



# **WHITEFISH RANGE PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT**

DRAFT  
November 18, 2013

# Whitefish Range Partnership

## ***Introduction***

The Whitefish Range Partnership (WRP) formed in September 2012 as a diverse, community-based collaborative with the goal of crafting recommendations for the Flathead National Forest (FNF) management plan revision process. The Partnership focused on the Whitefish Range of the Glacier View Ranger District.

The FNF anticipated started its forest planning process in 2013. The WRP set a goal of discussing and reaching agreement on the most important planning issues within approximately a year's time and to coincide with the start of the FNF management plan revision. All topics for which complete agreement was reached would be forwarded to the FNF as the community's recommendation for future management of the Whitefish Range.

The following ***Whitefish Range Partnership Agreement*** represents the results of those collaborative discussions over more than a year's time. Topics were discussed individually and tentative agreement was reached on each. *The Partnership reached agreement on every topic brought up for discussion.*

Now, at the end of the formal discussions, each member of the Partnership has agreed to each topic individually and to the Agreement as a whole. Each member's signature below testifies to their support for the Agreement as a whole, as stipulated in the Partnership's 'Charter'.

The WRP wishes to extend special thanks to its chairman, Bob Brown, whose leadership has largely determined the success of group.



## ***WRP Membership***

The voting members of the Whitefish Range Partnership included the following individuals and constituencies:

### **Person**

Bob Brown *Chairman*  
Rick Anderson *Motorized Recreation*  
Francis Auld *Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes*  
Noah Bodman *Flathead Fat Tires*  
Chas Cartwright *Citizen*  
Allen Chrisman *North Fork Compact*  
Flannery Coates *Owner, Polebridge Mercantile*  
Cris Coughlin *Montana Raft & Glacier Wilderness Guides*  
Bill Dakin *Columbia Falls Realtor*  
Tom Edwards *North Fork Compact*  
Leonard Gray *Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes*  
Greg Gunderson *Forestoration, Inc.*  
John Frederick *North Fork Preservation Association*  
Dave Hadden *Headwaters Montana*  
John Hanson *Montana Logging Association*  
Annemarie Herrod *North Fork Landowner*  
Robert Holman *Flathead Snowmobile Association*  
Sarah Lundstrum *(Secretary) National Parks Conservation Association*  
Paul McKenzie *Stoltze Land & Lumber Co.*  
Cecily McNeil *North Fork Compact*  
Chester Powell *Winter Sports, Inc.*  
Debo Powers *North Fork Landowners Association*  
Amy Robinson *Montana Wilderness Association*  
Greg Schatz *Backcountry Horsemen*  
Roger Sherman *The Sustainability Fund*  
Larry Timchak *Flathead Trout Unlimited*  
Steve Thompson *Whitefish Legacy Partners*  
Frank Vitale *Back Country Hunters and Anglers*  
Bill Walker *North Fork Preservation Associations*  
Larry Wilson *North Fork Landowner*

## **SIGNATURE PAGE**

*My signature below attests to my endorsement of the agreements contained in this **Whitefish Range Partnership Agreement**, and to my commitment to support each and every agreement contained herein throughout the Flathead National Forest planning process. I further agree to assist the Partnership to seek appropriate solutions to the recommendations contained in this Agreement that do not fall within the purview of the Flathead Forest planning process.*

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**WHITEFISH RANGE SHARED VALUES**

Montana's Whitefish Range, like Glacier National Park, is prized by our local communities – it is our job site, our playground, our refuge, our hunting grounds and our home. Just as we enjoy our right to use the land, water and wildlife we have inherited here, so do we carry a responsibility to leave these resources healthy and accessible for future generations.

Our freedom to use and enjoy the Whitefish Range is due to the forethought of stewards who came before us. Likewise, the foresight we demonstrate today will inspire tomorrow's generations, and protect their freedom to enjoy these lands as we have.

Adjacent Glacier National Park was established in 1910 both for the use and enjoyment of future generations, and for protection of its extraordinary natural resources. Likewise, the Whitefish Range has traditionally balanced these same dual stewardship functions of human use and forestland protection – and it provides economic vitality to nearby rural and urban communities through livelihood, recreation, healthy forests, hunting and fishing, clean water and clean air.

Our shared vision for the Whitefish Range is to ensure a balance of traditional and modern land uses. The unique qualities of this mountain region should be maintained, and the Range should continue to provide multiple-use values including both motorized and non-motorized recreation, sustainable forestry, wildland restoration, hunting, fishing and unique opportunities for backcountry solitude.

We recognize that change is a constant – even the remote North Fork Flathead River Valley is not immune -- and that people are a central component of this landscape; yet we also submit that as we adapt to inevitable change our waters should remain clean, our wildlife habitat connected, our fisheries robust and our economy vital. The Whitefish Range, at the heart of Glacier Country, should remain a critical part of our unique way of life and a key component in the local identity of our tightly-knit communities.

In order that this region remain rural in its nature, and that our public access be maintained, and that our neighbors be educated about the region's unique values, and that we sustain the historic traditions for which the Whitefish Range has come to be known, we must work in a collaborative manner. If we do not act deliberately and do not plan together for changing times, then the future of this place almost certainly will be decided by others.

By identifying the shared traditional livelihood and lifestyle values associated with the Whitefish Range, and working together to safeguard those values, we can ensure that the exceptional natural and cultural heritage of this range may be passed on to future generations.

**Approved by unanimous consensus of the Whitefish Range Partnership 01/03/2013**

# Whitefish Range Partnership

## Summary of Individual Agreements

### Wildland and Prescribed Fire

*The Partnership has agreed to manage fire using all the tools in the toolkit, including timber harvest, prescribed fire, and private landowner responsibility for managing fuels on their property and around their structures. This recommendation will help reduce the impact of wildfires, and their cost on everyone.*

### Fisheries and Streamside Management

*The Partnership recommends maintaining current standards for streamside management, placing a high standard on retaining and improving native fish populations, and reducing wildfire effects on fish habitat. We also recommend Trail Creek and its tributaries as “eligible” under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. These recommendations will enhance native fisheries and water quality for everyone.*

### Timber and Vegetation Management

*The Partnership recommends landscape-scale management to help ensure ecosystem resiliency and integrity, and commercial certainty for the timber industry. This recommendation would increase the potential “Suitable Timber Base” from 54,000 acres to 89,500 acres, an approximate 45 percent increase.*

### Weed Management

*The Partnership recommends an adequately funded invasive species plan, based on front-country, backcountry, and river corridor management using public/private partnerships and an interagency network. This will lead to reducing or eliminating weeds to the benefit of private landowners and publicly owned lands.*

### Wildlife

*The Partnership recommends maintaining the world-class wildlife habitat and wildlife populations found in the Whitefish Range. In particular, the Partnership recognizes the critical habitat found in portions of the northern range. These recommendations will benefit everyone and help maintain hunting, wildlife viewing, and habitat connection to Canada.*

### Summer Wheeled Motorized Recreation

*The Partnership recommends that the Flathead Forest assess possible opportunities for additional single-track motorcycle recreation in the southeast portion of the Whitefish Range.*

### Snowmobiling

*The Partnership recommends improving snowmobile play areas in the southern Whitefish Range, while maintaining existing snowmobiling in the rest of the Range, in accordance with Amendment 24. This will provide a large increase in recreation opportunities for snowmobilers, and allow North Fork landowners to commute across national forest land.*

### Hi-Intensity Recreation

*The Partnership recommends a "Front Country Recreation" management area that includes Whitefish Mountain Resort and neighboring lands. This will allow better integration of recreation in the southern Whitefish Range for all users, especially mountain bikers and trail users.*

### Backcountry Trails

*The Partnership recommends providing a range of backcountry trail experiences, moving from hi-intensity use near Whitefish Mountain Resort in the south to more primitive experiences moving north. It also recommends a trails assessment in specific areas, looking at trail uses, trail reconstruction and/or new trail construction. These recommendations will provide improvements for the backcountry trail using public.*

### Wilderness

*The Partnership recommends a recommended wilderness section that includes the Hefty, Tuchuck and Thompson Seton roadless areas. This recommendation will ensure an enduring resource of wilderness in the Whitefish Range. It also provides important fire protection for North Fork landowners.*

*~ End*

# **Whitefish Range Partnership Collaborative**

## **Charter: Draft January 3, 2013**

The Whitefish Range Partnership (WRP) is a diverse group of citizens, landowners, entrepreneurs, recreational interests, businesses and natural resource professionals who have a shared and direct connection to the Flathead National Forest lands found in the Whitefish Range of Northwest Montana.

### **PURPOSE**

Over the course of the year 2013, the WRP will work together with the primary purpose of creating a shared vision and management recommendations for the public lands managed by the Flathead National Forest located in the area commonly referred to as the Whitefish Range, Glacier View Ranger District. This proposal will be presented to Flathead National Forest officials as the desired management direction for the Flathead National Forest lands found in the Whitefish Range for the upcoming forest plan revision.

### **MEMBERSHIP**

Initial members of the WRP represent the following constituencies:

Columbia Falls Area Realtor	Montana Wilderness Association
Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes	National Parks Conservation Association
F.H. Stoltze Land and Lumber	North Fork Land Owners
Flathead Backcountry Horsemen	North Fork Compact
Flathead Fat Tires	North Fork Landowners Association
Flathead Snowmobile Association	North Fork Preservation Association
Forestation	Polebridge Mercantile
Headwaters Montana	The Sustainability Fund
Montana Logging Association	Winter Sports Inc.

The U.S.F.S. will be invited to attend in an advisory capacity only.

A new constituency may be nominated by a current member, approved by consensus, or with approval of the majority present, whether or not the nominee is in attendance. A new group or person that attends and wants to join may be nominated and decided upon at that meeting. If that potential member is not nominated at that time, he or she may attend two more meetings which indicates significant interest and may ask for another vote at that time.

### **OBSERVERS**

Members of the public may have observer status at any meeting. Observers may make or submit a comment to the WRP during the Public Comment Period at the end of each meeting.

## QUORUM

At any meeting of the WRP where significant decisions will be made, at least 50% plus one member of the total number of members eligible to cast votes, must be present to create a quorum. For the purposes of calculating a quorum, members who miss three consecutive meetings will not be included in the calculation of the quorum for that meeting. Voting members may assign proxies to other voting members by notifying the Chair prior to the meeting. A member who has assigned his/her proxy to another voting member will be considered present for the purposes of calculating a quorum.

Meetings may be held where a quorum is not present, but no decisions may be made in these low turnout meetings.

## LEADERSHIP

The WRP will elect one Chair by consensus of a quorum of the full WRP, the Chair has the freedom to appoint a Chair if he is to be absent from a meeting. The Chair will be responsible for convening WRP meetings, setting meeting agendas, facilitating meetings, providing oversight, and serving as points of contact for communications. The Chair will supervise the preparation of WRP documents and strive to ensure that all relevant duties are accomplished. In the case of the Chair's absence the Chair's designee will perform the Chair's duties.

## DECISIONS

Decisions made by the WRP will be input that may or may not be adopted by the Forest Service. A formal decision process will be used to generate official WRP input.

The WRP will make official decisions by a consensus process that applies the "thumbs-up/thumbs-sideways/thumbs-down" signaling levels of agreement. When all voting members have shown full support for a proposal (thumbs-up), or moderate support (thumbs-sideways), or any combination of full or moderate support, then a decision is taken. When one or more voting members of the WRP disapprove of a proposed decision (thumbs-down), a decision has not been made and additional discussion will be necessary. Those who disapprove of a decision will be required to identify the specific reasons for disapproval so others may understand the reasons behind a negative vote. Any individual who expresses disapproval of a proposal or action must offer an alternate proposal or suggestions to the WRP at the earliest possible juncture. In this way it is the intent of the WRP that no one individual may block the group's intention of reaching a solution.

The WRP Chair will call for decisions. On some very straightforward, simple matters, the Chair may simply ask verbally for consensus, and if no objection is raised, a decision will be taken. Decisions of the WRP will be recorded in the meeting notes. Voting members may assign proxies to other voting members by notifying the chair prior to the meeting

The WRP always strives for consensus. However, if consensus cannot be reached on any given decision, the WRP may choose to bring in an impartial facilitator from outside of the group to help come to a solution. Should impasse not be resolved, the WRP will provide no management recommendation to the U.S.F.S. on that subject or area of conflict.

## RECORD KEEPING

Official record keeping and communication functions will be the responsibility of the WRP Secretary, including taking minutes, attendance and other record-keeping functions. The Secretary shall be appointed by the chair. It is the intention of the WRP to make all its official proceedings openly accessible to all interested parties upon request. Records of attendance will be brought to each meeting of the WRP.

Official minutes of each meeting shall be compiled and circulated to members at the first practical date after a meeting. Notes from a prior WRP meeting will be approved at the following WRP meeting. All official WRP committees should provide a written summary of decisions made at each of their meetings to the WRP.

Minor revisions to notes prior to the next meeting may be made through independent contact with the Chair or their record-keeping designee, although any changes from original drafts may be subject to discussion from other WRP members during the subsequent meeting where notes are approved.

## COMMITTEES

The WRP may form unofficial subcommittees or working groups to advance tasks necessary to fulfill its purpose. Subcommittees or working groups shall report activities and findings during agenda items placed on a full WRP membership meeting at the discretion of the Chair.

## FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The WRP will strive to conclude its business by the end of 2013. The WRP will compile its decisions and recommendations in a "Whitefish Range Partnership Agreement" document signed by all members of the WRP. This document will be delivered to the Supervisor of the Flathead National Forest for inclusion in the forest plan revision record as the local community's expression of its thinking regarding future management of the Whitefish Range. Further, each member of the WRP agrees to support the entire Agreement and its recommendation without exception.

## PUBLIC COMMENT PERIOD

The WRP wishes to take comment from the public who are not elected members. Each meeting of the WRP will end with a designated public comment period. The public comment period will not exceed 10 minutes in length. Members of the public are encouraged to be concise with their comments and to not exceed 3 minutes in duration. The Chair has the authority to ask

commentators to summarize their comments to stay within the 3 minutes period. The members of the WRP will refrain from questions and answers during the public comment period. If necessary the members of the WRP can extend the 10 minute public comment period or the 3 minute time limit with a majority vote.

