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Service

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Environmental Assessment

Middle Fork Sixteen Mile Road Relocation Project

**Bozeman Ranger District, Custer Gallatin National Forest
Gallatin County, Montana**

Legal Description: T3N, R6E, NE of Sections 9, 10, 15, 16, 22 and 27

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SUMMARY

The Custer Gallatin National Forest is proposing a road improvement project to relocate a short section of Forest Service Road #642, the Middle Fork of Sixteen Mile Road, from private land onto National Forest System land in the NE portion of Section 16 and rejoin the original road location. This would improve the road location and maintenance, move the road away from the stream, avoid private land, and improve the road to be more useable in wet conditions. The road is an open, public system road provided for in the Travel Plan. The replacement road will be of similar standard as the existing road. The project area is located in the North Bridger Range T3N, R6E, NE of Section 16, and is within the Bozeman Ranger District, Custer Gallatin National Forest, Montana. This action is needed because this small section of forest system road #642 (approximately ¼ to 1/3 of a mile) is in a poor location and would be better managed on National Forest system land rather than on an easement in dispute on private land.

INTRODUCTION

Document Structure

The Forest Service has prepared this Environmental Assessment in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other relevant Federal and State laws and regulations. This Environmental Assessment discloses the direct, indirect, and cumulative environmental impacts that would result from the proposed action and alternatives. The document is organized into four parts:

- *Introduction:* The section includes the purpose of and need for the project, and the agency's proposal for achieving that purpose and need.
- *Alternatives, including the Proposed Action:* This section provides a more detailed description of the agency's proposed action and the no action alternative. This discussion also includes possible mitigation measures. Finally, this section provides a summary table of the environmental consequences associated with each alternative.
- *Environmental Consequences:* This section describes the environmental effects of implementing the proposed action and the no action alternative.
- *Agencies and Persons Consulted:* This section provides a list of preparers and agencies consulted during the development of the environmental assessment.

Additional documentation, specialist reports on project-area resources, may be found in the project planning record available by contacting Steve Christiansen at the Custer Gallatin National Forest Supervisor's Office

Purpose and Need for Action

The purpose of this project is to create a more sustainable road in a more upland location that reduces erosion and maintenance costs and allows for better public access to National Forest System lands. The current road has a steep section on poor soils and is

very close to the creek, causing sediment concerns. It can also be a difficult route for the public to travel during wet conditions. Much of the public use on this road is during hunting season and with horse trailers. There have been reported incidents of vehicles getting stuck on the road or slipping off the road into the ditch. The proposed location would reduce the grade and provide a better road surface for the public while reducing sediment delivery to Sixteen Mile Creek. Having a more sustainable road would also reduce long term maintenance costs, long term management costs and ultimately be a cost effective investment.

There is also a secondary purpose for moving this system road from private land to National Forest land. Although the Forest Service contends that the public has rights to travel this road and the road had been maintained by the Forest Service and is under its jurisdiction, it is good practice to put public uses on public lands where this is feasible. In this situation this is feasible and preferable for the reasons stated above. This action would prevent any future disputes with a land owner and ensure uninterrupted public use of the road. It would also negate any need for an easement, management or defense of easements and agreements for maintenance and the like.

