Dear Rebecca,

First, let us thank you for the cooperation that, Kimberly Schlenker, Jose Castro, and Steve Christiansen to name a few, have given in helping us understand the basics of the proposed Travel Plan. The Gallatin Valley Backcountry Horsemen have strong convictions concerning the plan and have spent considerable time reviewing and responding to the Gallatin Forest Travel Plan. We offer the following comments and recommendations:

At our recent state convention, all Montana BCH chapters signed a resolution stating that we are opposed to any blanket type (area or seasonal) closure to stock use. However, we would support other restrictions or actions to the extent that they are clearly necessary for resource protection or safety. We expect this would be done through site specific NEPA analysis with opportunity for public involvement. We will continue to support our heritage of stock use on public lands and will continue our collaborations with land management agencies to seek workable alternatives to any proposed stock closures. We are especially concerned about Gallatin Forest considerations of seasonal closures.

**SEASONAL CLOSURES**
The Gallatin Valley Backcountry Horsemen are opposed to seasonal closures. The outcome for us seems the same as a blanket closure. We recommend instead, site specific closures where and when trail conditions warrant.

In talking with your professionals, we came away unconvinced that the spring freeze/thaw cycle is significantly different from impacts such as intense thunder storms, wet fall hunting season, or other similar conditions. There are impacts from stock use on
trail during these wet times. We know most of these impacts can be mitigated through proper maintenance and/or relocation of certain trail sections.

We spend considerable time maintaining trails prior to June and July 15th. Your seasonal closures would preclude us from providing this volunteer service.

The Gallatin Forest Travel Plan says that “seasonal restrictions would be employed on some trails within the Wilderness, restricting stock use during spring breakup...”. This led us to think that seasonal closures would be implemented on select trails within the Wilderness only. Upon further study we find, in fact, that seasonal closures are proposed for all trails on the forest. “Alternative 7 would restrict OHV, mountain bike and stock use during the spring months (forest-wide) to better protect trail facilities, reduce erosion and lower maintenance costs (Forest-wide Guideline A-11). Under the guideline district rangers would have the latitude to open specific trails early if weather and trail conditions permit.” This, in effect, becomes a blanket closure until either May 15, June 1, June 15 or July 15. You do not have the resources for implementation nor will you receive the priority to check conditions to see if trails can be opened earlier than the assigned closure dates.

You have great people working for you on the Gallatin but they are stretched too thin to supervise or enforce this blanket closure. Closures without proper administration become permanent lock outs. You know as well as we do that for a closure or restriction to work, most of the public has to feel that it is needed to protect resources. That is not the case here. We definitely do not support these blanket, seasonal closures. However, as stated earlier, we will work with your people on any proposed site specific trail closures or restrictions as long as they clearly are based on need to protect the resource and the existing condition cannot be mitigated through proper trail maintenance or trail relocation.

**LAVA LAKE TRAIL**

We are opposed to year long closure of this trail. It is part of a loop route between Lava Lake and Deer Lake that is suited to stock use and has been used by stock for decades. This trail receives considerable stock use during hunting season. Who determined and what factors were used to now declare this “not suited for stock use”? We would like you to share with us the qualifications of this determining person(s) as we know that most people on staff for the Gallatin Forest are not experienced horsemen. They have very limited knowledge of pack and saddle stock use.

We are aware that recently the Lava Lake Trail has become very popular for hikers. We recommend an even/odd day use system that hikers and stock users can share. Another option is to designate hiker use on Friday through Sunday and stock users Monday through Thursday except for spring bear and fall hunting season during which time it would be shared every day.

Your written discussion of Alternative 7 is the first time any of us had heard of stock damage in the Lava Lake basin. We ask that your Bozeman District Ranger show us the
unacceptable damage so we can discuss possible remedial actions as opposed to closing it to stock.

**PINE CREEK LAKE TRAIL**
We are opposed to year long closure of this trail. The closure appears to be much like the Lava Lake closure. This trail has been used by stock just short of forever; long before it became a popular hiking trail. Who determined it is “not suited to pack and saddle stock use. . .”? What were their qualifications? Instead of closure to stock, we recommend the multiple use sharing system that we suggested in the Lava Lake scenario.

**SUNLIGHT TRAIL**
We recommend that you investigate the possibilities of building and maintaining a proper trail in this area that might employ the multiple use sharing system suggested above.

**BEARTOOTH PLATEAU**
We are opposed to blanket closures and therefore opposed to this closure. We would support site specific closures based on resource damage. An alternative might be access on a permit only system.

**BOTTOM LINE**
Our bottom line is our Backcountry Horsemen Mission Statement:

“The purpose of this organization shall be;
(1) to perpetuate the common sense use and enjoyment of horses in Montana’s roadless back country and (2) to assist the various government agencies in their maintenance and management of said resource and (3) to educate and solicit active participation by various members of the general public in the wise and sustaining use of horses and people, commensurate with our heritage and the back country’s resource.”

We exist to preserve our rich heritage of stock use. Therefore, we want to work with you to resolve our differences. We have a wealth of experience in responsible pack and saddle stock use. We believe that common sense and cooperation resolves issues and differences of opinion. Our chapter members have put time and effort precisely towards these beliefs. We are “walking our talk”. As volunteers, we provide trail maintenance on hundreds of miles of shared trails each year. It is our commitment towards a better resource.

We recognize that the lack of trail maintenance resources is a major issue in your Forest Travel Plan. We realize the Forest Service has limited resources at the district ranger level. Yet, we do not want restrictions and/or closures because of this limited resource; we maintain that closures/restrictions need to be based on site specific needs as opposed to blanket generalities. We exist to work with you to find reasonable solutions on site specific problem areas.

We recommend a strengthened volunteer trail maintenance program be implemented on the Gallatin Forest with participants from the wealth of various volunteer organizations in our area.
Feel free to contact us anytime, or better yet, come visit us on the trail as we do maintenance work. We have trail crews out on Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday every week. We work on our adopted trail one weekend each month.

Sincerely,
The Gallatin Valley Back Horsemen

Directors
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