#### **AMENDING THIS CHARTER**

This charter may be amended according to the decision-making process outlined above.

#### **DISSOLUTION**

The WRP may at any time receive a call for dissolution from one of its voting members. The decision to dissolve the WRP will use the same consensus decision process as is used in all other decisions.



## North Fork Flathead Geographic Area

### Unique Characteristics

- The North Fork Valley provides a distinct rural way of life that is highly valued by residents and enjoyed by visitors.
- Federal ownership of land dominates the North Fork Valley and includes the Glacier View Ranger District of the Flathead National Forest and Glacier National Park, and the valley is bounded on the north by the international border with Canada.
- The North Fork River originates about 57 miles north of the border in British Columbia, Canada.
- The North Fork Flathead River watershed is subject to Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909 between the U.S. and Canada, and the 2010 Memorandum of Understanding between Montana and B.C.
- The historic threat of mountaintop removal coal mining in British Columbia required the intervention of the International Joint Commission (IJC) in 1976, their final report in 1988, and provided motivation for legislation in both B.C. and Montana that would prevent inappropriate industrial development that would harm water quality, fish and wildlife habitat.
- Congress designated the North Fork Flathead River as a free flowing, Wild and Scenic River in 1976 that is co-managed by the Flathead National Forest and Glacier National Park.
- The Whitefish Range provides approximately 225,000 acres of Inventoried Roadless Lands that, under current Forest regulation, are not part of the timber base, and provide secure habitat for many species.
- Forest Products industry is a significant portion of the regional economy, and the Flathead National Forest - including the North Fork - is a significant supplier of fiber for that industry.
- The North Fork River watershed displays some of the greatest diversity of species in North America from the diversity of invertebrate species to mammals, birds, insects and plants.
- The creeks flowing out of the Whitefish Range provide some of the best bull trout spawning habitat in the region because of its colder water compared to Glacier Park streams.
- The North Fork River watershed is a significant refuge for genetically pure west slope cutthroat trout.
- The North Fork Flathead River Valley has some of the highest densities of grizzly bears in the lower 48 states and is key grizzly bear habitat.
- The North Fork Flathead Valley contains seven significant wetland

complexes that represent some of the least impacted wetlands in the Flathead River basin.

- Flathead County is one of the fastest growing counties in Montana and the Whitefish Range and North Fork Flathead River provide a wide range of front and back country recreational opportunities ranging from motorized to primitive wilderness experiences across all four seasons as well as substantial and long-term commercial recreation interests.
- Regional universities, along with the Glacier Institute located at the Big Creek Works Center, provide quality environmental education in cooperation with the Forest Service, other resource management agencies, public schools and families from across America.
- Large wild fire events have affected over 260,000 acres of the watershed since 2008.
- The Tuchuck Research Natural Area (RNA) provides reference habitat for a subalpine larch/subalpine fir habitat type.

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Tentatively approved by unanimous consensus of the Whitefish Range Partnership on 4/8/2013.

**Drafted by Dave Hadden, edited by the committee as a whole.**

# WILDLAND AND PRESCRIBED FIRE

## *Background*

The North Fork has a long and well-documented history of wildland fire. Active large fires visited the North Fork extensively before 1930 in the large fire years of 1910, 1926 and 1929 for example, and before that in the late 1800's. During the period 1930 to 1980, aggressive initial attack and a cooler, moister period reduced large fire occurrence significantly. Since 1980, large fires have again occurred extensively including the Red Bench Fire in 1988, Moose Fire in 2001, and Wedge Canyon and Robert fires in 2003. These recent large fires have shared the same general characteristics: the fire starts at mid to upper elevations in the Whitefish Range; starts occur during extremely hot, dry conditions; the fires escape initial attack; and develop explosive fire runs both fuel driven and wind driven to the east, burning through private lands in the valley bottom across the North Fork River and into Glacier National Park. Some 260,000 acres have burned in the last 30 years in the North Fork including Glacier National Park.

According to Fire Ecologist Steve Barrett, most of the vegetation in the North Fork is spread between three Fire Regime Groups:

- Fire Regime Group III: infrequent occurrence/mixed severity effect – fire frequency averages 50 – 80 years.
- Fire Regime Group IV: infrequent occurrence/stand replacement effect – fire frequency averages 100 – 150 years.
- Fire Regime Group V: very infrequent occurrence/stand replacement effect – fire frequency averages 300 – 500 years.

Based on this assessment, the effects of fire suppression have not significantly altered the fire regime condition classes in the North Fork at this point, and the recent fires in the area are not unprecedented or outside the range of historic variability. Barrett summarized the condition in the North Fork as:

- Fire Regimes are naturally severe: fires are predominately stand replacement events with lesser amounts of mixed severity.
- Natural fire occurrence has increased since the 1980's
- From the standpoint of Wildland Fire Regimes, the North Fork is still in good ecological condition.

With support from the North Fork Landowner's Association and cost-share grants through the North Fork Fire Mitigation Committee, many private landowners in the North Fork have initiated hazardous fuels reduction projects on their own property. These fuel reduction projects allow for a better opportunity to defend structures and improve firefighter safety in the event of fire. In addition, the Flathead National Forest has implemented several projects designed to break up the continuity of fuels adjacent to private lands and primary travel routes. Existing fire "footprints" from the Moose, Wedge Canyon and Robert Fires continue to act as fuel breaks for future wildland fires. This fuel

break effect has been demonstrated already as the Robert Fire (2003) bumped into the fire footprint from the Moose Fire (2001) and failed to spread. This beneficial effect within the footprints from the 2001 – 2003 fires can be expected to last through 2020 to 2025 or so. The Forest has begun fuel treatments within the Red Bench Fire area as those stands have regrown to the point they will carry fire very effectively. The Forest is also planning prescribed fire projects to break up fuel continuity, especially in areas outside the timber base.

The Forest has some latitude in response to wildfire, and some flexibility under the existing Forest Plan to manage natural fire starts for resource benefit. Aggressive initial attack for fires that threaten private lands is still the standard. Other starts can be evaluated based on location, proximity to heavy or continuous fuel loads, time of the season, and other factors to determine an appropriate response.

The pattern of large, stand-replacing fire events in the North Fork threatens private property, structures, and life safety. In addition, large stand replacing fires have the potential to adversely impact watersheds, fisheries, wildlife (especially small mammals and furbearers) including T & E species, and other natural resources including commercial timber stands and plantations. Consequently, while large stand replacing wildfires are a part of natural processes in the North Fork, they are considered undesirable based on the values society places on private lands, structures and natural resources in the area.

### ***Fire Management Recommendations in the Whitefish Range***

The Whitefish Range Partnership recognize that federal spending for fuels reduction may be limited in the future, and that private property owners may have to take extra precautions to protect assets. The Partnership makes the following recommendations to the Flathead National Forest concerning fire management in the Whitefish Range:

#### ***Fuels Management:***

- Work programmatically with private landowners to continuously educate and provide funding for fuels reduction on private property. This recognizes that private landowners have primary responsibility for defense of their structures.
- Work programmatically to manage fuels on public lands in combination with forest restoration efforts such that there are reasonable opportunities to check the spread of wildfire onto adjoining private lands.
- Modify fuels on National Forest lands using all available tools to reduce fire intensity and spread rates and create shaded fuel breaks in a logical manner in the Wildland Urban Interface around private property and transportation corridors. Emphasis should be given to areas where private landowners have initiated treatment on their own lands and connecting areas of fuels treatment;
- Use cultural treatments and stand tending harvests to reduce surface, ladder and aerial fuels; break up fuel continuity; encourage recruitment and retention of fire resistant species (western larch, Douglas-fir, etc); and develop diversity of species and size classes to create a mosaic of stands within watersheds.

***Fire Response:***

- Provide for rapid initial attack on new starts that threaten private property;
- Continue collaboration and integration of fire response with other wildland fire agencies, Flathead County, rural and volunteer fire departments and local landowners;
- Consider the need for fire access for initial attack, extended attack, and large project fire management in all decisions regarding road management and road closure. Maintain as much road access for fire response as possible while meeting other resource requirements (T&E species, watershed management, etc).

***Prescribed Fire and Wildland Fire Use***

- Use prescribed fire from both planned and unplanned ignitions, where and when appropriate to modify fuels on National Forest system lands, with emphasis on areas outside the suitable timber base including whitebark pine restoration projects;
- Maintain latitude through the Forest Plan revision to manage natural fire starts for resource benefit based on site specific information about risk to private land and structures and risk to National Forest resources.
- Recognize that the opportunities for large scale prescribed fire and wildland fire use fires should be limited due to the risk of escaped fires threatening private and state land and natural resources on the National Forest and other federal lands.

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**Committee Members**

Allen Chrisma, Larry Wilson, Robbie Holman, Dave Hadden, Paul McKenzie, Greg Gunderson

**Approved by unanimous consensus of the Whitefish Range Partnership on 3/27/2013.**

# **Fisheries and Streamside Management; Wild and Scenic River Eligibility; Wild and Scenic River Corridor Management Recommendations; and Other Considerations**

## ***Introduction***

The North Fork Flathead watershed represents a unique natural resource in Montana, the nation and across international borders. Biologists describe the watershed as the most intact and healthy in the Lower 48 and it is considered a vital “stronghold” for native bull trout and west slope cutthroat trout. However, bull trout numbers continue to decline in the watershed. Historic threats to the watershed have motivated a considerable investment in water, fish, and wildlife research, as well as impressive political efforts to maintain and protect the watershed. Local citizens have sought political solutions to protect the watershed since the 1970’s when a British Columbia mining interest proposed a mountaintop removal coalmine six miles north of the border.

Efforts and accomplishments to protect the watershed include the International Joint Commission’s (IJC) “referral” in 1984 on the Cabin Creek coalmine proposal in BC; the IJC’s recommendation against that mine in 2008; the engagement of every Montana governor (both Republican and Democrat) since 1975 to obtain a cooperative agreement on watershed management with BC; the re-emergence of mining and coal bed methane proposals in the early 2000’s; the Environmental Cooperation Agreement between Gov. Martz and BC Premier Campbell; the subsequent Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Montana and BC in 2009; the UNESCO report on the status of threat to the Waterton – Glacier International Peace Park in 2009; the passage by the BC legislature of Bill 2 “The Flathead Watershed Area Conservation Act” in 2010 that banned mining and energy development in the BC Flathead; and the introduction of “The North Fork Watershed Protection Act” (S. 255) currently before congress that complements BC’s Bill 2.

The Whitefish Range Partnership considered large scale fires, fisheries, streamside management, wild and scenic rivers, and other measures relevant to the revised Flathead National Forest plan process to ensure the continued protection of the North Fork’s water and fisheries.

## ***Large Scale Fires***

The Partnership is concerned about the large-scale, high intensity forest fires that have occurred historically in the North Fork Flathead watershed. We recognize that fire has always played an important ecological role in the North Fork drainage. Fish, wildlife and vegetation have evolved and adapted to fire over time. However, fire suppression over the past century combined with forest growth and succession has led to our current situation where fires can burn with more intensity over larger



areas.

"The initial changes in aquatic systems caused directly by forest fire tend to ripple through time. Direct effects of fire on soils and vegetation, for example, can influence the quantity and quality of water in these systems long after the flames have passed. These changes, in turn, influence the type and number of insects, amphibians, and fish that affected watercourses and water bodies can support in the years that follow fire."

"Fish are sensitive to the lingering effects of forest fires. Elevated water temperatures, for example, can stress or kill cold-loving fishes like our native trout and Salmon (Riemann and Chandler 1999, Sauter et al. 2001). While heavy nutrient and sediment inputs can be toxic to all (Minshall et al. 1989). In the face of such changes, the fish are apt to seek refuge in unaffected waters, leaving burned areas poorly stocked until conditions become favorable once again (Minshall et al. 1989, Riemann and Clayton 1997, Gresswell 1999). Fish isolated from safe havens due to the extent of the burn or the lack of connectivity between affected and unaffected waters, however, must suffer any ill effects of burning on their habitat. Thus, the short-term effects of fire on fish populations are a function of both the degree and duration of fire-caused changes in water quality and quantity as well as the proportion of each inhabited stream network affected by burning. All else, equal, an isolated, or fragmented, fish population will recover far more slowly from and adverse effects of burning than will a population inhabiting a widespread and well-connected stream system."

(<http://www.northernrockiesfire.org/effects/aqshort.htm>)

The Partnership thinks that large-scale, high intensity forest fires pose the greatest risks to water and native fish health in the watershed because of the magnitude of each occurrence.

### ***Fisheries and Streamside Management***

Biologists and the local community regard the North Fork Flathead River watershed as one of the most unique in the Lower 48 states. Fishery studies and management extend back to 1950 and fishing closures to protect native bull trout populations began in 1953 (MDFWP). Scientific studies have continued on fisheries and watershed issues continuously since the '50's making it one of the most thoroughly studied watersheds in North America. More recent scientific findings have recognized the importance of the North Fork Flathead and its tributaries remaining intact watershed because of its remarkably clean waters, and the assemblage and diversity of invertebrates, native bull trout and genetically pure west slope cutthroat trout, mammals, birds, and flora.

The USFS and other agencies developed the "Inland Native Fish Strategy" (INFISH) in 1995 to help conserve and restore fish habitat on federal lands in the Northwest. INFISH provides measurable standards and guidelines for stream and streamside management. For example, streamside management zones are defined as "Category 1 – Fish-bearing streams" (300 foot zone on each side of creek); "Category 2 – Permanently flowing non-fish-bearing stream" (150 foot zone on each side of

creek); "Category 3 – Ponds, lakes, reservoirs, and wetlands greater than 1 acre" (150 foot zone from edge); and "Category 4 – Seasonally flowing or intermittent streams" (variable standards), among other stipulations. Flathead National Forest and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks fishery biologists stated that INFISH has worked well to maintain and restore fish habitat.

