordinary circumstances, as identified in FSH 1909.15 Chapter 30.3, a decision memo will be used to document the final decision. The decision document will be available upon request.

For further information on this project, please contact Ian Bardwell at the Rocky Mountain Ranger Station, 1101 North Main Avenue, Choteau, MT at (406) 466-5341 or by email: ianbardwell@fs.fed.us

Sincerely,

MICHAEL A. MUNOZ
District Ranger