



Our Mission: To promote, recommend and advocate for programs and projects within the Custer-Gallatin National Forest that will provide for the public health, safety and general welfare of our communities under the sustainable multiple-use management concept to meet the diverse needs of our communities through a transparent, collaborative and mutually supportive process within a diverse and committed stakeholder group.

Custer Gallatin Working Group

Big Horn, Carbon, Gallatin, Madison, Park, Powder River, Rosebud, Sweet Grass & Stillwater Counties

Senator Steve Daines
320 Hart Senate Office Building
SD-G55
Washington, D.C. 20515

Senator Tim Sheehy
Dirksen Senate Office Building

Washington, D.C. 20515

Representative Ryan Zinke
212 Canon House Office Building
Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Representative Troy Downing
1529 Longworth House Office

Washington, D.C. 20515

February 17, 2025

Dear Senator Daines, Senator Sheehy, Representative Zinke and Representative Downing,

We, the members of the Custer Gallatin Working Group, are writing today to express our strong disagreement with the recent U.S. Forest Service staff reductions. We ask that you contact President Trump and U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Brooke Rollins regarding the considerable unintended consequences from this action. As Montana's representatives in Washington, D.C., we request that you make it a priority to restore these positions and fully staff the US Forest Service so the agency can continue to do its important work for our state.

For many years, the Forest Service has struggled to increase the pace and scale of forest management and address the multitude of other needs that fall under multiple use management. (2019 [National Association of Forest Service Retirees \(NAFSR\) work force capacity study](#).) This week's force reduction will dramatically worsen this situation with severe consequences for the agency's ability to manage our public lands far into the future. When combined with the ongoing freeze on federal grants and contracts, this force reduction could have significant negative consequences for important sectors of Montana's economy, including the timber, agriculture and outdoor recreation industries.

The CGWG was organized by Carbon, Stillwater, Sweet Grass, Park, Gallatin, Big Horn, Powder River, Rosebud and Madison County Commissioners in southern Montana, whose overriding priority is public safety, health and general welfare within their counties. Each of these counties provides access to the Custer Gallatin National Forest and other public lands within their boundaries. The twenty-four designated seats on the collaborative include County Commissioners, representatives of conservation NGO's, the ski industry, agriculture and ranching, recreation, hunters, anglers, outfitters, mining, and the timber industry.

Membership

County Commissions

Carbon Co.
Madison Co.
Park Co.
Gallatin Co.
Stillwater Co.
Big Horn Co.
Sweet Grass Co.
Powder River Co.
Rosebud Co.

Industry Representation

Skiing -
Red Lodge Mountain

Minerals/Mining -
Stillwater Mining Corp.

Multiple Use -
Citizens for Balanced Use

Recreational & Economic Dev. -
Big Sky Chamber

Agriculture/Ranching -
OPEN

Timber -
Sun Mtn. Lumber Co.

Motorized Recreation -
Montana Trail Vehicle Riders Assoc.

Quiet Recreation -
Winter Wildlands Alliance
SW Mont. Mtn. Biking Advocates

Fishing and Hunting -
Montana Back Country Hunters &
Anglers

Outfitters -
Montana Outfitters
& Guides Assn.

Montana University Extension

Conservation NGOs

Greater Yellowstone Coalition

The Wilderness Society

Society for Range Management,
Northern Great Plains Section

Trout Unlimited

This week, the Custer Gallatin National Forest laid off 36 employees across the forest. This is being repeated across the agency with at least 3,400 people losing jobs. This represents 10% of the total Forest Service workforce. These jobs are essential to managing recreation, combatting weeds, and implementing essential fuels reduction projects that improve community resilience to wildfire as well as forest health.

The Custer Gallatin Working Group has concerns over the effects of this reduction in force on specific projects that we have selected to engage.

1. The Cooke City Fuel and Forest Health Project; This project lies on the south side of Cooke City itself. This area was not affected by the 1988 fires and contains heavy fuels. The CGWG organized well attended field trips and public meetings in Cooke City and Gardner. If this project does not move forward, the entire community of Cooke City is at risk in a severe forest fire.
2. The Hyalite Cottonwood Fuels Project: Hyalite Canyon is the most heavily used recreational area on the Custer Gallatin National Forest and provides 80% of Bozeman's municipal water supply. This area is also susceptible to an extreme fire event, which could damage Bozeman's water supply as well as public and private infrastructure. This project is currently being designed and reliant on data collected during the field season by people in the kinds of positions just eliminated.
3. The Red Lodge Mountain Fuel Reduction and Forest Health Project. This area is also heavily fueled and there is large potential for a large catastrophic fire that would destroy Red Lodge Mountain Ski Resort, the largest private employer in Carbon County

Delays in these fuel reduction projects, if there are no "boots on the ground" to complete them, could cause collateral damage to Montana's timber industry. Sun Mountain Lumber, with mills in Deer Lodge and Livingston, has stated that this, in addition to the end of the grant and loan programs, could cause them to close their mills. Without Montana's lumber mills, there will be nowhere to send the material produced by forest restoration and fuels reduction projects. Increasing the pace and scale of projects that mitigate wildfire hazards requires both a viable Forest Service and timber industry. This force reduction combined with the freeze on federal grants and contracts threatens both.

The CGWG has also collaborated with Sibanye Stillwater and the Custer Gallatin National Forest to develop a tailings and waste rock management plan for both the East Boulder and the Stillwater mines. We trust that it is not necessary to emphasize the importance of Sibanye Stillwater to the economy of the State of Montana and the local communities. Forest Service staff reductions will further hobble Sibanye Stillwater's ability to work in Montana and could have a devastating economic impact.

With the pressing need to address insect and disease outbreaks and hazardous fuels across the 3.2 CGNF million-acre forest, these workforce reductions will have enormous long-term consequences for the economies and safety of our communities. Due to already inadequate staffing levels, we have seen a decrease in the quality and quantity of recreation facilities, a significant backlog in special use permitting, and significant delays in everything from special use permitting to environmental analysis and decision making. Investments from the Legacy Restoration Fund, Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, and Inflation Reduction Act were beginning to address these issues, and those gains have now been eliminated.

National Forest lands support our Montana way of life in many ways – from lifestyles to livelihoods. These lands are the backbone of Montana's economy, including timber, mining, grazing, and outdoor recreation. We need to invest in the Forest Service, so this land is properly cared for today and in the future.

As the budget reconciliation process proceeds in the next several weeks, we strongly urge you to reverse these reductions in the workforce at the USDA Forest Service and adequately fund the agency.

Sincerely,

John Prinkki, Chair, Custer Gallatin Working Group

Bill Wallace, Sweet Grass County Commissioner
Mike Story, Park County Commissioner
Bill Bullock, Carbon County Commissioner
Jennifer Boyer, Gallatin County Commissioner
Ed Joiner, Rosebud County Commissioner
Duke Gilman, Madison County Commissioner
Jeff Ruffatto, Stillwater County Commissioner
Nick Horn, Sun Mountain Lumber
Randy Weimer, Sibanye Stillwater
Jeff Schmidt, Red Lodge Mountain Ski Resort
Hilary Eisen, Winter Wildlands Alliance
Barb Cestero, The Wilderness Society
Sally Schrank, Greater Yellowstone Coalition
Jackie Walden
Zach Bailey, Southwest Montana Mountain Bike Association
Connor Parrish, Trout Unlimited