### ***Fisheries and Streamside Management Recommendations***

- The Flathead National Forest should maintain a strong focus and priority on maintaining, improving and restoring native fish and their habitat.
- The Flathead National Forest should consider the implications of large-scale fires on bull trout and west slope cutthroat trout and manipulate forest cover where appropriate to help inhibit the spread of wildfire by creating fire breaks and forest mosaics using prescribed burns, mechanized thinning, and other management tools.
- For wildland fire management, "Minimum Impact Suppression Strategies" to minimize sedimentation, protect water quality and fish habitat should be used. Use of fire retardant near live streams should be avoided.
- The Flathead National Forest should work cooperatively with the state, the National Park Service and other Federal agencies to assertively suppress lake trout in the North Fork Flathead watershed.
- The Partnership recommends that the Flathead National Forest keep INFISH as its standard for streamside management.
- The Partnership recommends that the Forest Service and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks expand angler awareness and education to reduce angling related mortality of bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout.

### ***North Fork Tributaries W&S Eligibility Candidates***

In 1993 the National Park Service conducted an inventory of North Fork Flathead River tributary creeks that had potential for listing as "eligible" under the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. This inventory resulted in the 'pre-listing' of 'potentially eligible' Whitefish Range creeks because of their value to bull trout and other Outstanding Remarkable Values. The Flathead National Forest decided in 2005 to "start over" with the eligibility study as part of the forest plan revision effort because the 1993 effort lacks specific documentation. The Flathead National Forest completed its most recent Wild and Scenic River eligibility proposal in 2006. This study proposed listing Trail, Nokio and Yakinikak creeks for "eligibility". This study defined the 'area of consideration' as the boundary of the Flathead National Forest. Because the area of consideration was so limited, the uniqueness and cultural value of some of the North Fork Flathead tributaries to the region and the nation did not necessarily stand out. Viewed at this scale, the North Fork and its tributaries would demonstrate their uniqueness within the state and even the nation. The U.S. Flathead watershed is an integral part of the larger Crown of the Continent conservation effort between the U.S. and Canada. The watershed acts as an essential



biological and ecological refuge. Threatened bull trout and genetically pure west slope cutthroat trout and other native fish populations use the intact watershed as a whole. No other watershed in Montana encompasses the history of science, conservation, or the biological richness and examples of Outstanding Remarkable Values (ORV).

### ***Wild and Scenic River Recommendations***

- The Wild and Scenic Eligibility region of scale for the North Fork Flathead watershed should be the state of Montana because of the national significance of the North Fork Flathead watershed.
- Recommend for listing as 'eligible' the Trail Creek watershed including Trail, Yakinikak, Tuchuck and Nokio creeks because of important and unique bull and cutthroat trout habitat and populations, geological, and cultural Outstanding Remarkable Values. An ancient Indian trail follows Grave Creek to the upper Trail Creek watershed then across Glacier and Waterton parks to the East Side.
- Recommend that the FNF conduct the wild and scenic eligibility review in a clear and publicly transparent manner as part of the Forest planning process that allows for public comment.

### ***North Fork Flathead River Wild and Scenic River Corridor***

The North Fork Flathead Wild and Scenic River corridor is a national and international treasure. Congress designated the North Fork Flathead River a Wild and Scenic River in 1976. The 1986 amendments to the act require that rivers with pre-1986 management plans be revised. The Flathead National Forest will undertake a NEPA planning effort for this Wild and Scenic corridor after the forest plan revision process. The Flathead Forest has expressed an interest in the Partnership's suggestions for river management that may be applied to current management or to the new river management plan

### ***North Fork Flathead Wild and Scenic River Corridor Recommendations***

- The Flathead National Forest should follow the original enabling legislation that provides for public sanitation and rest stops.
- There is a clear and present need for sanitation at Sondreson Meadow. The Partnership thinks that the Wild and Scenic River Act provides clear authority and recommends that the Flathead National Forest determine a location for a vault toilet at Sondreson Meadow so that the public can raise funds to resolve this need.

### ***Other Considerations***

In response to considerable pressure from local citizens, Montana's governor and BC's premier signed a "Memorandum of Understanding" (MOU) in February 2010. Subsequently, in 2011, the BC government passed legislation that banned mining and energy development in the Canadian reach of the North Fork Flathead (Bill 2, the "Flathead Watershed Area Conservation Act"). In 2010 Montana's U.S. Senate

delegation negotiated the voluntary return from Conoco-Philips, Chevron and other oil companies of about 80 percent of dormant oil and gas leases held on federal lands in the Whitefish Range at no cost to the taxpayer. In 2013, the Montana U.S. Senate delegation re-introduced the "North Fork Watershed Protection Act" (S. 255).

### ***Other Recommendations***

In light of the history and strong public support for protecting the water, fish and wildlife of the North Fork Flathead River watershed, the Whitefish Range Partnership recommends:

- That Congress withdraw (*subject to valid existing rights*) all forms of location, entry, and patent under the mining laws of the United State, and disposition under all laws relating to mineral leasing and geothermal leasing, *on federal lands* in the Whitefish Range and vicinity.
- That the Flathead National Forest in its revised forest plan adopt an *administrative withdrawal (subject to valid existing rights)* of all forms of location, entry, and patent under the mining laws of the United State, and disposition under all laws relating to mineral leasing and geothermal leasing, *on federal lands* in the Whitefish Range and vicinity.

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**Tentatively approved by unanimous consensus of the Whitefish Range Partnership on 3/27/2013.**

### **Committee Members**

Larry Timchak, Larry Wilson, Robbie Holman, Tom Edwards, Cris Coughlin, Dave Hadden, Paul McKenzie

# TIMBER AND VEGETATION MANAGEMENT

## *Background*

Timber harvest has been part of the North Fork area history since western settlement, starting with small-scale harvest on private homesteads to meet the needs of local residents. National Forest management of timber increased in scope and complexity following the Second World War. Managing these forests for multiple benefits is a way of life in the North Fork. Insect and disease activity such as white pine blister rust, mountain pine beetle and various types of root rot along with high intensity, low frequency fire and localized blow down events are the primary natural change vectors for the North Fork Forests. The Forest Service built an extensive trail system in the Whitefish Range over the 1920's and 30's to establish a fire lookout system, employ local residents during the Great Depression, and provide access. In the 1940's, commercial timber harvest on National Forest lands in the North Fork began. Construction of road systems to facilitate timber harvest, fire suppression and recreational access represented the second phase of actively managing these lands.

During the 1950's and 1960's timber harvest was concentrated in mature spruce stands, often located in the upper reaches of many of the drainages, in response to a spruce bark beetle epidemic. Since it was generally salvage logging in pure spruce stands, harvest prescriptions at that time were most commonly clear cutting and overstory removal. White pine blister rust caused ongoing salvage operations from the mid 1960's to mid-1980's. A major mountain pine beetle outbreak in lodgepole and whitebark pine stands initiated large-scale salvage operations from mid-1970's until mid-1980's. Approximately 13,000 acres of commercial timber harvest in this time frame is largely attributed to the beetle epidemic.

Since the 1960's, timber harvest in the North Fork has been a combination of salvage of fire, insect and disease and blow down events and timber harvests to increase stand vigor and diversity to reduce the risk of epidemic beetle outbreak. General timber production was a significant management goal up until the mid 1980's. Records of timber harvest activity from 1950 to the late 1990's indicates a total of approximately 73,000 acres have had some type of timber harvest.

Since the mid 1990's, new laws, regulations and legal challenges have led to a significant reduction in commercial timber harvest activities in the North Fork. Timber management on national forest lands has been challenged at the local and national level. Concerns over endangered species such as the grizzly bear, bull trout, Canada lynx and other societal concerns led to limitations on forest management in an attempt to improve access management and conservation of landscape and ecosystem integrity. The protracted "roadless areas" debate and final ruling; impacts to water quality and budget concerns led

to limitations on road use and construction. Litigation at a project level became the new norm in adjudicating conflicting interests on national forests in general. The balance point between these conflicting interests has yet to be reached, however, great strides have been made at local and community levels.

In recent years, we have seen a modest recurrence of commercial timber harvest in some areas of the North Fork. Subsequent to large wildfires in 2001 and 2003, some salvage of fire-killed timber did occur. Fuels management projects have recently been approved and implemented through the use of stewardship contracting in the Trail Creek, Moose Creek and Hay Creek areas. These success stories are a result of good multiple objective planning, and collaborative involvement of interested parties.

Commercial timber harvesting in conjunction with the stewardship program is one of the few land management techniques that not only pay for themselves but generate excess revenue. These excess revenues can be reinvested to make improvements in our local forests. The Flathead valley area still has a robust forest products industry infrastructure. Sawmill capacity within Flathead County alone exceeds 200mbf annually. The forest products industry and support services accounts for nearly 20% of the local economy.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Current issues – Opportunities for Vegetation Management***

The ecological forest types found in the North Fork are diverse and productive. Evidenced by the robust and diverse wildlife populations, including a variety of endangered species, the habitat capacity of these forests are unique and must be maintained. This diversity presents both opportunity and limitations. Specifically, fire, endangered species habitat, political designations such as inventoried roadless, declining federal budgets and other issues provide sideboards for how forest management projects are developed in the North Fork.

The North Fork subunit of the Flathead National Forest encompasses roughly 309,300 acres of National Forest System lands (NFS). Under the existing 1986 forest plan, 116,507 acres are considered to be within the suitable timber base. The North Fork subunit also classifies 214,050 acres as “grizzly bear core”, 56,291 ac of which are currently in the suitable base but not generally available for harvest. 136,642 ac are within inventoried roadless areas (IRA), 12,000 ac of which are also currently classified as suitable timber base but not generally available for harvest. 10,186 acres of the 1987 suitable timber base are classified as BOTH GB core and IRA and are not generally available for harvest. Thus, due to grizzly bear core and Inventoried Roadless Areas, the effective current suitable timber base which includes lands available for harvest is substantially less, closer to 58,500ac.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> U of M BBER 2013 Outlook 2013 Flathead County Report

<sup>2</sup> Heidi Trechsel G.V.R.D USFS 4/18/13

Under the current (1986) plan, roughly 116,507 acres are considered “suitable” for timber management.<sup>3</sup> Lands generally suitable for timber harvest are those areas that do not meet one of the following exclusions:

1. Timber Harvest prohibited by Statute, executive order or regulation
2. Soil, slope or other watershed condition will be irreversibly damaged by timber harvest
3. No assurance the lands could be re-stocked within 5 years
4. Trees are unable to grow due to environmental conditions
5. Lands where timber harvest is not compatible with desired conditions and objectives.

While lands may be considered “suitable” for timber management, those lands may not be available for timber management for a variety of reasons. For example, significant portions of those lands classified as “suitable” in 1986 have since been designated as Inventoried Roadless Areas or part of “grizzly bear core”. These designations have limited the availability of those acres for timber production.

### ***Fire***

Fire regimes in North Fork forest types tend to be high intensity, low frequency in nature. Fire tends to be stand-replacement across large contiguous areas. Past fires in the north fork leave us with approximately 76,500 ac of forest on National Forest System lands that are largely in the seedling/sapling age class and are predominately stocked with lodgepole pine. This condition on this scale and continuity presents some vegetation management challenges. Large contiguous blocks of similar forest type – though historic and natural - increase the risk for insect and disease outbreaks, large scale fire activity and reduce the functionality of wildlife habitat due to lack of diversity of habitat types in close spatial relationships.

Essentially the entire North Fork area falls within lynx critical habitat designation. Seedling – Sapling lodgepole stand types fits the lynx foraging habitat need. However, there are 83,825 acres of lynx foraging habitat in the North Fork between fire areas, past harvest units and other natural events creating young age class forests, often in large contiguous blocks. Lynx denning habitat and travel corridors are not proportionate to the area of foraging habitat. Similarly, the results of large-scale wild fire can greatly alter habitats for wildlife species such as grizzly bear, bull trout and big game ungulates both in the short term and long term.

Management of these burned areas should focus on increasing diversity of species and age class while imposing a mosaic of patch size across the landscape. Appropriate management

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<sup>3</sup> Heidi Trechsel G.V.R.D USFS 4/18/13



tools for these forest types include prescribed fire, pre-commercial thinning, commercial thinning and patch cutting/regeneration harvests. Artificial regeneration to enhance species diversity should be considered. Management activities to reduce fuel loading, increase crown spacing and reduce fuel ladders should take place where USFS property adjoins private and in other strategic locations to help modify future fire behavior and mitigate the size and scale of future wildfire activity.

### ***Insect and Disease***

Forests dominated by older age class late serial species such as alpine fir, grand fir and Douglas-fir are susceptible to insect and disease. Similarly, large contiguous stands of even aged lodgepole pine eventually will become susceptible to mountain pine beetle. It is not uncommon to see outbreaks of Douglas-fir bark beetle in areas surrounding or impacted by mixed severity fire.

Management for insect and disease should focus on two fronts: First priority should be salvage of dead, dying or infested trees to recover the value of timber affected and to help limit spread of insects and disease (while allowing for sufficient snag retention to ensure habitat for wildlife and other ecological functions). Secondly, managing for diversity of species and age classes and to maintain a high level of individual tree vigor is the universal prescription to prevent large scale insect and disease outbreak. Use of small-scale timber salvage sales to respond early to activity is an appropriate tool. Incorporating large-scale planning for forest diversity allows use of commercial timber sales to generate both economic and silvicultural benefit.

### ***Unique Ecotypes***

The North Fork contains a variety of unique ecotypes, many of which seem to be at risk. Specifically, high elevation whitebark pine and subalpine larch, high elevation old growth spruce basins and western white pine forest types are underrepresented in relation to historic conditions. Varieties of elements contribute to this situation, including past forest management, fire suppression and stand replacement fire activity, climate change and insect and disease activity.

Active forest management, including natural and planned regeneration activities can promote the conservation and recovery of these unique forest types. Conservation and recovery of these forest types needs to be incorporated into both long-term and project level planning. Continued research and data gathering is critical to identifying these unique forests and the things that put them at risk.