Proposed Action

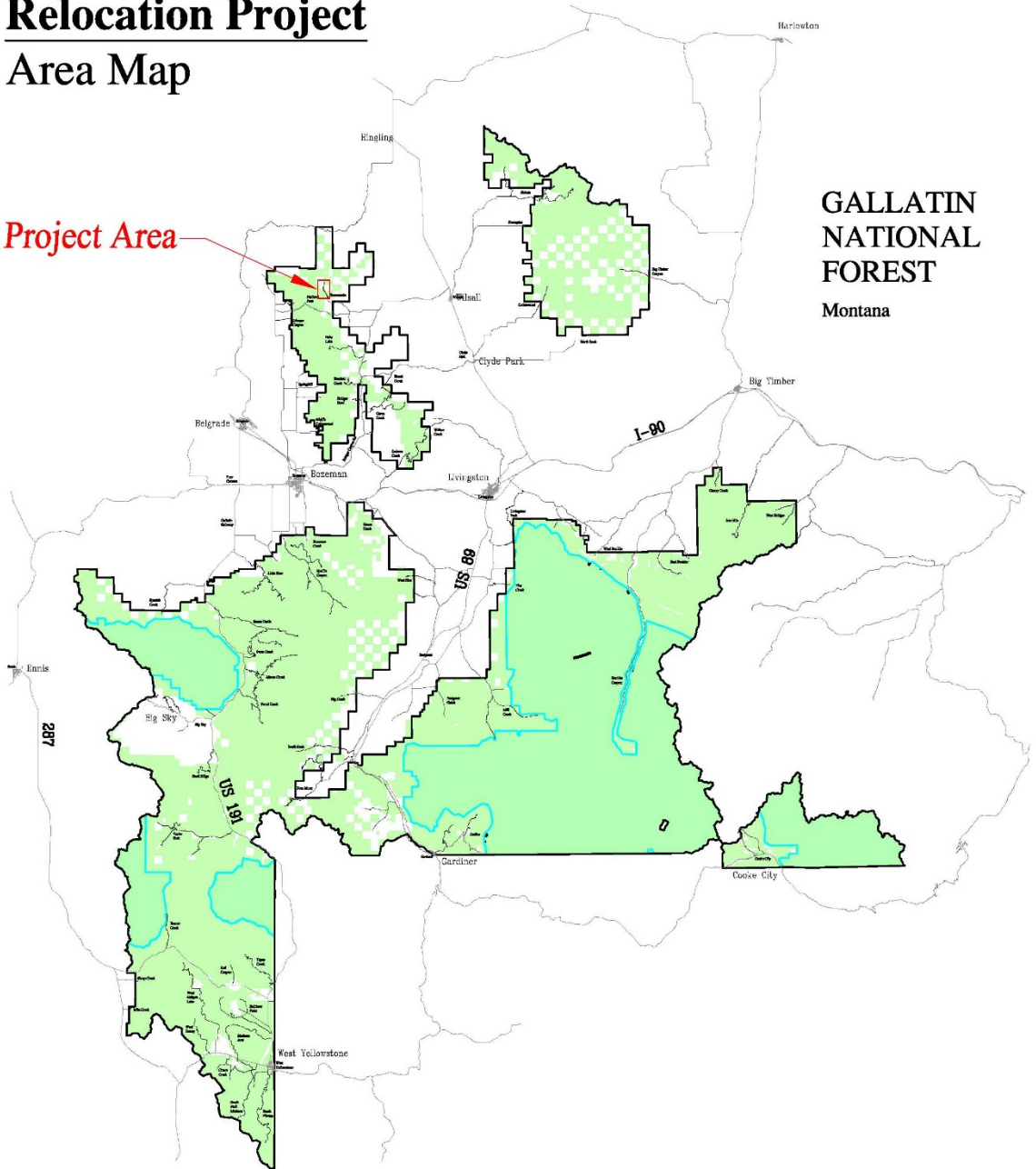
The Forest Service is proposing to relocate a short section of the Middle Fork Sixteen Mile Road (#642) in the northern part of the Bridger Mountains in Gallatin County, Montana. This road is currently managed as a system road, open year round to the Troy Creek Trailhead (TH) in the Gallatin Travel Plan. The proposal also includes maintenance work on the road from about mile post (MP) 4.0 to the Troy Creek TH. Specific work would include:

