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June 22, 2018

Sonya Germann, State Forester
MT DNRC – Forestry Division
2705 Spurgin Rd.
Missoula, MT 59804

Dear Ms Germann,

Flathead Audubon Society represents about 400 members from northwest Montana. Our mission is to conserve birds, wildlife habitat and ecosystem diversity; promote awareness and appreciation of the natural world through education and advocacy; work with diverse groups and agencies to achieve sound decisions on natural resource issues; provide community services such as school programs, work projects, and field trips. We were active supporters of the Alvord Lake Community Forest near Troy (contributed to its funding) and we strongly support the creation of the new Smith Lake Community Forest near Whitefish. A new Community Forest in the Whitefish Range would be a great addition to the myriad of outstanding and important conservation projects that have recently been completed in that region. It will complement the Foy's Blacktail Community Forest near Kalispell, and will provide a unique opportunity for families, students, and members of the north Flathead Valley community to engage in active forest management, forest and wildlife education, and recreation.

The Smith Lake area is important for birds, bears, moose, mule deer, elk, and Canada lynx. Our Chapter has been leading birding field trips to the Smith Lake area for years. The landscape and forest types are varied and include mesic streams, steep slopes, and forested benches. Protecting the proposed Community Forest parcels from development will help retain important connectivity between state and federal public lands and will ensure that wildlife can continue to move easily in this area without contending with development. Creation of the Community Forest will also enable Whitefish Community Partners to complete a loop trail from Whitefish Mountain to the upper end of Whitefish Lake. The trail will be developed with outdoor/forest education, natural resource protection, and other natural values in mind.

Flathead Audubon provides the only free K-12 and adult conservation education program in the Flathead Valley. Our program focuses on birds and their importance to our ecosystems. We also participate in Forestry Expo, Earth Day, and other Whitefish events. We will work with the Smith Lake Community Forest stakeholders to provide bird conservation/education programs and opportunities at the Smith Lake Community Forest.

Thank you for the opportunity to support this proposed project.

Sincerely,

Kay Mitchell, President
Flathead Audubon Society