### **Basic Goals and Guiding Principles for Forest Planning and Land Use Designations**

Future forest management in the North Fork will likely look different from past management. The following goals and guiding principles should be incorporated into the forest planning document to guide future management.

- **Landscape Level Planning:** Incorporate landscape level analysis and planning, relying on scientific analysis to develop long-term (50 year) comprehensive watershed scale integrated habitat and vegetation management plans.
  - Utilize a multi species integrated planning process specifically to address wildlife habitat management.
- **Ecological Resiliency and Integrity:** Forest management activities should employ both “passive” and “active” management techniques and focus on promoting ecological resiliency and integrity. Use an integrated, multiple benefit framework in project design.
  - Increase diversity of species, age class and stand size, working towards a mosaic that reduces risk of large-scale disturbance from either fire or insect epidemic.
  - Using the best available science, provide for resiliency in the face of a changing climate.
  - Utilize silvicultural systems that mimic natural processes such as wildfire, blow-down and insect and disease events.
  - Conserve and/or restore unique ecological types such as white bark pine, high elevation spruce basins, western white pine, subalpine larch and subalpine fir.
  - Recognize that forest fires and burned forests are a natural and important component of the Whitefish Range ecosystem that provides important ecological processes and habitat elements for many species. While large stand replacing wildfires are a part of natural processes in the North Fork, they are considered undesirable based on the values society places on private lands, structures and natural resources in the area. Post fire response should recognize pre-fire desired future conditions and adapt treatments to promote both economic and ecological benefits.
  - Conserve existing old growth and recruit new old growth across the Whitefish Range to ensure Old Growth representation within the Historic Range of Variability.
- **Commercial Certainty:** Increase predictability, consistency and volume of forest products to provide some level of certainty to the forest products industry and local communities.
  - Recognize the ecological, economic and societal benefits of commercial timber harvest as a tool in managing national forest lands.
  - Utilize Stewardship Contracting to capture the economic value of timber removal and re-invest those dollars back in the forest to meet other management objectives.
  - Designate the suitable timber base with an eye to the future and provide opportunities, not barriers, for future management under changing conditions.

- **Economic and Legal Flexibility:** Ensure Forest Plan retains flexibility to allow for changing conditions, both ecological and legal.
  - Anticipate flexibility that may result from implementation of the Grizzly Bear Conservation Strategy .
  - Using science and experience, challenge existing lynx management strategies and develop alternatives that incorporate landscape level and long-term planning for multiple species habitat. Evaluate current Lynx habitat condition classes to assess proportions of stands in target condition for foraging habitat, denning habitat, etc. Develop recommendations for minimum habitat by condition class to support recovered Lynx populations. Evaluate the opportunity to maximize those condition classes in the non-suitable management areas, including MA 3.3, insuring that adequate Lynx habitat exists without excessive dependence on forested lands in MA 4.1a or MA 4.1b. This should allow more cultural treatments (precommercial thinning, etc.) in stands in MA 4.1a & b while maintaining adequate Lynx habitat overall.
  - Consider implications of climate change on long-term productivity of landscapes.

### ***Specific Recommendations***

**Suitable Timber Base:** Extensive planning, public input and analysis of the suitable timber base took place in the 2005-2006 forest planning process. Many of the sideboards that constrained that analysis remain. In order to achieve greater management flexibility over vegetation over the life of the revised plan, we suggest adopting land use designations as indicated on the attached map as a starting point for discussion. Specifically, adopt the use of categories 4.1a, 4.1b and 3.3 for lands that potentially could use commercial timber harvest as a management tool.

Under this planning scenario, roughly 89,500 acres would be classified as either 4.1a or 4.1b, General Forest Medium Intensity. The 4.1b designation represents land that could currently be managed under General Forest Medium Intensity strategies including regularly scheduled timber harvest (roughly 54,000 ac +/-). The 4.1a designation represents lands *potentially* suitable for General Forest Medium Intensity management **IF** new flexibilities in the management of grizzly bear core and lynx habitat are allowed (roughly 40,000 ac).

Land use designation 3.3 would not be considered “suitable”; however commercial timber harvest could be used as a tool to meet other resource objectives if analysis shows it is appropriate. Timber harvest would not be regularly scheduled. None of the lands proposed to be classified as 4.1a, 4.1b or 3.3 are within Inventoried Roadless areas, or proposed recommended wilderness areas.

### **Recommended Management Unit Direction**



3.3: Use timber harvest in infrequent entries to modify or improve stand conditions for wildlife habitat or hazardous fuels modifications within or adjacent to the Wildland Urban Interface and adjacent to private lands.

4.1a: Use infrequent broadscale timber harvest to treat stand conditions as necessary while promoting the intent to minimize entries into Grizzly Bear Core habitat to support recovered Grizzly Bear populations.

4.1b: Use regularly scheduled timber harvest and stand tending activities (precommercial thinning, commercial thinning, salvage and sanitation harvests) to maintain and improve stand conditions with an emphasis on improving species diversity, multiple age and stand structure to create mosaics of stands within drainages to improve resiliency.

Additionally, consideration should be given for re-classifying the following areas:

City of Whitefish Municipal Watershed (1,600 ac +/-) - Consider designation of the NFS lands within the watershed boundaries of First, Second and Third creeks as 4.1a or 4.1b. The primary management goal for these lands would be preservation of water quality by fuels management and reduction of risk of large-scale wildfire in these areas while fully accounting for aesthetic and visual impacts.

West of Whitefish Mountain Resort - Review MU designation in the area directly west of Whitefish Mountain Resort in the upper King creek area. Consider either 4.1a or 4.1b designation with the primary management goal of fuels management and reduction of risk of large-scale wildfire in these areas while fully accounting for aesthetic and visual impacts.

Demers Ridge (4,000 ac +/-) - This area was extensively burned in the Moose fire. While access is limited, a large portion of this area could benefit from silvicultural treatment to improve wildlife habitat diversity. Ensure MU designation would allow management activities to address wildlife habitat improvement needs.

East of Ketchikan Creek - This area is currently designated as Inventoried Roadless Area. However, fuel loading in this area is extremely high due to high levels of mortality from past mountain pine beetle activity. Given the close proximity to private and State lands in the Trail Creek and Mud Lake area, review MU designation for the area between Ketchikan Creek and private and state lands to better allow management to reduce fuels and risk of wildfire.

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### **Addendum**

- Review the Inventoried Roadless Area boundaries in the Ketchikan Creek area to allow for fuel hazard reduction management activities necessary to adequately protect private and state lands abutting National Forest lands in this area.

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**Committee Members**

Paul McKenzie, Larry Wilson, John Hanson, Robbie Holman, Dave Hadden, Allen Chrisman,  
Greg Gunderson

**Approved by unanimous consensus of the Whitefish Range Partnership on  
05/13/2013**

# Weeds in the Whitefish Range and North Fork River Valley

## *Introduction*

Public land managers on the Flathead National Forest have long sought an effective and sustainable strategy for controlling/reducing the presence of noxious and invasive species. They have noted, in their *Noxious and Invasive Weed Control Environmental Assessment*, that “damage to forest resources from noxious weeds is increasing due to their expanding populations.”

The spread of non-native species on the Flathead National Forest has adversely affected every aspect of multiple-use management, including timber, range, recreation, fisheries and wildlife. Weed expansion erodes soil productivity, with implications for forest structure, fire, elk/deer range, riverbank integrity and winter forage. The continued expansion of invasive populations threatens healthy-forest initiatives not only on public acres, but also on adjacent lands. Flathead Forest specialists note that “without an adequate plan for weed control on lands managed by the FNF, efforts on other lands and the management plan for the individual counties are greatly hampered.”

The Whitefish Range Partnership recognizes that weed control is a chronic issue that cannot be addressed with sporadic funding; management of non-native species is ongoing and long-term by nature. While strategic planning for this ongoing effort is critical, funding is limited and emphasis should be placed on programmatic field work directly aimed at suppression, including prevention, control and eradication. Prioritization of suppression efforts must consider the following:

*\*Location* (Wilderness, wildland-urban interface, high-use recreation sites, wildlife habitats, proximity to roads/trails, river corridors, timber units, wildfire areas, sensitive sites, etc.)

*\*Species* (spotted knapweed, St. Johns-wort, oxeye daisy, Canada thistle, tansy ragwort, yellow toadflax, Dalmatian toadflax, houndstongue, hawkweed, leafy spurge, common tansy, sulfur cinquefoil, tall buttercup, field bindweed, creeping bellflower, hoary alyssum, yellowflag iris, etc.)

*\*Cost/benefit* (as determined by location, species and treatment method)

*\*Timing* (seasonal plant life-cycle considerations often require targeted timing to maximize benefit relative to cost, and must be assessed species-specific)

Priority should be given to preventing potential invaders from gaining a foothold on the Flathead National Forest; followed by eradication of new invaders that are not yet widely established; followed by containment and reduction of existing and widespread invaders.

### ***Recommendations***

- The Whitefish Range Partnership advises adequately funded invasive species management planning and implementation that combines aggressive prevention and education with sufficient long-term weed suppression (including mechanical, biological, cultural and chemical treatment methods).
- The Whitefish Range Partnership recommends that distinct (but coordinated) non-native management plans/implementation protocols be established for front-country (roaded) and back-country (off-road) areas, as well as a separate river corridors plan (in cooperation with private river guides and other user groups) reflective of the exclusive qualities of wetland and riparian habitats and water-borne seed transmission.
- The Whitefish Range Partnership advises that these three distinct management plans (front-country, back-country and riparian) should include provisions for partnership, and the USFS should actively participate in existing collaboratives in order to identify shared opportunities, funding sources and projects. Partnership in planning/implementation is necessary, as FNF weed program staff recognize that "noxious weed populations on the FNF have become so widespread that not all of them can be treated with the resources currently available."
- The Whitefish Range Partnership recommends that USFS actively engage neighboring landowners (private, public, tribal, county extension offices, etc.), as well as collaboratives such as the Resource Advisory Committee, in seeking cooperative grants and Congressional appropriations to fund long-term management programs.
- In addition, the Whitefish Range Partnership recommends a formal network be established to ensure agency and inter-agency coordination. This "clearing house" (in the form of a list-serve or file-share system) should serve to secure and to direct additional and shared funding toward: identifying, inventorying and monitoring new invasive species; preventing spread through education (signage, public outreach, media, etc) and best practices (washing/inspecting machinery, area/road closures, weed-seed-free feed, etc); and especially controlling invasive populations through appropriate treatment methods, including re-seeding with native plants.
- The Whitefish Range Partnership recommends that these partnership-funded mechanisms employ adaptive strategies grounded in an action/monitor/adjust

model, and should include both trans-jurisdictional coordination as well as partnership with user groups such as Back Country Horsemen and North Fork Landowners Association. Cooperative tactics should include, but not be limited to shared databases/information; shared resources (personnel, equipment, chemicals, funds); shared agreements (challenge cost-share, participating agreements, cooperative agreements, memorandums of understanding, etc.); federal/state/county/private coordination; and shared grant and legislative applications.

- The Whitefish Range Partnership recognizes that many private companies work on FNF lands throughout the year under contract, lease, bid-sale and special-use permits. WRP recommends that all such arrangements contain appropriate provisions commiserate to impact for prevention of weed spread and suppression of weed communities, and that these private partners be held responsible for expressed weed-control costs/efforts, and that right of use to FNF lands be revoked should private partners fail to maintain adequate weed-control programs as defined by FNF.
- The Whitefish Range Partnership recommends that FNF staff establish and follow best-practices protocols intended to minimize over-spray impacts to non-target species, including site inspections of spray units both before and after application. WRP further recommends that training be required for all private contractors involved in weed suppression, to minimize over-spray impacts to non-target species, and that training include methodology for pre- and post-application site inspections.

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### **Addendum**

Community collaboratives such as the Whitefish Range Partnership should be considered powerful allies in an aggressive USFS strategy to secure long-term funding through federal legislation, grants and other means. Additionally, establishment of land-use designations (Wilderness, National Recreation Areas, Special Study Areas, etc) often results in new funding for backcountry rangers and weed controls, and should be considered as part of long-term weed-management planning. The WRP also recognizes that private contractors are critical to weed management, and that those contractors cannot make effective long-term business decisions (hiring, equipment purchase, etc.) without assurance of long-term weed management funding.

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**Tentatively approved by unanimous consensus of the Whitefish Range Partnership on 3/27/2013.**

**Committee Members:** Frank Vitale, Greg Schatz, Tom Edwards, Bill Dakin, Roger Sherman, Greg Gunderson and Michael Jamison

# Whitefish Range Wildlife

## ***Background***

The Whitefish Range harbors one of the most outstanding, remaining, large mammal assemblages in North America, including 16 carnivore and six ungulate species (John Weaver (2001) states,

*“A unique community of carnivore species resides in the transboundary Flathead region that appears unmatched in North America for its variety, completeness, use of valley bottom lands, and density of species which are rare elsewhere. Due to these unique characteristics and its strategic position as a linkage between National Parks in both countries, the transboundary Flathead may be the single most important basin for carnivores in the Rocky Mountains.”*

The Whitefish Range also provides critical habitat for bull trout and is recognized as a genetic refuge for west slope cutthroat trout (as noted in the Partnership’s document on fisheries).

Several reasons stand out as the basis for this remarkable diversity of wildlife. Perhaps first in importance is the productivity of the land, which receives enough moisture in snow and rain to provide a diversity of habitat conditions including a very high diversity of plant species and plant communities (Kuijt, 1982). Second, the accident of geography places the Whitefish Range at the southern extent the Canadian Rockies where, historically, carnivore species have persisted longer and with greater success than in the U.S. This connectivity with Canada has played and will continue play a key role in the persistence of some species into the future. (Apps, et al. 2007). Third, large blocks of contiguous habitat remain available and provide secure habitat relatively free from human disturbance. And fourth, the emphasis placed since 1975 on the recovery of the grizzly bear has resulted in greater acreage of secure habitat becoming available to ungulates and carnivores in particular, in large part due to the reduction in road densities and associated industrial and human activity.