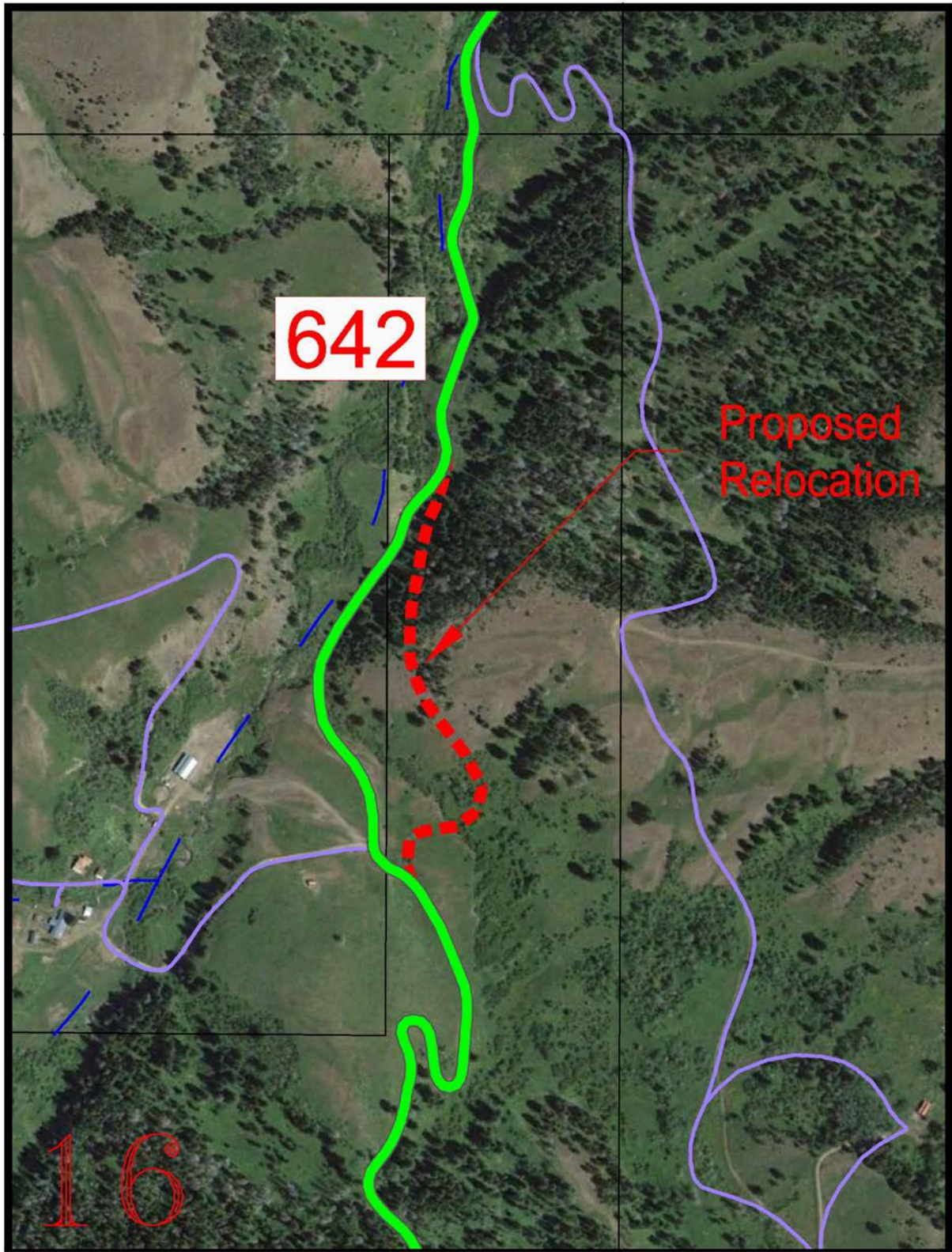
- Relocation (new construction) of approximately 1500 feet of road in T3N, R6E, Section 16, NE 1/4, from Milepost 5.474 to Milepost 5.748. The new road would be entirely on National Forest System (NFS) land and rejoin the original road location before continuing on to the Troy Creek Trailhead in Section 10. Currently this segment is partially located on private land in the NE 1/4 of Section 16.
- Road maintenance and improvement between the end of the county road at MP 2.9 and the Troy Creek TH at milepost 6.1 to provide a 3 season maintenance level 3 (passenger car) road. The road would continue to be single lane with turnouts and a 12 foot driving surface width. Road work could include additional drainage such as culverts and drainage dips, added signing, spot surfacing, and addition of turnouts.
- Watershed Best Management Practices would be employed in the construction of the new segment of road, including revegetation of the cut and fill slopes and using available woody debris to reduce sedimentation and prevent cattle trailing across new vegetation.

Middle Fork Sixteen Mile Road Relocation Project Area Map

Project Area

GALLATIN
NATIONAL
FOREST
Montana





- Closure of the current segment of road located on private land from (MP 5.47 to MP 5.75) to public use. The approach at milepost 5.748 would be eliminated and the old road on National Forest Lands would be decommissioned and restored.
- A short access from FR 642 at milepost 5.47 to the private land in Section 16 would be allowed to continue under a special use permit, if requested by the land owner, as the road relocation would be entirely on NFS land and would no longer intersect the private parcel to provide access.
- Posting additional signing identifying National Forest System lands.
- Restore and revegetate the old road segment on private land if the landowner no longer wants it.

Work is expected to be completed in one season, including construction and restoration.

Issues

The Forest Service has identified the following topics as the issues that should be considered for potential effects in the environmental analysis:

Issue 1: Concern that construction activities could disturb vegetation and create bare cut and fill slopes which could result in short-term accelerated sediment delivery to streams.

Issue 2: Concern that cattle trailing and grazing could negatively affect revegetation of the new road cut and fill slopes adjacent to the stream channels and result in a chronic sediment delivery source.

Issue 3: Concern whether the proposed action could affect threatened species, sensitive species, management indicator species, migratory bird species, and habitat needs associated with these species.

Issue 4: As with all ground-disturbing proposals, the Forest Service must investigate whether there are sensitive plants or heritage resources that could be impacted by proposed activities.

Issue 5: How to provide safe and reliable access to National Forest system lands for public and administrative use.

ALTERNATIVES, INCLUDING THE PROPOSED ACTION

This chapter describes and compares the alternatives considered for the proposed project. It includes a description of each alternative considered. This section also presents the alternatives in comparative form, sharply defining the differences between each alternative and providing a clear basis for choice among options by the decision maker and the public. Some of the information used to compare the alternatives is based upon the design of the alternative (i.e., how the work is implemented) and some of the information is based upon the environmental, social and economic effects of implementing each alternative (i.e., what will happen as a result of implementation).

Alternatives

Alternative 1

The Proposed Action

Under this alternative the activities described under the proposed action (pages 2 and 3) would occur. The section of the Middle Fork Sixteen Mile Road (#642) located on private land would be relocated and proposed maintenance work would be implemented. This alternative would also include the following mitigation to prevent sedimentation of nearby streams and minimize disturbance to the stream channel and riparian vegetation.

