

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..."¹

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."

¹ Source: "Winton Weydemeyer and the Northern Whitefish Range," Tom Harding

1986: The Flathead Forest Plan establishes the Trail Creek Grizzly Bear Management Area² 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.*”³

The Partnership’s goal is to promote a “*shared vision for the Whitefish Range... to ensure a*

² Flathead Forest Plan, (pp. IV 148-153). “This area will be administratively classified as the Trail Creek Grizzly Bear Management Area. The Trail Creek Geograhic 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.”

³ From Whitefish Range Partnership “Charter”

balance of traditional and modern land uses.”⁴

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:

⁴ From Whitefish Range Partnership “Whitefish Range Shared Values”

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 Plan⁵) 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.

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.

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.

⁵ Flathead National Forest. 2006. [Winter Motorized Recreation Plan](#).

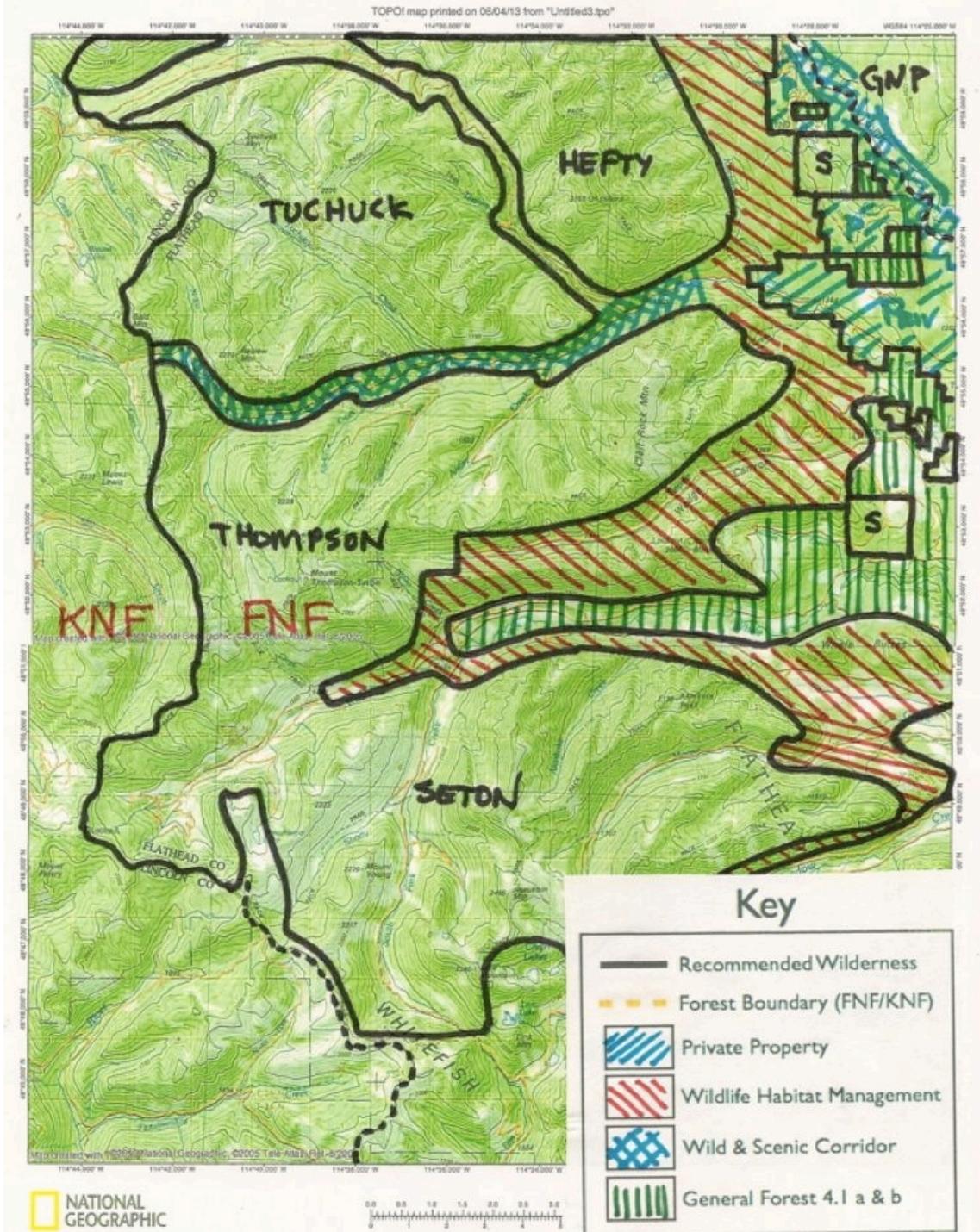


Exhibit B: Whitefish Range Partnership Recommended Wilderness with Wildlife Habitat Management Recommendation.