All of the ungulate and carnivore populations in the Whitefish Range are ‘international’; they either migrate seasonally across the international border or are connected genetically. Weaver (2001) stated, “All of these wildlife move across the international border making the Flathead River basin truly a transboundary landscape that must be managed as one integral, ecological unit.”

Weaver’s 2011 and 2013 reports provide an analysis and assessment of the most valuable wildlife habitat for six species (grizzly, wolverine, bighorn sheep, mountain goat, west slope cutthroat trout, bull trout) and advocates for the protection of the most secure habitat.

Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks (FWP) reports that the Whitefish Range produces some of the biggest trophy mule deer bucks in Montana. The department attributes this phenomenon once again to the large blocks of secure, roadless land, and the



ruggedness of the terrain. The furbearer carnivores are also noteworthy in the Whitefish Range, with the pine marten in particular noted for its exceptionally high quality. Wolverine maternal habitat appears to be abundant, but population numbers or estimates are unavailable at this time.

FWP also note that elk and moose numbers are declining in the Whitefish Range. Also, spruce grouse are abundant and a quality hunting opportunity. FWP is interested in a citizen science program for wildlife sightings to help bolster observational data on species of management interest.

### ***Goal***

**Future Generations:** Pass on to the next generations the same high quality and diversity of wildlife species found in the Whitefish Range and transboundary Flathead.

### ***Management Recommendations***

1. **Maintain the Core of Secure Habitat** by conserving the existing large blocks of intact, secure roadless lands, especially in the northern part of the North Fork subunit as required by law.
  2. **Maintain Habitat Quality and Diversity** for the full range of wildlife in the 'suitable' and 'non-suitable' timber base through the spectrum of management tools. Avoid single species management.
  3. **Maintain Habitat Connectivity** between adjacent management jurisdictions – including to Canada and Glacier National Park - using the best available, current science to identify movement corridors and trends.
  4. **Identify the High Diversity and High Value Habitats** in the Whitefish Range based on species range and meet the diversity of habitat needs across the landscape (e.g. respond to declining habitat needs of moose).
  5. **Maintain a Quality Hunting Experience** for key species such as moose, mule deer, and elk.
  6. **Coordinate with Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks** and other government agencies where appropriate to incorporate their plans and multi-agency strategies into Flathead National Forest projects and activities. Work jointly to meet habitat and population goals for a variety of species.
  7. **Anticipate the Impacts of Climate Change** using the best available science and where appropriate by modifying habitats in the 'suitable' and 'non-suitable' timber base using the full spectrum of management tools.
  8. **Continue to Move Listed Species Toward Recovery and De-listing.**
  9. **Look for Opportunities for Wildlife Conservation Education Programs**, including a citizen science program, and media that would be used to promote conservation practices for threatened and endangered species and species of concern.
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### **Committee Members**

Larry Wilson, Robbie Holman, Dave Hadden, Frank Vitale, Paul McKenzie, John Larsen, Steve Gnaidek (observer).

**Approved by unanimous consensus of the Whitefish Range Partnership on 05/13/2013.**

## Summer Wheeled Motorized (Single Track)

Motorcycle (wheeled summer-motorized, single track) riding in the Whitefish Range has been reduced since the adoption of the 1986 Flathead Forest Plan. Currently wheeled, summer motorized recreation of all types (passenger car, 4x4, motorcycle, quad, and other OHV's) is limited to year-round and seasonally-open roads and to the Cyclone Mountain trail (#40) (motorcycles only).

In 1975 the grizzly bear was listed as "Threatened" under the Endangered Species Act. The listing of the grizzly led to incremental reductions of trails and roads open to motorized vehicles in the summer months. The Flathead National Forest adopted Forest Plan Amendment #19 in 1995. This amendment required further road and trail closures to motorized recreationists (among other actions) for the purpose of establishing "core" areas of secure grizzly bear habitat and has led to the current motorized use limits in the Whitefish Range.

The Flathead National Forest must adopt the "Grizzly Bear Conservation Strategy" as part of its final forest plan revision. This document will replace Amendment #19 as the guiding document for road density standards and motor vehicle use under the revised forest plan.

The Whitefish Range Partnership discussed summer, wheeled motorized recreation in the Whitefish Range. The Partnership recognizes the current limitations placed on summer, wheeled motorized recreation. The Grizzly Bear Conservation Strategy may allow a relaxation of restrictions on summer, wheeled motorized recreation in the future.

### **Recommendation**

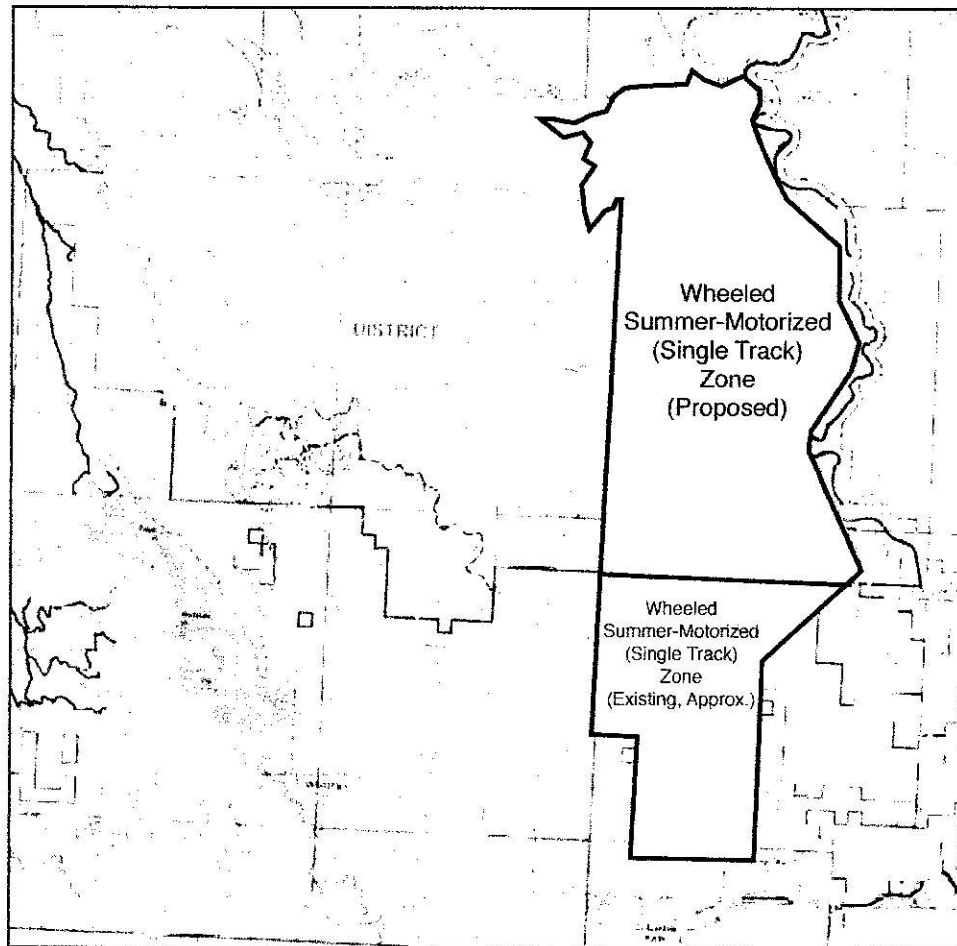
- The Partnership recommends that the Flathead National Forest establish a summer, wheeled motorized analysis zone in the southeast part of the Whitefish Range and assess the opportunities for establishing single-track motorized route(s) in this zone. (See the map for details – next page.) The Partnership also recommends that the Flathead Forest evaluate additional single-track summer motorized routes in the Whitefish Range in the course of project-specific analyses.

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Tentatively Approved by WRP 10/28/13

### **Committee Members**

Robbie Holman, Dave Hadden, Rick Anderson



**MAP A: Single track, summer motorized analysis zone.**

# Snowmobiling

Snowmobiling: The Whitefish Range offers excellent and diverse snowmobiling opportunities for the novice to the expert rider as part of a mix of dispersed winter recreational uses. The Flathead Snowmobile Association maintains over 170 miles of groomed snowmobile trails. Steeper, off-trail terrain in designated play areas provide greater challenge for expert riders.

The Flathead National Forest manages snowmobiling in the Whitefish Range (and the rest of the Forest) under Forest Plan Amendment #24 (A24). Amendment 24 was adopted in 2003 as a result of a negotiated, legal settlement between the Montana Wilderness Association, Montana Snowmobile Association, and Flathead National Forest. The Montana Wilderness Association and Flathead Snowmobile Association meet to review each year's snowmobiling season.

The Whitefish Range Partnership discussed winter motorized recreation in the Whitefish Range. The Partnership recognizes that adopting A24 with modifications would be the least expensive and most effective way to improve snowmobiling opportunities in the Whitefish Range. For this reasons, the Partnership supports carrying Amendment 24 – with modifications – forward into the revised forest plan, with the following additional recommendations.

## Recommendations

- Amendment 24 designates “routes” and “play areas”. Routes follow existing forest roads and riders are required to stay within 100 feet of each side of those designated routes. Play areas are located at higher elevations associated with open slopes and forest cutting units (clear cuts). The Partnership recognizes that some of the designated (mapped) play areas will gradually fill in with new trees. For this reason the Partnership recommends the following:
  1. The Flathead National Forest establish a management area or zone south from Big Creek Road (#316) to Werner Peak (see following map) that emphasizes winter recreation (motorized and non-motorized) where expansion of snowmobiling play areas may occur. (See Map B).
  2. The Flathead National Forest designates the McGinnis Creek area as a newly established snowmobiling play area *as a site-specific outcome of the forest plan revision process* (see Map A).
  3. The Flathead National Forest maintains Amendment 24 in all other respects.
- Residents of the North Fork Valley often use snowmobiles in winter to travel between homes. Travel on plowed county roads is not allowed. The Partnership recommends that the Flathead National Forest work collaboratively with North Fork residents to explore the potential for allowing residents to cross Forest Service land during the winter motorized recreation season for the purpose of accommodating community transportation between residents.

- Allow snowmobiling along FS Road #1674 (Whale Creek Road) as far as Whale Falls.
  - Groomed Nordic skiing opportunities do not presently exist in the North Fork Flathead River valley. The Partnership recommends that the Flathead National Forest consider allowing for a groomed Nordic ski trail system in the vicinity of Polebridge, recognizing one way this could be accomplished is through use of federal lands with private partnership.
- 

### **Addendum**

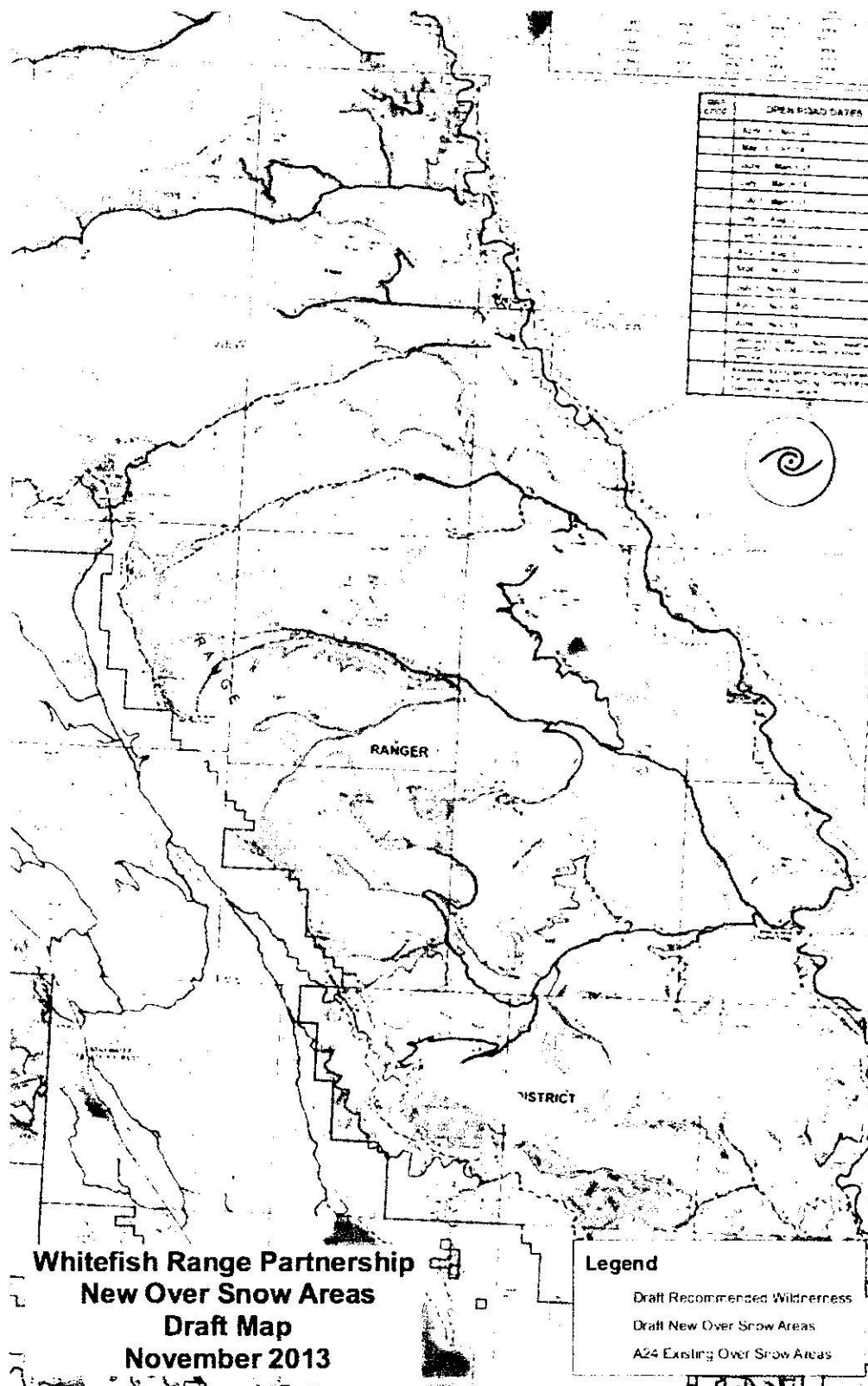
The Partnership examined some snowmobiling issues that lie outside of the Flathead Forest Plan revision process. We include here two additional concerns that could be addressed through the Partnerships efforts.