1. Obtain and comply with the requirements of 404 and 124 permits, including:
 - Employ short term BMP's to prevent sediment from entering streams; and
 - provide long term soil stabilization (e.g., revegetation/mulching of disturbed soil surfaces and gravel surfacing of road bed) to prevent the new road segment from becoming a chronic sediment source to nearby stream/s.
2. Design road drainage system to maintain buffers between runoff from road bed/prism and streams.
3. Windrow slash at the base of fill slopes within the stream bottom area to filter/trap sediment.
4. Avoid new unintended cattle trails by designing a road alignment that minimizes switchbacks or other areas that cattle and riders tend to short-cut.
5. Protect seeded cut and fill slopes in close proximity to the unnamed stream or block cattle trails using project generated woody slash.
6. Minimize disturbance to stream channel and riparian vegetation.
7. Include in the project the revegetation/mulching of disturbed soil surfaces.
8. Surface the new road bed.
9. The area should be surveyed for the presence of nesting goshawks prior to road decommissioning or construction activities. If an occupied goshawk nest is found

in the project vicinity; i.e. if the new road location is within an occupied nest stand or post-fledging area, then mitigation measures should be applied, which would restrict activity associated with new road construction during the breeding season of April 15 to August 15.

10. Conduct one herbicide treatment of the weeds within the project area prior to soil disturbance; retreat if necessary to get a thorough treatment of the weeds.
11. Power-wash and inspect all off-road equipment prior to entering the Forest to remove all soil and plant material from equipment.
12. Use weed-free materials such as rock, pit-run, top soil, native grass seed mix and other plant materials brought to the site.
13. Native grass seed mixture – certified weed free - will be planted on all disturbed soil.
14. Monitor the site for seed establishment and replant if native vegetation does not establish on the site within one year.
15. Repeat herbicide treatment of the weeds in the project area for two years following disturbance.

Alternative 2

No Action

Under the No Action alternative, none of the activities described under the proposed action (pages 2 and 3) would occur. The section of the Middle Fork Sixteen Mile Road (#642) located on private land would not be relocated and proposed maintenance work would not be implemented.

Alternatives Considered but not Analyzed in Detail

Alternative 3

In early discussions with the private land owner, the Forest Service did consider the option of negotiating for an easement, granted on the current road location, to document and record the public rights where the road currently exists. The Forest Service and the private land owner even exchanged some examples of possible agreements and easement formats. After looking more closely at the road and current situation, this alternative did not prove to be as desirable as the proposed action. The proposed action puts the road in a more sustainable and less environmentally impactful location. It also puts the public facility on public land thereby avoiding any future disputes about easements, uses or public rights. It is important that public rights be uninterrupted and clearly defined and

the recent closure of the road to vehicle traffic has demonstrated why these sorts of arrangements on private land are less certain than placing facilities on public land, where this is feasible. This is an important policy to follow and this is why this alternative was not analyzed in further detail.

Comparison of Alternatives of Alternatives Studied in Detail

This section provides a summary of the effects of implementing each alternative. Information in the table is focused on activities and effects where different levels of effects or outputs can be distinguished quantitatively or qualitatively among alternatives.

Table 1. Comparison of Alternatives

	Alternative 1	Alternative 2
1. Creates a more sustainable road in a more upland location that reduces erosion and maintenance costs and allows for better public access to National Forest System lands.	Yes	No
2. Sediment delivery to streams.	There would be a short-term increase in sediment delivery to the unnamed stream crossed by the new road segment under the proposed action and likely to South Fork Sixteenmile Creek. No long-term sediment effects.	The existing alignment of the road would remain and this is currently a significant sediment source to Upper South Fork Sixteenmile Creek.
3. Effects to threatened species, sensitive species, management indicator species, migratory bird species, and habitat needs associated with these species.	May have minor disturbance effects to individuals.	No disturbance effects.
4. Effects to sensitive plants or heritage resources.	No sensitive plants or heritage resources present, therefore no effect.	No sensitive plants or heritage resources present, therefore no effect.
5. Public and administrative access to National Forest system lands	Would provide safe and reliable access to NFS lands without dispute.	Would provide a lower level of road maintenance and a less reliable road access to Troy Creek. Future road access is less certain.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

This section summarizes the physical, biological, social and economic environments of the affected project area and the potential changes to those environments due to implementation of the alternatives. It also presents the scientific and analytical basis for comparison of alternatives presented in the chart above.

Water Quality

Direct/Indirect Effects:

There would be a short-term increase in sediment delivery to the unnamed stream crossed by the new road segment under Alternative 1 (the proposed action) and likely to the South Fork of Sixteen Mile Creek. Construction BMP's imposed by the permitting agencies and internally by the CGNF would minimize such sediment delivery to streams.

Long term stabilization measures including slash windrows at the base of fill slopes, revegetation/mulching of disturbed soil surfaces, and gravel surfacing of the road would minimize long-term sediment delivery to stream. Abandonment of the old road alignment in the project area would leave that alignment accessible only to the local landowner and reduce (probably to zero) traffic on that route, which is currently a significant sediment source to Upper South Fork Sixteen Mile Creek. Under Alternative 1 (no action) it would continue to be a significant sediment source.

