

October 31, 2018

Hans Peak-Bears Ear Ranger District
Attn: Kent Foster, Project Leader

Re: Mad Rabbit Trail System

Dear Mr. Foster,

Thank you for taking public comments on the proposed Mad Rabbit Trail System. I am both an avid cyclist and an avid hiker and outdoorsman. I am writing you requesting that we take a serious pause before building more trails in our national forests, and specifically the Mad Rabbit project.

My concerns are due to the potential adverse impacts Mad Rabbit represents to the environment and the habitat. I was distressed to read the Steamboat Pilot article of October 28, 2018 on the state of the Buffalo Pass area since the recent trails went in. Dispersed campsites up 50% in two years, garbage, human waste, toilet paper blooms, erosion. I know there is a plan to triple the size of Dry Creek Campground to mitigate this. But perhaps this is the price we pay when we create concentrated hiking/biking trails in our forests.

Equally disturbing are the reports of elk moving away from the Buffalo Pass area. The reports are multiple and credible. A reduction of habitat in the Routt National Forest directly affects the viable size of the resident elk herds, and places more pressure on nearby private lands as the elk migrate in response. Reducing wild habitat is the opposite of what we want to do.

Reading reports from the Vail Daily, I am struck by the speed of the decline of Eagle County's elk population. Craig Wescoatt, wildlife manager for Colorado Parks and Wildlife, reported that elk numbers are down 50% since 2003. That's just 15 years ago. He reports that there was no major event that caused this, just human encroachment. "What we have seen is an increase in dispersed recreation on federal lands."

This is a crisis. This August, the Vail City Council removed the Vail Trail Extension through the Katsos Ranch Open Space from their plans. At that meeting retired DPW district manager Bill Heicher said, "it's painfully obvious that business as usual hasn't worked." Bill Andree, a retired 38-year wildlife manager for CPW summarized that the plans to mitigate wildlife impacts have turned out to be a "pretty dismal failure." Vail mayor Dave Chapin, who voted to eliminate the planned trail summed it nicely, "I didn't always feel that way at the beginning of this process. As a matter of fact, I'm pretty sure I said, what a great opportunity that would be for mountain biker's kids to go out and have a great trail experience."

Whether Eagle County elk can recover from this crisis is still to be seen. It may just be too little and too late. They probably wish they could turn the clock back to 2003 when the elk herd was twice its size.

But we don't have to turn the clock back 15 years here in Routt County. We are facing the key decisions today, specifically the Mad Rabbit Trail proposal. We've seen the negative effects of "loving the Buff Pass area to death." We've received multiple reports of elk moving from the area. We currently have ample hiking and biking trails compared to demand. All of this adds up to the obvious course of action: Put the planned Mad Rabbit trail proposal on hold until we can study the effects of the Buffalo Pass trail development and make a serious assessment of the impact of Mad Rabbit.

As conscientious custodians of our public lands, this is our duty. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Larry Desjardin
3261 Snowflake Circle
Steamboat Springs, CO