- The Partnership sees human sanitation as a potential problem, particularly at the Olney trailhead. This trailhead is located on Montana DNRC land. The Partnership recommends a bathroom facility at this location and will work with DNRC to help find a solution. The Partnership supports the continued operation of restroom facilities at the Canyon Creek trailhead.
  - Limited parking exists at the foot of Upper Whitefish Lake Road (off of East Lakeshore Drive) on DNRC land. The parking area was reduced in size in recent years that in winter can preclude vehicles hauling trailers and snowmobiles, thus limiting access. The Partnership would like to find a way to restore parking for snowmobilers.
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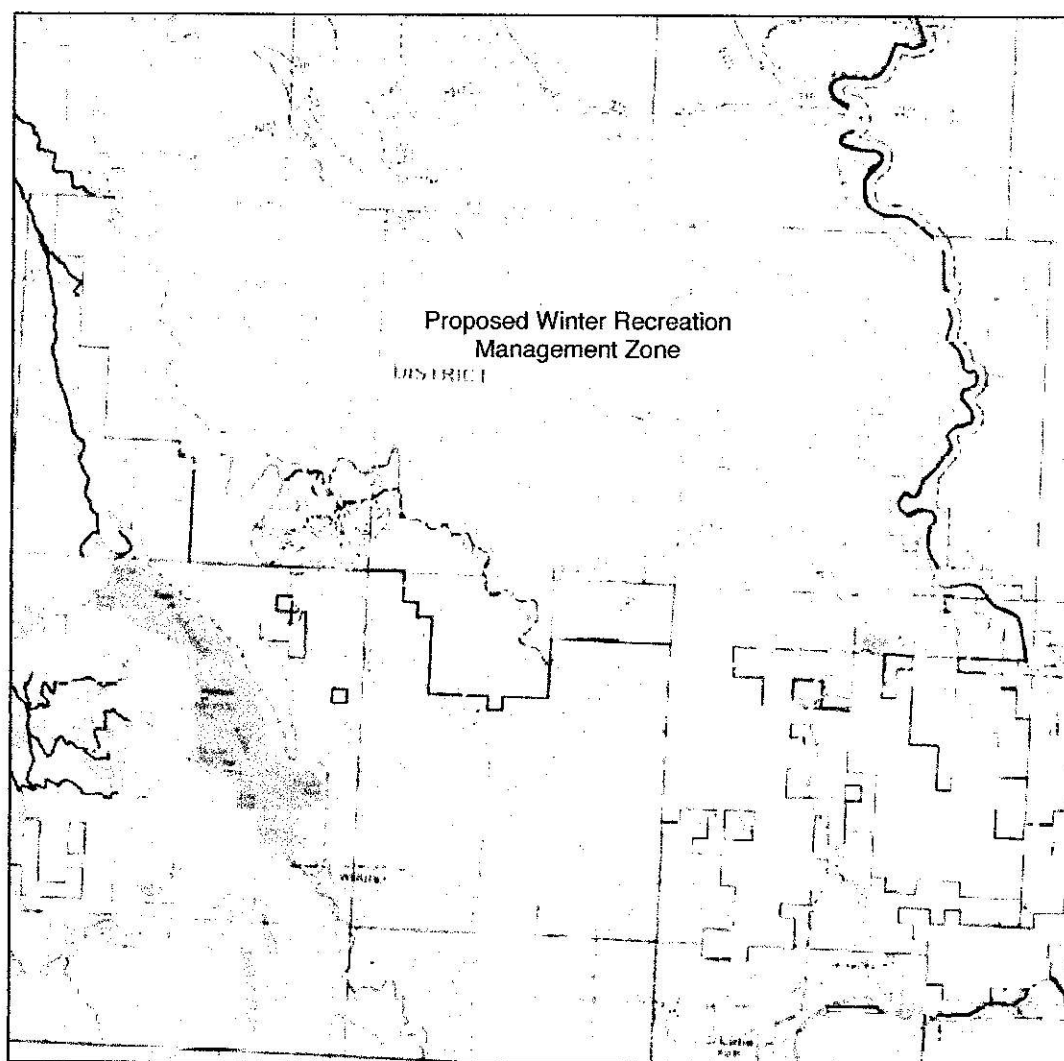
Tentatively Approved by WRP 10/XX/13

### **Committee Members**

Larry Wilson, Robbie Holman, Cris Coughlin, Dave Hadden, Rick Anderson, Amy Robinson



**Map A showing proposed play areas proposed for adoption through the forest plan**



**Map B showing proposed snowmobile play area.**



## High-Intensity Recreation/Whitefish Mtn. Resort

The Whitefish Mountain Resort is a popular year round recreation destination that enhances the recreation-based resort economy of the Flathead Valley and is the cornerstone of recreation in the front country serving the communities of Whitefish, Columbia Falls, and the greater Flathead Valley. Whitefish Mountain Resort offers access to the surrounding forest lands and supports increased recreational opportunities accessed from and to the Resort and the surrounding forest lands. As recreational use continues to grow now and in the future, it will be important to provide multiple use trails close to the communities of Whitefish and Columbia Falls in the 'front country' areas of the USFS property.

The Master Plan for Big Mountain was written in 1995 and they have worked to complete aspects of it over the years. There are also new recreation opportunities emerging - the Whitefish Trail (a collaborative project between the City of Whitefish and Whitefish Legacy Partners), and Glacier Nordic Groomed Ski Trails on and around Whitefish Mountain Resort, and Columbia Falls recreation development efforts.

The partnership would like to see increased recreational access opportunities spanning from Werner Peak to Canyon Creek. These recreation opportunities should be in the form of trails, trail corridors, trailheads and loop opportunities. While this is not the same "high intensity" as the recreation that occurs on Whitefish Mountain Resort, there was recognition that a specific designation was needed to define this 'front country' area where future recreational growth in the Whitefish Range should occur.

Included in the Backcountry Trails section of this document are specific recommendations concerning trails, several of which connect with and directly impact the High Intensity/Whitefish Mountain Resort area (See exhibit 1). These trails would, in part, fall under the front country designation, and would establish an appropriate link between higher intensity front country uses and backcountry opportunities. These trails are envisioned to provide non-motorized diverse recreational opportunities.

### Forest Plan Recommendations:

- Maintain High Intensity Recreation designation for Whitefish Mountain Resort permit area.
- Encourage a recreation focused designation for all lands south/west of the 316 road corridor including Werner Peak and Canyon Creek - **Front Country Recreation** - this would be different from 'High Intensity' Recreation due to scale of development and number of visitors. Also, the recreation-focused designation primarily contemplates non-commercial recreational endeavors as opposed to those offered within the Whitefish Mountain Resort permit area.
- Assess the suitability for increased diverse recreational opportunities in the "front country" area as set forth above.

- Review and approve the trails set forth in Exhibit 3, as discussed in greater detail in the Back Country Trails section of this document.
- Beyond the specific approvals recommended in Exhibit 1, encourage additional recreational opportunities that connect front country and backcountry trails, as envisioned in Exhibit 3 and discussed in the backcountry trails section of this document.

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### **Addendum**

The partnership also discussed some ideas that don't fit within the rubric of forest planning; those ideas are included below and could be explored or advanced by the partnership through different venues.

- Consider opening the 316 C road corridor in the summer to non-motorized diverse recreation to serve as a connector between Whitefish Mountain Resort, the Haskill Basin area, and the Cedar flats area.
- Increase trails and trailheads in the area south/west of road 316 to allow for greater recreational opportunities in the front country around Whitefish and Columbia Falls
- In addition to the specific recommendations set forth in Exhibit 1, find ways to better allow for recreational access between Whitefish Mountain Resort and surrounding forest areas (i.e., allow for travel off of the Big Mountain trail system)
- Explore opportunities for easements across private lands to allow for recreational loops.

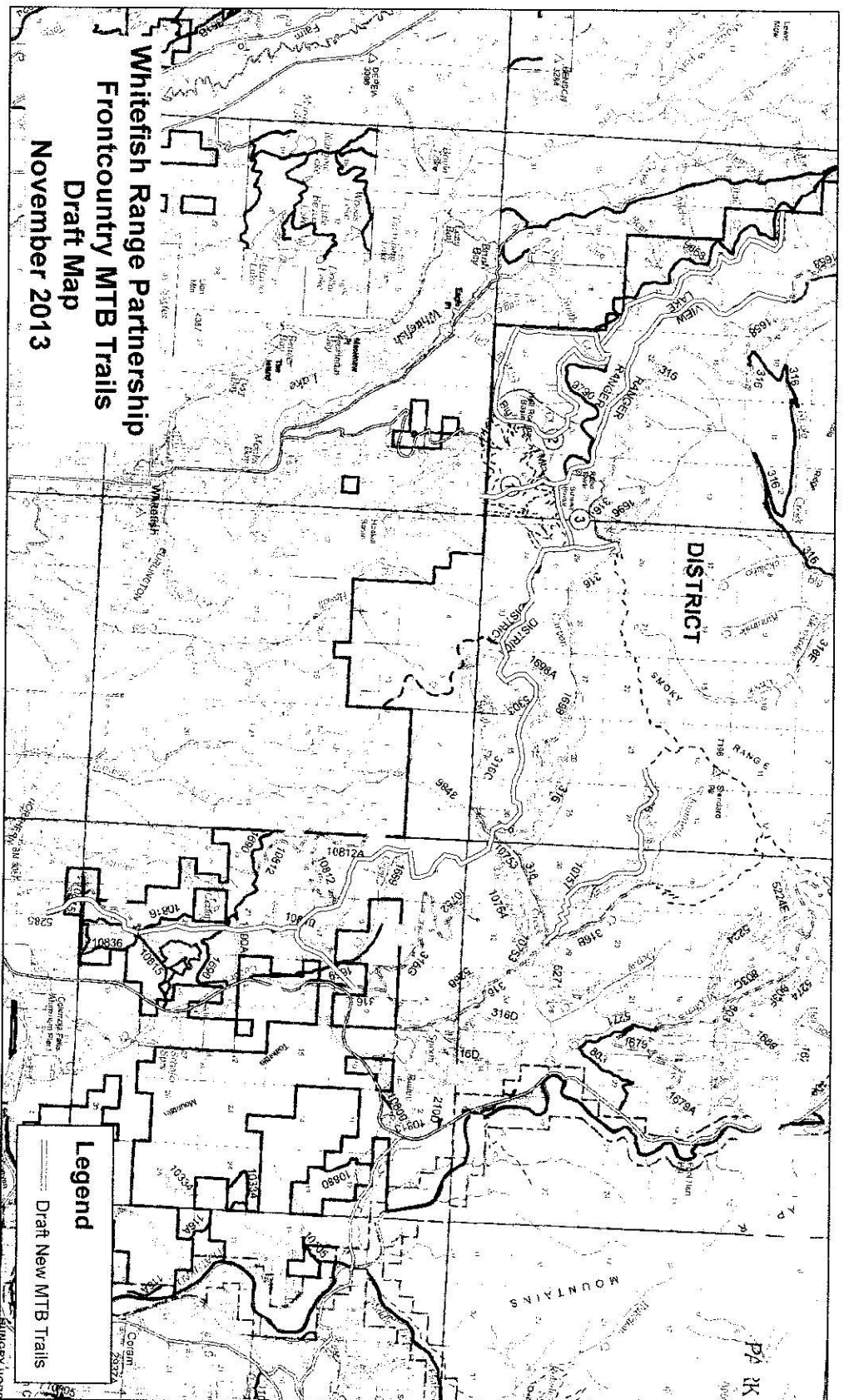
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**Tentatively approved by unanimous consensus of the Whitefish Range Partnership on 11/18/2013**