It is likely that the construction of the new road segment and abandonment of the old route would result in a net reduction of sediment inputs to Upper South Fork Sixteen Mile Creek in the project vicinity. This benefit would be foregone under Alternative 2.

Cumulative Effects

The past, present and reasonably foreseeable future actions considered for possible cumulative effects with the proposed action (White, 1/8/2016) included: (1) The existing road system and travel management; (2) Recreation uses such as hunting, camping, motorized and non-motorized travel; (3) Private land activities; (4) Cattle grazing and trailing. Of these, the road system, travel management and cattle trailing and grazing were the only activities that may have additive effects with the proposed action (Alternative 1). There would be no new direct and indirect effects under Alternative 2 (no action) and therefore there would be no cumulative effects.

Existing Road System and Travel Management Changes Within the Analysis Area:

Although there will be a short-term increase in sediment delivery to the unnamed stream and nearby South Fork Sixteen Mile Creek as a result of Alternative 1, the chronic sediment delivery point associated with the existing road would be improved due to the reduction/elimination of vehicle traffic on that route. The Forest Service would work

with the landowner where feasible to decommission and stabilize the existing stream crossing and adjacent area which is a chronic sediment delivery site. Under Alternative 2 there would be no new effects but the current sediment delivery would continue to be chronic.

Cattle Grazing and Trailing:

The area immediately adjacent to the proposed re-route under Alternative 1 is grazed as part of the Alexander Allotment. The existing road across private land is used to trail cattle to and from private land to the Troy Creek and Middle Fork allotments as to private pasture located within Section 9.

The new road alignment under Alternative 1 could potentially lead to more trailing of cattle through the unnamed creek and associated riparian area. However, increased trailing would be avoided by designing road alignment to provide cattle easy passage through the area using the road bed (i.e., providing a relatively straight path and gentle grade). As stated earlier, since Alternative 2 (no action) results in no new direct and indirect effects, by definition there would be no cumulative effects.

Wildlife

Direct/Indirect Effects:

Threatened Species: Two threatened species are known to occur on the Gallatin portion of the forest: the grizzly bear and Canada lynx.

Grizzly bears are not currently known to occur in the Bridger Range (where the project is located), but the Bridgers provide a suitable travel corridor, which may be important linkage habitat for eventually connecting geographically separated populations of grizzly bears. Secure habitat is a key component of travel corridors for grizzly bears. By definition, secure habitat is the area located away from roads. Since the proposed action merely relocates an existing road, the segment to be relocated is relatively small (~0.27 mi) and the new road would be in close proximity (within 150 feet) of the existing road, there would be little or no impact to secure habitat. Because grizzly bears are not currently known to use habitat in the project area, and Alternative 1 (the proposed action) would have no effect on the proportion of secure habitat for potential future use of the area as a travel route, the proposed relocation would have *no effect* on grizzly bears. Alternative 2 (no action) implements no new activity and therefore would also result in *no effect* to grizzly bears.

Canada lynx is the only species currently listed as threatened that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has determined may be present in the Bridger Mountain Range. The FWS considers lynx use north of I-90 (including the Bridger Range) to be transient in nature. The project is located in the Bridger/Bangtail Lynx Analysis Unit (LAU). Boreal forest types preferred by lynx occur at lower proportions, with patchier distribution in the Bridger and Bangtail Ranges than in other LAUs on the Gallatin portion of the Forest. There is no documented occurrence of lynx presence on NFS lands within the

Bridger/Bangtail LAU. Given the lack of evidence for use by lynx, the Bridger/Bangtail LAU is considered secondary, unoccupied lynx habitat. This LAU does not likely have sufficient lynx habitat to support resident lynx, or provide habitat suitable for successful rearing of kittens. However, it does provide a potential travel corridor for lynx to move through when dispersing between core areas. Documented exploratory movements, including dispersal, by lynx in Montana occur mostly in mid-summer (Squires and Laurion 2000:343).

Snowshoe hares are the primary prey species for lynx. Snowshoe hare habitat is lynx habitat (i.e. boreal forest) with horizontal structure adequate to provide foraging and cover needs for hares. Lynx habitat is patchily distributed in the vicinity of the proposed road relocation, and potential snowshoe hare habitat is a very minor component in the project area. Neither the existing road segment to be replaced, nor the proposed new road location, is within mapped lynx or snowshoe hare habitat. The proposed new location is primarily through open grassy, shrubby and/or rocky habitats, with only a very short stretch through mature Douglas fir trees.

The new road location would not be on a ridge top, through a saddle, within a forested stringer, or other areas that are important for lynx habitat connectivity, but would reduce by a very small degree, the amount of vegetation that could provide security cover for lynx. Therefore, Alternative 1 (the proposed action) **may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect** lynx or lynx habitat. The project is not within designated critical habitat for lynx, so there would be **no effect** on critical lynx habitat. Alternative 2 would not remove any vegetation and therefore there would be **no effect** on lynx, lynx habitat or lynx critical habitat.

