

South Beaverhead Multi-Use Agreement

Beaverhead County Collaboration

September 18, 2024

The What

The Beaverhead County Collaborative (BCC) announces their proposed framework for the future management of selected public lands in southwest Montana: The South Beaverhead Multi-Use Agreement.

The Why

The BCC sought to reach a set of collaborative agreements intended to move **beyond deadlock** over the future of public land management in Beaverhead County by examining the **challenges and opportunities** in the local wilderness study areas and proposed wilderness areas. The parallel purposes include creating more **certainty for the communities** concerning public safety, public access, economic development, ecological integrity, and wildlife resources while providing the Bureau of Land Management and USDA Forest Service with clear management direction, reducing conflicts over the maintenance of county roads and utility rights-of-way, the continued administration of grazing permits, the execution of wildlife management, and the future of motorized and non-motorized recreation routes.

The How

During the forty-five years since Congress designated a set of Wilderness Study Areas (WSA) in Montana, there have been attempts to resolve long-term management for those key areas in Beaverhead County. But those efforts have failed to generate the broad consensus needed to resolve these issues. Following the passage of a state legislative resolution asking for the release of Hidden Pasture WSA, a group of those who were supportive and others who were opposed came together to seek common-ground and they agreed to form the Beaverhead County Collaborative (BCC) in 2021. The group established a broad-based membership framework, adopted a charter, and hired a professional facilitator.

The group limited the original scope of work to the Hidden Pasture and Bell/Lime Kiln Wilderness Study Areas and the Garfield Mountain and Italian Peaks Recommended Wilderness Areas. In 2023 the group added Henneberry Ridge Wilderness Study Area to their scope, and in 2024 added management recommendations for a limited number of acres surrounding the two Recommended Wilderness Areas.

Each area was considered separately, with site visits, subject matter presentations and open debate. After reaching agreement for each location, they considered all areas as one package for our agreement proposal.

The Details

Hidden Pasture Wilderness Study Area

The BCC members recommend that this protected area be officially designated by Congress as a Backcountry Conservation Area (BCA), in place of its current Wilderness Study Area (WSA) status (approximately 15,509 acres). Under the BCA designation there would be prescription to protect and improve wildlife and fish habitat, to maintain motorized access on currently established routes, to continue with grazing permits and related management of those allotments, to protect significant cultural resources (as aligned with the current Area of Critical Environment Concern designation within the area), and to retain the area's primitive character. The BCC members also agreed to slightly modify the existing WSA boundary to improve management opportunities for adjacent private lands, to resolve incorrectly included private lands, the county road and the utility rights-of-way.

Bell – Limekiln Canyon Wilderness Study Area

The Beaverhead County Collaborative recommends that legislation should release the Bell-Limekiln Canyon Wilderness Study Area (approximately 9,650 acres) designation and largely return management to the directions stipulated in Appendix Q of the most recent Resource Management Plan from the Bureau of Land Management's Dillon Field Office, with the limited exception of stipulating "no surface occupancy" for oil and gas exploration/development.

Henneberry Ridge Wilderness Study Area

The Beaverhead County Collaborative recommends that legislation should release the Henneberry Ridge Wilderness Study Area (approximately 9,806 acres) designation and return management to the directions stipulated in Appendix Q of the most recent Resource Management Plan from the Bureau of Land Management's Dillon Field Office.

Italian Peaks Recommended Wilderness

The Beaverhead County Collaborative supports and recommends the area defined as the Italian Peaks Recommended Wilderness (approximately 12,000 acres) in the current Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest Management Plan be designated as wilderness through Congressional legislation. The Collaborative also recommends language prescribing that grazing rights and wildlife and fisheries management be continued under this legislative designation.

Garfield Mountain Recommended Wilderness

The Beaverhead County Collaborative supports and recommends the area defined as the Garfield Mountain Recommended Wilderness (approximately 48,935 acres) in the current Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest Management Plan be Congressionally designated as wilderness legislation. The Collaborative also recommends language prescribing that grazing rights as well as wildlife and fisheries management be continued under this legislative designation.

Little Sheep and Nicholia Creek Management Area

The Beaverhead County Collaborative recommends that Congressional legislation defines certain inventoried roadless acres (see map) that adjoin the Garfield Mountain and Italian Peaks

Recommended Wilderness Areas (totaling approximately 29,100 acres) as the Little Sheep Creek and Nicholia Creek Management Area. The purpose of this management area is to conserve, protect, and enhance for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations the recreational, scenic, historical, cultural, fish, wildlife, roadless, and ecological values of the Little Sheep and Nicholia Creek Management Area. This area shall be managed in accordance with all applicable laws, regulations, and rules applicable to the National Forest System.

The Who

The membership of the collaborative was intended to be designed to represent a wide range of interests, including but not limited to hunters, anglers, ranchers, quiet and motorized recreationists, foresters, wilderness advocates, conservationists, and members of county and state government. The voting members include –

Jeff Welborn – Senate District 36

Jeff Johnson – Landowner

Byron Martinell – Landowner

Tom Welch – HD 72

Ken Walsh – HD 71

Tom Rice – Beaverhead County Commissioner

Scott Laird – Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership

Gene Loder – Citizen at Large

Jim Berkey – The Nature Conservancy

Jack Kirkley – Quiet Recreation

Zach Owen - Beaverhead Conservation District

Casey Hackathorn – Trout Unlimited

Bill Hodge – The Wilderness Society

Parke Scott – Motorized Recreation

Craig Blubaugh – Sun Mountain Lumber

Aubrey Bertram – Wild Montana

Raylee Honeycut – Montana Stockgrowers

Jack Atcheson Jr.- Montana Wild Sheep Foundation

The BCC also has non-voting advisors from the Montana Forest Collaboration Network, Trout Unlimited, and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. The group also sought

informational input and heard from representatives of the Montana Mining Association, Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks, Bureau of Land Management, USDA Forest Service, local permit holders, local residents, and geologists from Montana Technological University.