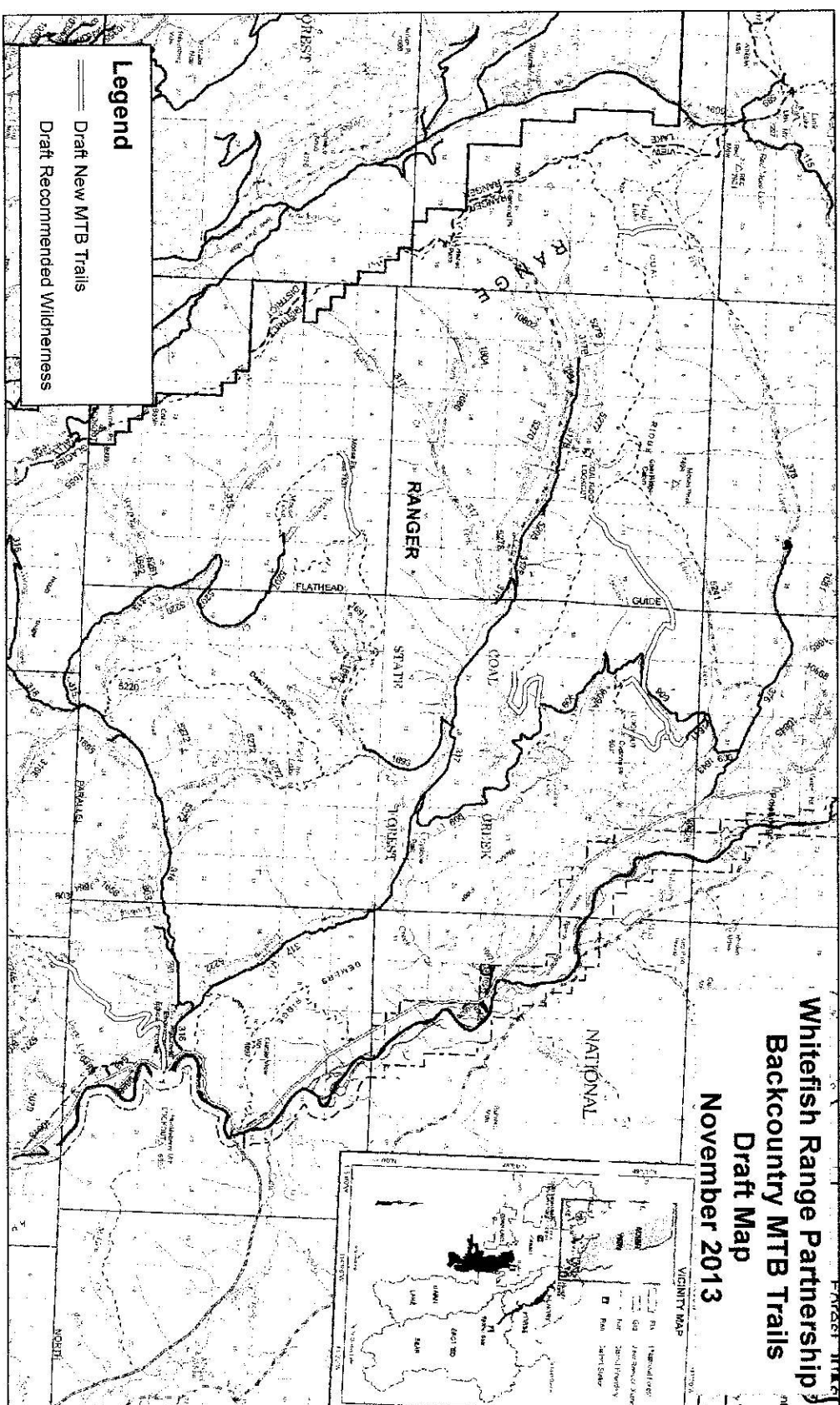
### **Committee Members**

Robbie Holman, Noah Bodman, Greg Gunderson, Chester Powell, Heidi Van Everan

**Exhibit\_1**



**Exhibit\_3**



# Backcountry Trails

## ***Background***

Backcountry trails in the Whitefish Range represent a historic resource that largely predates both the present day road system and timber program on the Flathead National Forest. Trails are portals into the backcountry for the enjoyment found there, including the rich wildlife habitat, solitude, challenge, and healthy outdoor activity. The backcountry trail system provides a range of recreational opportunities for residents and visitors ranging from high-use to secluded and primitive.

The Kootenai were the first travelers in the Whitefish Range going back to the earliest time of human occupation of the region. They established a number of trails in the region that have been documented in *"Indian Trails of the Northern Rockies"* by Darris Flannagan. The *Buffalo Cow Trail* remains visible along Trail, Yakinikak, and Grave creeks (on the Kootenai Forest). This trail provided passage across the mountains from the Tobacco Plains to the East Front for up to 400 horses and hundreds of Kootenai several times per year for the purpose of hunting buffalo. Segments of this trail remain visible along Grave and Trail creeks.

Almost all other trails in the Whitefish Range – so far as is documented – were constructed in the 1920 and 30s as pack, saddle and foot trails when the Flathead National Forest was still part of the Blackfoot National Forest. These trails primarily provided access to the forest for fire management purposes. They also provided critical employment to residents during the Great Depression. Bill Yenne's book *"Switchback"* documents the trail building history in this part of Montana.

The trail network in the Whitefish Range is extensive and represents an extraordinary recreational resource for residents and visitors. Much of the historic trail system remains intact, but some segments have fallen into disrepair or have been abandoned by the Forest Service over the years.

The Flathead Backcountry Horsemen, North Fork Preservation Association, North Fork Landowners Association, the Montana Conservation Corps, and the Flathead Snowmobile Association have provided considerable volunteer and financial assistance over many years to the Forest Service and the public. Their efforts help to maintain, improve, and re-open trails lost to maintenance neglect. Thanks largely to the efforts of these groups the Whitefish Range now boasts one of the most impressive and enjoyable trail systems in Montana.

Today, the Flathead National Forest continues to experience budget reductions that will challenge future trail maintenance in the Whitefish Range. Trail maintenance is scheduled on something of a rotational basis, however, the Forest Service attempts to be responsive to critical needs as they arise. Partnering with community groups will be essential to maintaining the level of service expected by the public based on the existing trail network, as well as for re-opening historic trail segments where determined appropriate or as needed. These partnerships should keep the Forest



Service informed of the public's desires regarding maintenance priorities and management decisions for trails.

### ***Trail System Goals***

The Partnership recognizes that the preservation of diverse recreational opportunities is of utmost importance in the Whitefish Range.

To preserve a range of recreational opportunities for all user groups in the Whitefish Range, and specifically cyclists, it is necessary to expand the trail networks at the southern end of the Range. The partnership feels that immediate emphasis should be placed on 1) connecting National Recreation Trails to existing trail centers; and 2) connecting appropriate backcountry trail networks with front country population centers. In pursuit of these goals, the general suitability for diverse recreational opportunities in the southern end of the Whitefish Range must be assessed. Specifically, these goals should be implemented via the restoration of historic trail tread as well as, where necessary, the construction of new trails. The partnership supports a specific proposal for this implementation, see attached Exhibit 1. The trails depicted in Exhibit 1 may be re-mapped for increased accuracy after the approval of this document.

The partnership supports both a generalized suitability review for diverse (including mechanized) recreation as well as the environmental review and approval of the site-specific projects, set forth in Exhibit 1, that are located in the front country portion of the Range (see High Intensity recommendation). The recommendation that this review and approval be conducted as part of the forest plan revision process comes with the understanding that independently gaining approval for trails set forth in Exhibit 1 is a substantial hurdle that would significantly delay or prevent the implementation of these recreational assets. This recommendation also comes as the result of the collaborative process, where specific projects such as those outlined in Exhibit 1 are the necessary outcome of the unanimous recommendation that this document represents. Without these specific recommendations, consensus would not have been possible.

As such, in order to preserve the recreational opportunities afforded by this portion of the forest, it is imperative that approval for these trails be included within the Management Plan process. The partnership envisions that, once approval is obtained, the construction and management of these trails may be funded as a result of collaborative efforts made possible by WRP.

The Flathead National Forest struggles with decreased funding for recreational trail maintenance while use increases in the Whitefish Range. In order to provide for this increase in use a vision of appropriate expansions of the trail network should be included within the Management Plan. A map, attached as Exhibit 3, denotes potential expansions of the backcountry trail network within the Whitefish Range. These trails are representative of a desirable vision and expansion of the Whitefish

Range backcountry trail network. These trails are distinguishable from those set forth in Exhibit 1 (front country trails) in that the partnership is not seeking immediate approval of these trails.

- In general the WRP recognizes all backcountry trail uses and thinks all trail uses should be accommodated as best as possible and with the least disruption to the outstanding wildlife values found in the Whitefish Range.
- The WRP recognizes that the addition of recommended wilderness in the north end of the Whitefish Range will have the effect of limiting certain user groups. To preserve the backcountry experience that is available to non-motorized user groups, it is necessary and desirable to expand the backcountry trail network at the southern end of the Whitefish Range, with particular emphasis on making loops, providing access to National Recreation Trails, providing connections from Front Country recreation areas to backcountry trail systems, and providing backcountry experiences that are reasonably accessible.
- The partnership envisions a "Front Country" designation, which is discussed in the "High Intensity / Whitefish Mountain Resort" section of this document. Certain specific proposals further the goals set forth in that section. More specifically, the trails set forth in the attached Exhibit 1 serve as an appropriate and important link between backcountry recreational opportunities and higher intensity, front country experiences. The partnership feels that link is a crucial element of the recreational opportunities afforded in this area, and approval of those links should be a priority.
- Backcountry trails are recognized as an important aspect of our nation's public lands and the use of this asset should be encouraged both for long time backcountry travelers as well as for people who are new to the backcountry experience. The backcountry, rustic nature of the experience should be preserved while at the same time removing unnecessary impediments to access.
- The Partnership thinks that, in general, the FNF should emphasize and direct most trail use to trails at the south end of the Range, and work to maintain primitive trail characteristics as at the north end of the Range.
- The Polebridge area continues to receive increasing visitation and the national forest trail system should help direct and disperse visitor use to selected appropriate trailheads in the vicinity.
- The Partnership thinks that some historic trail segments should be restored (as outlined in exhibits) to provide greater recreational access and loop trail opportunities
- The Partnership recognizes that the Flathead Valley's population will continue to grow and may reach very high numbers over the coming decades. For these reasons the Partnership's recommendations reflect the awareness that the outstanding wildlife and recreational opportunities could be compromised with



associated growth in trail use. When possible, these issues should be addressed via trail and use management rather than outright closure.

- The Partnership recognizes that national forest budgets are shrinking and that maintenance and upkeep of the existing or possibly expanded trail system will require close financial and project partnership between the Flathead Forest and community groups that have an interest in trail resources.

### ***Specific Recommendations***

1. Analyze for general suitability and approve the southern portion of the Whitefish Range for moderate increases in diverse recreation. The Highest densities of trails (and therefore use) should be focused on the "front country" area, as discussed in the "High Intensity Recreation" section of this document.
2. Review and approve the trails in Exhibit 1, with the understanding that the construction and maintenance of the trails will be performed via private partnerships.
3. Encourage expansion of backcountry trail opportunities in accordance with the map attached as Exhibit 3.
4. Protect or re-establish trail corridors through timber sale areas as part of timber sale planning.
5. Maintain a safe, efficiently managed trail system that minimizes adverse ecological impacts.
6. Maintain a dispersed trail system that provides for a range of appropriate backcountry uses and avoids restrictions as have developed in the Jewel Basin.
7. Encourage opportunities to establish trail corridors on old roadbeds that would connect or complete trail segments or create loop trail opportunities.
8. Connect backcountry and front country trails and provide an interconnected trail system in the Whitefish Range for diverse users.
9. "The Partnership recommends that the Flathead National Forest consider brushing out some amount of closed, impassable roads in the vicinity of private lands to provide additional hiking and biking opportunities in cooperation with community trail group(s)."
10. Mountain biking is a rapidly growing sport; work with community groups to identify and prioritize riding areas (Polebridge area, Coal Ridge, and Whitefish Divide) provide dispersed access, and improved loop trail opportunities, including, but not limited to, those areas specified in Exhibit 3.
11. Horse packing and horse back trail riding are historic uses in the Whitefish Range; maintain an adequate trail network for this use, with emphasis in the more primitive north end of the Range.
12. Restore specific historic trail segments as funding is raised (e.g. Cleft Rock, Deep Creek, Coal Ridge and Moran Creek areas).

13. Recognize the historic and cultural significance of the Buffalo Cow Trail and maintain and protect that resource
14. Segment trail uses into 5 levels (1 = primitive, 5 = developed trail) and manage for these levels of use. As the local population and visitor use increases on trails, establish use or impact levels that trigger management review and action.
15. While maintaining the backcountry character as best as possible, direct public trail use to existing more heavily used trails that are readily accessible with the goal of minimizing increased uses in other areas. Examples of such trails include Glacier View Mountain, Chain and Link Lakes, Nasukoin, Polebridge area trails.
16. Maintain and improve the Ralph Thayer and Smoky Range National Recreation Trails for foot, bicycle and stock uses. Maintain and improve Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail consistent with its nature and purposes as a non-motorized National Scenic Trail.
17. Help direct and disperse Polebridge visitors by providing information and signage for nearby trailheads (e.g. Cyclone Lookout, Coal Lookout).
18. Improve visibility of signage and trail head facilities for more heavily used trails. Maintain primitive signage and conditions for trails on primitive end of use spectrum.
19. Work with interested community groups to establish and fund a Whitefish Range Backcountry Ranger program.
20. Work with interested community groups to plan and implement a long-term Whitefish Range Trail Maintenance and funding program.
21. Maintain existing levels of motorized access.

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**Citations**

1. Flannagan, Daris, R. 2001. *Indian Trails of the Northern Rockies*. Stoneydale Press.
2. Yenne. W. J. 1983. 2005. *Switchback: Bill Yenne's 50 Years in the Mountains of Montana and the West*. W.Y. Books.

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Committee Members: Bill Walker, Greg Schatz, Frank Vitale, Noah Bodman, Steve Thompson, Heidi Van Everen, Amy Robinson, Dave Hadden, Chas Cartwright.

**Approved by unanimous consensus of the Whitefish Range Partnership on 11/18/2013.**

## Recommended Wilderness

### ***Background***

The Whitefish Range has a long management and legislative history associated with protecting its existing wilderness characteristics. Specifically, the Tuchuck, Hefty and Thompson-Seton roadless areas have been recognized by both agency professionals and previous consensus-based collaborative groups for their outstanding wilderness potential.

Wilderness was first proposed for the Whitefish Range in 1925. Fortine resident Winton Weydemeyer made the proposal in a written response to an article that appeared in *American Forest Magazine* authored by Aldo Leopold. The Whitefish Range was then part of the Blackfoot National Forest, which was later split into today's Kootenai and Flathead National Forests. Weydemeyer wrote:

*"This is the Whitefish Ranges, which with its outlying ridge, lies adjacent to the Canadian boundary and the west boundary of Glacier National Park, with a central roadless area of approximately 450,000 acres...*

*"Many sections have never been visited by anyone other than a few old-time hunters and trappers, and members of the United States Geological Survey party. Trails are usually few and distant...Though it thus admirably conforms to the requirements by the Western wilderness lover, it is by no means inaccessible to the ordinary camper or tourist---a few hours travel from automobile roads by foot or horseback..."<sup>1</sup>*

### **Management History**

**1932:** A large primitive area encompassing most of the Whitefish Range (approximately 450,000 acres) is inventoried by the U.S. Forest Service as a wilderness candidate landscape.

**1973:** The Tuchuck and Thompson-Seton areas are recommended for wilderness study by the USFS in the first Roadless Area Review and Evaluation (RARE I), which began in 1967 and culminated in 1972.

**1979:** The second Roadless Area Review and Evaluation (RARE II), again recognizes the significant wilderness attributes of Tuchuck, Mount Hefty and Thompson-Seton.

**1984:** The Flathead National Forest planning team evaluates all roadless areas as part of their forest planning process, and classifies the Tuchuck, Thompson-Seton, and Mt Hefty areas as "areas that possess high-quality wilderness attributes."