Sensitive Species: Sensitive terrestrial wildlife species known to occur on the Gallatin portion of the Forest include: bald eagle, peregrine falcon, gray wolf, wolverine, black-backed woodpecker, flammulated owl, western big-eared bat, bighorn sheep, harlequin duck and trumpeter swan. Of these, all but the bighorn sheep, harlequin duck and trumpeter swan have been detected in the Bridger Mountain Range. Alternative 1 would require the use of heavy equipment. Noise associated with equipment and human presence could have disturbance effects on sensitive species in the project area, and the new road location would result in habitat alteration that may affect habitat suitability for sensitive species. Project-related activities would not occur during high risk (e.g. breeding, wintering) seasons for sensitive species that may be present. Due to the limited geographic scope (< 1/3 mile of road construction) and the short time frame (up to two weeks), project effects are expected to impact only a few individuals at most. Therefore, because of the limited spatial and temporal scope of the project, the Alternative 1 (the proposed action) **may impact individuals or habitat, but would not lead to a trend toward federal listing** for the bald eagle, peregrine falcon, gray wolf, wolverine, black-backed woodpecker, flammulated owl or western big-eared bat, and would have **no impact** on bighorn sheep, harlequin ducks, or trumpeter swans, since these species are not present in the area, and the project would not affect key habitats for these species. Alternative 2 (no action) involves no use of heavy equipment and therefore would have **no effect** on the above “sensitive species.”

Management Indicator Species: MIS are those species identified in the forest planning process that are used to monitor the effects of management activities on populations of wildlife. Grizzly bears and bald eagles are identified as indicator species, and were addressed above under threatened and sensitive species respectively.

Elk are the MIS identified to represent big game species. The project area does not provide key seasonal habitat (e.g. winter range or calving areas), but rather is used as general summer range and also during the transition between summer and winter range. There are no readily identifiable migration routes through the project area, but rather big game movement occurs in a dispersed pattern throughout the northern portion of the Bridger Range. The area proposed for the new road location under Alternative 1 does not provide secure habitat for elk due to its proximity to the existing open road. Further, because the new road location is mostly through open grassy, shrubby and/or rocky habitat, it is not currently providing important hiding cover.

Under Alternative 1 a very short segment of road (perhaps 350 feet total) would be constructed through a patch of mature Douglas fir, requiring removal of some large and small trees. Given the proximity of this forested area to the existing road, it is not currently providing secure habitat for elk, and the small strip cleared for the new road would have very minor impacts on hiding cover for elk. The road relocation would have no notable effect on road density proportions on NFS lands. The existing stretch of road on private land would be decommissioned for public and administrative use. The private landowner may choose to continue to drive anywhere they wish on their private land, but there would be little incentive to drive on the existing roadbed, since it would no longer connect to the Forest Service system road, at least at one end. Therefore, while the project may affect a few individual elk under through disturbance factors and minor habitat alteration, Alternative 1 would not notably change access conditions for hunters, or otherwise have impacts that would affect elk at the population level. Alternative 2 would not change the current situation in terms of access and therefore would have no effect on elk.

American (pine) marten and northern goshawk are the Forest Plan MIS for old growth forest conditions, with martens representing cool, moist habitat types and goshawks associated with warmer, drier types. While these species are Forest Plan indicators for old growth, they are not old-growth obligates, but are associated with mature forest conditions. Very little forested habitat would be affected by Alternative 1 (the proposed action). A short (~350 feet) segment of the new road location is through forested habitat. The rest of the new road is located in open grassy, shrubby, rocky ground. The forest stand that would be affected by new road construction is mature Douglas fir that is somewhat fragmented, and is isolated from large, contiguous blocks of mature forest. It is not representative of the cooler, moist types preferred by martens.

The project area contains potential nesting and foraging habitat for northern goshawks. The area should be surveyed for the presence of nesting goshawks prior to road decommissioning or construction activities under Alternative 1. If an occupied goshawk

nest is found in the project vicinity; i.e. if the new road location is within an occupied nest stand or post-fledging area, then mitigation measures should be applied, which would restrict activity associated with new road construction during the breeding season of April 15 to August 15. Given the proximity of the new road location to the existing open public road and private land facilities, it is unlikely that an active goshawk nest would be located in the project vicinity. However, if a nest is located, then it is a logical conclusion that the territory is occupied by goshawks with a high tolerance for human activity. Therefore, there would be no need to restrict project activities associated with use or decommissioning of the existing road. In conclusion, Alternative 1 (the proposed action) has potential to alter habitat and present disturbance factors that could affect individual pine martens or northern goshawks; however, with appropriate mitigation, negative impacts to breeding individuals could be minimized and the project would have no notable effects at the population level for MIS. Alternative 2 involves no decommissioning or construction activities and therefore would have no effect on pine marten or northern goshawk populations.

