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TOP STORY

## Bozeman residents worried about logging near Kirk Hill

By Helena Dore Chronicle Staff Writer Jun 19, 2020



A man and his dog walk along a trail at Kirk Hill surrounded by trees marked with spray paint as preparation for the Bozeman Watershed Project Thursday in Bozeman.

Ryan Berry/Chronicle

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Locals are attempting to prevent the U.S. Forest Service from logging an area above Kirk Hill slated for thinning under the Bozeman Municipal Watershed Project.

Phil Knight, a conservation advocate from Bozeman who's been leading efforts to block logging near Kirk Hill, said the area is home to stands of old growth Douglas fir trees, which offer important wildlife habitat.

Knight said old growth forests are becoming increasingly rare, as it takes a long time for the trees to grow back. He formed Friends of Kirk Hill, a group of locals interested in protecting trees in the area, after he saw maps of the Forest Service's plans under the Bozeman Municipal Watershed Project.

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"There hasn't been any logging in the Gallatin Range in many, many years," Knight said. "People are going to be shocked by it."

Knight started a petition on [change.org](#) to oppose logging on Kirk Hill ridge around three weeks ago. More than 1,600 people have signed the petition out of Knight's goal of 2,500.

The Kirk Hill loop trail, owned by Montana State University, is among Bozeman's most popular hiking trails. Logging would occur above the official trail along the ridge, near loop trails that circle further back into the forest.

Knight plans to present the petition to Mary Erickson, Custer Gallatin National Forest supervisor, during a meeting on Tuesday. He plans to request that a portion of the project on Kirk Hill ridge be removed from plans for logging.

Marna Daley, spokesperson for the Custer Gallatin National Forest, said in a statement that Forest Service officials take their responsibility to manage the public's natural resources seriously, and they appreciate the passion of the petition organizers and signees.

"The development of the Bozeman Municipal Watershed Fuels Reduction Project was based on extensive open and transparent public outreach and participation process. Perspectives from everyone interested in and concerned about the risk to the city of Bozeman's municipal water supply were heard and considered," Daley said. "The Custer Gallatin Forest needs to honor the time, energy and input from people who participated in the analysis process and intends to move forward with implementation of the fuels reduction project."

The Bozeman Municipal Watershed Project includes about 4,700 acres of land in the Custer Gallatin National Forest. The project targets the Hyalite and Bozeman creek drainages, which supply 80% of the city's water.

If a large wildfire were to spread around these drainages, Forest Service and city officials worry Bozeman's water supply would be contaminated. To prevent this from happening, they've decided to reduce wildfire fuels through burning and thinning.

"The purpose of the project is to reduce the risk of a severe and extensive wildland fire affecting the municipal water supply and to address wildland urban interface concerns," Daley wrote. She said work on Kirk Hill is needed because officials worry fire could spread from National Forest to private land or vice versa.

"The work will complement the rest of the fuels reduction work to lower the risk to our city's water supply, private infrastructure and increase firefighter and public safety," she wrote.

Knight said water from Kirk Hill drains into Leverich Creek and Hodgman Canyon, two drainages that don't supply the city's drinking water. Though he recognizes officials' rationale for cutting down the trees, Knight said he thinks it's somewhat wrong.

Knight said in some cases, forest thinning actually increases fire danger by increasing wind speeds through trees and drying out the forest.

His petition references a May 2020 article from The Wildlife News. According to the article, "there is plenty of evidence that logging/thinning the forest often enhances fire risk by putting more fine fuels on the forest floor, opening the canopy, and leading to greater drying of fuels, and greater wind operation."

Forest Service officials did not comment on this claim from Knight.

Building a logging road around Kirk Hill would significantly alter the character of the landscape, as roads bring in more people, weeds and landslides, Knight said.

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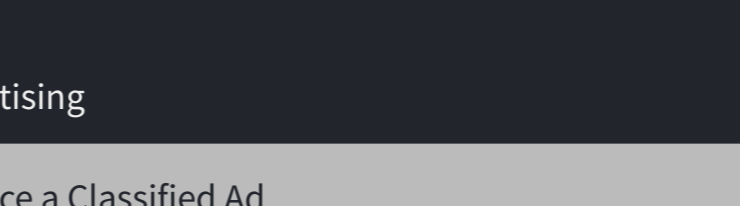
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