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<sup>1</sup> Source: "Winton Weydemeyer and the Northern Whitefish Range," Tom Harding

**1986:** The Flathead Forest Plan establishes the Trail Creek Grizzly Bear Management Area<sup>2</sup> between Whitefish Mountain and British Columbia, including Tuchuck, Mount Hefty and Thompson-Seton proposed Wilderness Areas.

**2004:** The Flathead Forest Plan incorporates Winter Recreation Amendment (#24). Determination of snowmobiling areas and non-motorized winter zones in the Whitefish Range is based on agreement negotiated between snowmobilers, conservationists and Forest Service.

**2006:** Flathead National Forest recommends wilderness for the Tuchuck and Thompson-Seton Areas in its draft revised Forest Plan.

**2007:** Forest Service considers Hefty for addition to recommended wilderness as result of 2006 public comment period.

### **Legislative History**

**1988:** Congress passes legislation (Senate Bill 2751) to designate the North Fork Wilderness -- which includes Tuchuck, Thompson-Seton, and Mt Hefty -- as part of a statewide wilderness bill. The bill is later pocket-vetoed.

**1992:** Flathead Basin Commission (FBC) achieves stakeholder consensus on management recommendations for the U.S. portion of the North Fork Flathead River Watershed submitted by Governor Stephens to the International Joint Commission. The FBC recommends "congressional approval of the Mount Hefty-Tuchuck, and Thompson-Seton areas . . .for Wilderness designation."

**1994:** The U.S. House passes H.R. 2473, the "Montana Wilderness Act of 1994," which includes Tuchuck, Thompson-Seton, and Mt. Hefty as wilderness.

### **Recommended Wilderness Goals**

The Whitefish Range Partnership formed to *"work together with the primary purpose of creating a shared vision and management recommendations for the public lands managed by the Flathead National Forest located in the area commonly referred to as the Whitefish Range, Glacier View Ranger District."*<sup>3</sup>

The Partnership's goal is to promote a *"shared vision for the Whitefish Range... to ensure a balance of traditional and modern land uses."*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Flathead Forest Plan, (pp. IV 148-153). "This area will be administratively classified as the Trail Creek Grizzly Bear Management Area. The Trail Creek Geographic Unit contains the finest grizzly bear habitat in the lower 48 states and is very important to recovery of the grizzly bear....recreational use of the area is low due to its remoteness. The unroaded nature of the area, however, attracts some recreationists interested in...backcountry hiking and horseback riding...All (future) management activities will be oriented toward maintaining or improving grizzly bear habitat."

<sup>3</sup> From Whitefish Range Partnership "Charter"

<sup>4</sup> From Whitefish Range Partnership "Whitefish Range Shared Values"

With the discussion of wilderness beginning in 1925, there is a remarkably rich history of recognizing outstanding wilderness values in the Whitefish Range. Even though agency professionals advocated for recommended wilderness in the *current* plan, those values were only officially acknowledged by the Flathead National Forest in 2006, when it recommended wilderness for the northern-most one-quarter of the Whitefish Range as part of a forest plan revision process.

The Whitefish Divide trail (Trail 26) is an important recreational asset that extends from its northern origin at Road 114 to Big Mountain, and includes the portion in this wilderness recommendation. South of the recommended wilderness, Trail 26, including those portions on the Kootenai National Forest, will remain outside recommended wilderness.

More specifically, based on the 2013 Revised Land Management Plan for the Kootenai National Forest (KNF), it is anticipated that recommended wilderness may cross the divide in the area of Mt Locke and Mt. Lewis. If this is the case, Trail 26 should remain open to mountain bike, foot and stock travel from the trailhead at Forest Road 372 (Link Lake and Red Meadow on FNF) to the intersection with Trail 372, south of Mt. Locke on the KNF.

Any user conflict that may arise on Trail #26 south of the junction with Williams Creek Trail # 372, in the future should be dealt with via site and use specific management decisions rather than categorical placement of the trail within recommended wilderness.

The wilderness goals of the Partnership are:

- Maintain the remote and primitive character of the northern whitefish range;
- To secure a permanent endowment of wilderness in the Whitefish Range for future generations;
- To secure the most valuable wildlife and fisheries habitat in an undeveloped and natural state;
- To provide primitive, recreational opportunities for present and future generations.
- Continue to demonstrate by action the highest level of U.S. commitment to conserve the lands, water and wildlife of the international North Fork of the Flathead watershed.

### **Specific Recommendations**

This wilderness recommendation is site-specific to provide clarity and incorporate commitments to other stakeholders. The attached map (labeled Exhibit A) was negotiated and agreed to by both specific constituencies with the greatest interest in this discussion, and by the Partnership acting as a 'committee of the whole.'

In general terms, the Partnership recommends to the Flathead National Forest that the *Hefty, Tuchuck, and Thompson Seton roadless areas* be recommended for wilderness with the following areas removed or added:

1. **Removed:** an approximately one (1) mile buffer west and north and south of private land in the vicinity of Trail Creek.
  2. **Removed:** The Link Lake area and the Huntsberger Lake area consistent with Flathead National Forest *Amendment 24* (Winter Motorized Recreation Plan<sup>5</sup>) and Exhibit A.
  3. **Removed:** Those portions of the Whitefish Divide Trail (Trail 26) located south of the junction with Williams Creek Trail # 372.
  4. **Added:** the lands adjacent to Ninko Creek as shown in Exhibit A.
  5. **Added:** The roadless area north of Frozen Lake Road in the Wigwam drainage as shown in Exhibit A.
  6. **Added:** Antley Creek watershed.
  7. **Exhibit B** is included to depict recommended Wildlife Habitat Management area; the purpose of this area is to emphasize wildlife habitat improvement.
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### **Addendum**

Recommend to Montana's congressional delegation that the one-mile wide area of Inventoried Roadless Area adjacent to private land in the vicinity of Trail Creek be removed from the roadless base for fuel and forest management purposes (#1 above). Access for fuel reduction shall be temporary and no new vehicle routes will be established.

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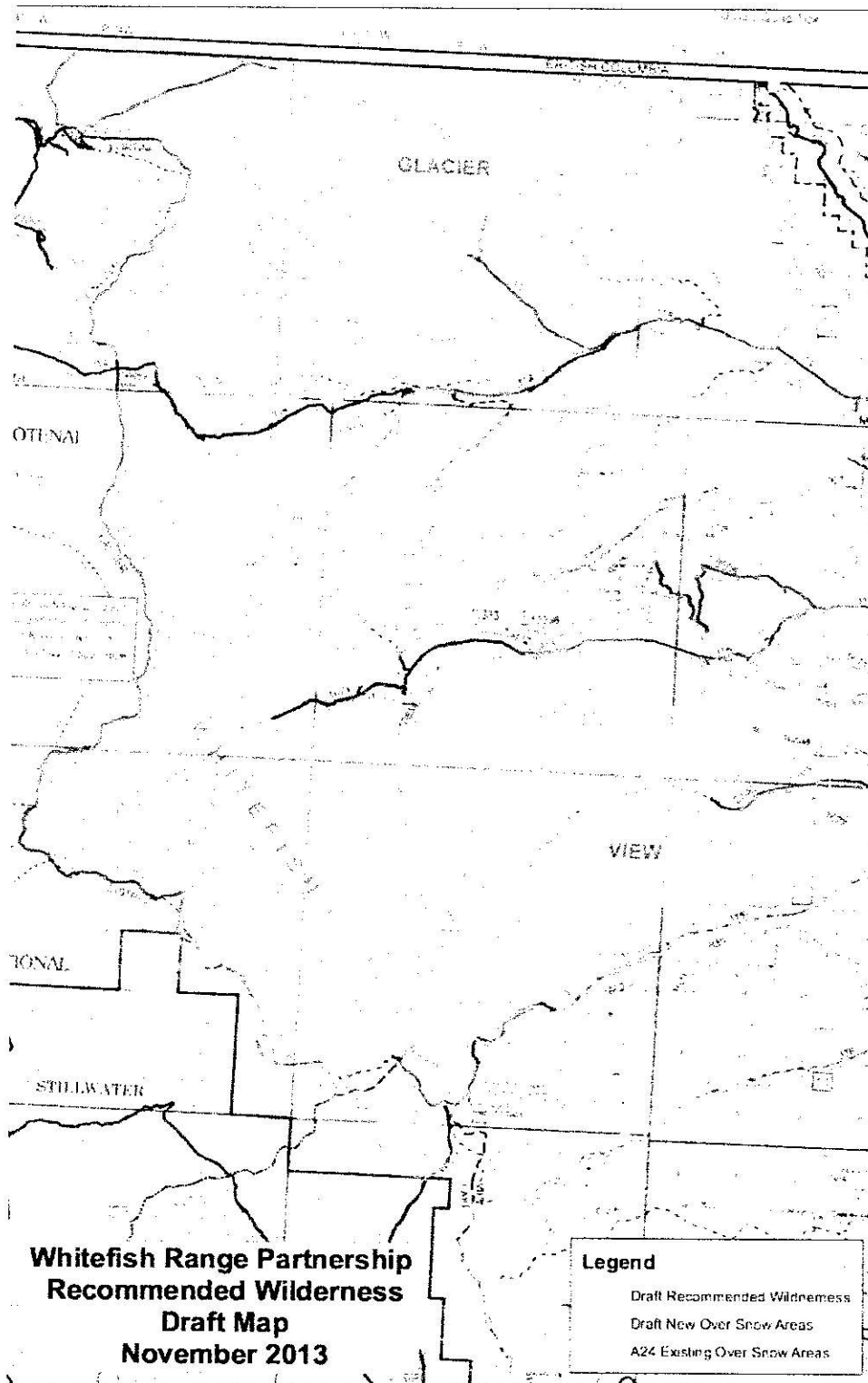
**Committee Members:** The Whitefish Range Partnership as a committee of the whole. Amy Robinson and Dave Hadden were tasked with drafting the initial recommended wilderness document.

**Approved by unanimous consensus of the Whitefish Range Partnership on 11/18/2013.**

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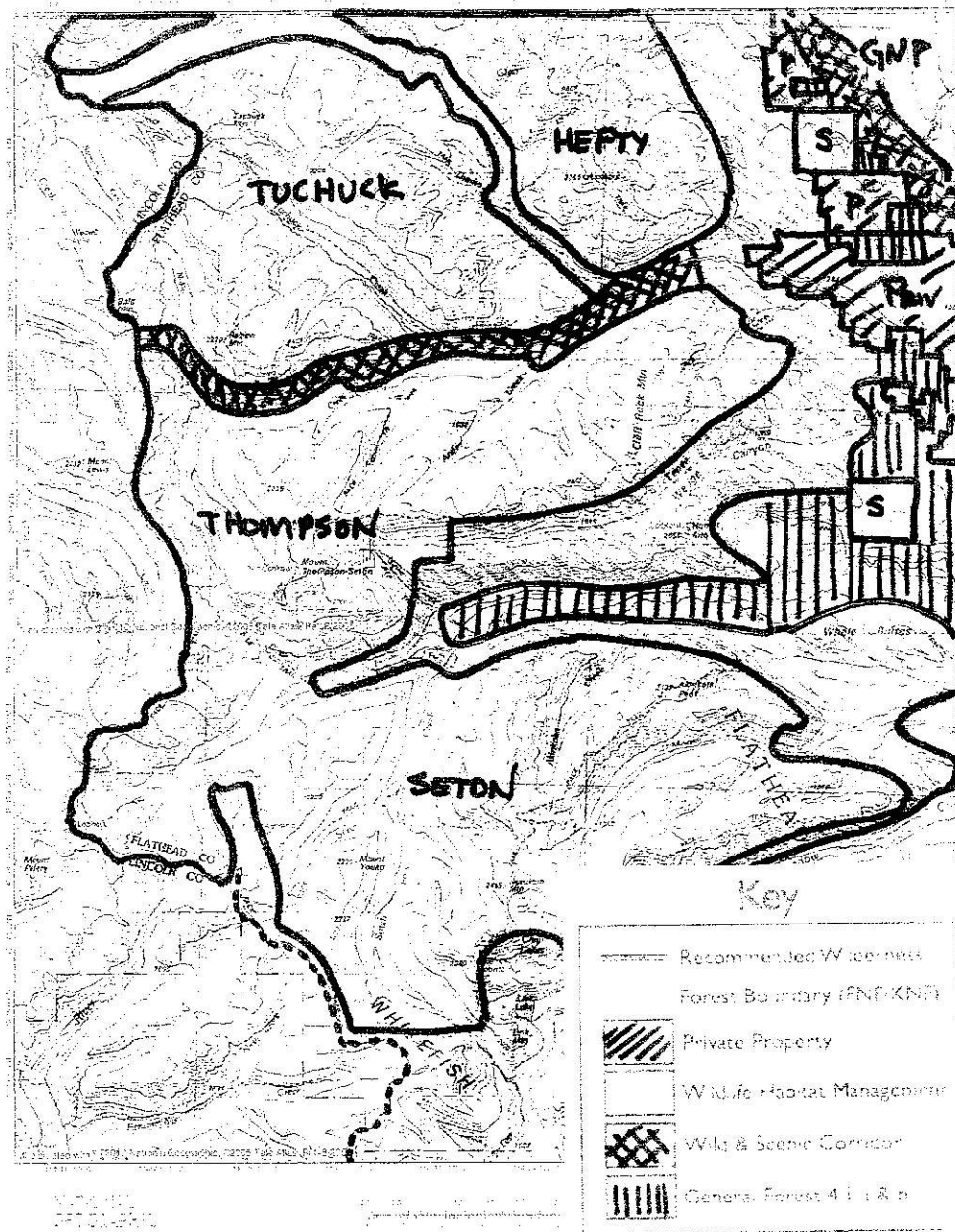
<sup>5</sup> Flathead National Forest. 2006. Winter Motorized Recreation Plan.





**Exhibit A: Whitefish Range Partnership Recommended Wilderness**





**Exhibit B: Whitfish Range Partnership Recommended Wilderness with Wildlife Habitat Management Recommendation.**