Migratory Bird Species: Migratory bird species are protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA). Executive Order 13186 requires agencies to ensure that environmental analyses evaluate the effects of federal actions on migratory birds, with emphasis on species of concern (SOC). A number of migratory bird SOC were addressed above as Sensitive and/or Management Indicator Species. Migratory birds are a very diverse group, which includes raptors, waterfowl, shore birds, upland game birds, and songbirds. The project area contains a mosaic of habitat types that provide breeding, feeding and sheltering opportunities for a wide variety of migratory bird species. Project activities under Alternative 1 would result in habitat alteration and disturbance factors that could impact migratory bird species.

Birds are most vulnerable to human-caused disturbance during the breeding season, which is generally from mid-March to late July in this area. During the breeding season, nestlings and fledglings are most vulnerable to human disturbance from the time they hatch (mid-May to early June) until they leave the nest, which is generally around mid-July. The existing road is open to motor vehicle use with no restrictions year round. Therefore, birds inhabiting this area likely have a relatively high tolerance of human presence and activity. Due to the level of human occupation and use existing in the project area, coupled with the limited spatial scale, timing and short duration of the road relocation and decommissioning work, Alternative 1 (the proposed action) may impact individuals and habitat, but is not likely to have notable impacts on any migratory bird species at the population level. Under Alternative 2 no road relocation or decommissioning work would occur and therefore there would be no effect on migratory bird species.

Cumulative Effects

The past, present and reasonably foreseeable future actions considered for possible cumulative effects with the proposed action (Dixon, 12/24/2015) included: (1) The existing road system and travel management; (2) Recreation uses such as hunting,

camping, motorized and non-motorized travel; (3) Private land activities; (4) Cattle grazing and trailing. Of these, the road system, travel management, recreation and private land activities were found to be the activities that may have additive effects with the proposed action.

Existing Road System and Travel Management Changes Within the Analysis Area:

If the existing segment of road on private land is left intact, and used by the private landowners for motor vehicle transportation, then the new road will be additive in terms of use/disturbance and habitat alteration; however, if the existing road segment on private land is decommissioned and rehabilitated as proposed under Alternative 1, there would be little or no cumulative effects to wildlife. Alternative 2 results in no direct or indirect effects to wildlife and therefore there would be no cumulative effects.

Recreation Uses:

Under Alternative 1 the proposed road relocation is neither intended nor expected to change the overall volume or types of public recreation occurring in the project vicinity; however, the existing road could be left open to allow public access during construction of the new route, which would result in additional use and disturbance in the project area during road construction. Alternative 2 results in no direct or indirect effects to wildlife and therefore there would be no cumulative effects.

Activities on Private lands in area:

Activities on private land in the project area are not expected to change as a result of Alternatives 1 or 2, and such activities have been ongoing coincident with the existing road for years. Cumulative effects of activities on private land with the FS transportation system were considered in the analysis for the Forest Travel Management Plan. However, under Alternative 1, if the private landowner objects to the Forest proposal to rehabilitate the existing road segment on private land, the existing segment could continue to receive vehicle use on the private section, in addition to the expected future use on the segment to be relocated onto NFS land. Such use on private land is beyond our control, but is not expected to have significant effects, since the existing road segment on private land would no longer connect to the Forest system road, at least on one end.

Sensitive Plants and Heritage Resources

Direct/Indirect Effects:

Sensitive Plants: An initial assessment determined that it was unlikely that sensitive plants occur on the site because the elevation and habitat is not conducive for listed sensitive plants species. A field survey was conducted on June 18, 2015 (Martell/Senger, 6/18/16) verified the absence of sensitive plants. Therefore neither Alternative 1 nor 2

would affect sensitive plants either directly or indirectly. For more information refer to the sensitive plant and invasive weed specialist report (Lamont, 1/14/16).

Heritage Resources: Under Alternative 1 (the proposed action), approximately 1/3 mile of Forest Road #642 would be relocated. Forest Road #642 was also known as the Peterson Road (24GA1954), consists of approximately 6.0 miles of historic road, located within two miles to the east of Flathead Pass. Although today this road extends further to the north and south, only the road segment defined on a 1904 GLO Plat Map is considered potentially eligible for listing on the National Register. This road segment provided access to at least four homesteads, a cabin, and most likely the Troy Ranger Station which was built sometime after the establishment of the Gallatin Reserve in 1899.

Today, the road consists of a single-lane dirt and gravel road that appears to receive limited maintenance and moderate public use. The Forest Service has found that this road is not eligible for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places for the following reasons:

- (a) The road is not associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- (b) The road is not associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- (c) The road does not embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master or possesses high artistic values or represents a significant or distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction
- (d) The road has not yielded, or is not likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

In addition, the integrity of the original alignment to the north has been compromised by realignment from the original route. It has been determined that the proposed relocation of approximately one-third mile of Forest Road #642 off private property and onto Forest Service administered land represents a **NO HISTORIC PROPERTIES**. Therefore there would be no direct or indirect effects to heritage resources from Alternative 1 (the proposed action) or Alternative 2, the no action alternative.

Cumulative Effects

Since it was concluded that there are no direct or indirect effects of the proposed action or no action alternatives, by definition there would be no cumulative effects.

Other Disclosures

The primary purpose of an EA is to provide sufficient evidence for determining whether to prepare an environmental impact statement or a finding of no significant impact (40 CFR 1508.9). To determine whether there may be significant impact, NEPA requires consideration of predicted impacts in terms of both context and intensity (40 CFR 1508.27). "Context" means that the impacts must be considered in the appropriate setting

or scale. “Intensity” refers to the severity of impacts and requires consideration of the following 10 factors.

1. **Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse.** This been addressed in the Environmental Consequences section of this document. Briefly summarized this project (Alternative 1) is beneficial in that it creates a more sustainable road in a more upland location that reduces erosion and maintenance costs and allows for better public access to National Forest System lands. There will be minor displacement impacts to wildlife individuals during activities and a short term increase in sediment reaching area streams. There would be no effect to sensitive plants or heritage resources. No beneficial or adverse impacts are predicted for Alternative 2
2. **The degree of effect to public health and safety.** Both alternatives pose no risk to public health and safety.
3. **Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farm land, wet lands, wild and scenic rivers or ecologically critical areas.** The project area was surveyed and no known cultural resource sites were found. The project area is not in the vicinity of any park lands. There are no farm lands, wet lands, wild and scenic rivers or other ecologically critical areas near the project area.
4. **The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.** This factor pertains to disagreement between experts in a given field over the potential effects of this project. There are no known disagreements over the predicted effects of Alternative 1 or Alternative 2.
5. **The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risk.** Forest roads have been constructed, reconstructed and relocated since the National Forest System has been established. There is nothing unique or unknown about this project.
6. **The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future action which significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.** This project is not unique or precedent setting. The road relocation under Alternative 1 simply accommodates existing uses. It will not lead to any new or different uses of the area.
7. **Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.** Cumulative effects are discussed in the earlier sections disclosing predicted environmental consequences related to the identified resource issues and in the specialist reports contained in the project file. In summary no significant cumulative effects were identified for either alternative.
8. **The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structure or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.** There are no historical districts or sites within the project area. A cultural heritage inventory was completed for the area; no sites were discovered during the inventory. If a site is discovered then the work will avoid the site until an archeologist can determine the best course of action.

9. **The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.** The potential effects to threatened and endangered species is discussed in the “Wildlife” section of this document and in the Programmatic Biological Assessment available in the project file. Because grizzly bears are not currently known to use habitat in the project area, and the proposed action would have no effect on the proportion of secure habitat for potential future use of the area as a travel route, the proposed relocation under Alternative 1 would have *no effect* on grizzly bears. Canada lynx is the only species currently listed as threatened that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has determined may be present in the Bridger Mountain Range. The proposed action *may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect* lynx or lynx habitat. The project is not within designated critical habitat for lynx, so there would be *no effect* on critical lynx habitat.

10. **Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.**

The principle Federal laws applicable to this proposal include the National Forest Management Act of 1976 (as amended), National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (as amended), and Endangered Species Act of 1973,

Compliance with the National Forest Management Act of 1976 (as amended) - The Act requires that all projects and activities be consistent with the Forest Plan, which was approved in 1987. This project incorporates all applicable Forest Plan standards and guidelines, including additional, directions contained in all amendments.

Compliance with National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (as amended) – The process followed to create this Environmental Analysis and the supporting documents project file comply with NEPA.

Compliance with Endangered Species Act of 1973 - Under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act, each Federal agency must ensure that any action authorized, funded, or carried out is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of any threatened or endangered species. If a threatened or endangered species, or species proposed for listing occurs in the area where a project is proposed, a Biological Assessment must be prepared. If the action would result in a “no effect” determination for the species, formal consultation with the US Fish and Wildlife Service is not necessary.

A determination of *may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect* for the Canada lynx was made but it was also found to meet the screening criteria for using a programmatic Biological Assessment (Dixon, 2016).

Environmental Justice – Executive Order 12898, Federal Action to address Environmental Justice in Minority Population and Low-Income Population, directs federal agencies to integrate environmental justice considerations into federal programs and activities.

The Forest Service has not identified any adversely impacted minority or low-income populations from the proposed action. None of the alternatives would have a discernible

effect on minorities, low-income individuals, American Indians, women, or the civil rights of any United States citizen.

CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

This environmental assessment (EA) is being released in draft for a 30 day public comment period. In preparation of this EA the Forest Service consulted the following individuals, Federal, State, and local agencies, tribes and non-Forest Service persons.

ID TEAM MEMBERS:

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FEDERAL, STATE, AND LOCAL AGENCIES:

Montana State Historic Preservation Office

TRIBES:

None

Others:

Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation

Adjacent land owners

Members of the general public