

For immediate release
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Sportsmen defend big game habitat on Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest

Montana hunters compelled to take legal action to protect important big game habitat in roadless areas

MISSOULA, Mont. – Today, Helena Hunters and Anglers Association and its parent organization, the Montana Wildlife Federation filed a [complaint](#) in federal court to protect big game habitat in two inventoried roadless areas along the Continental Divide – Jericho Mountain and Lazyman Gulch – that are slated for logging as part of the massive Tenmile-South Helena Project (“Tenmile project,” [map](#)).

“There is a long history of public support for preserving Helena’s two closest inventoried roadless areas – Lazyman and Jericho Mountain – dating back to the 1970s,” said Doug Powell, a board member of Helena Hunters and Anglers Association.

The groups are challenging the Forest Service’s December 2018 authorization of more than 5,000 acres of logging and related activities, including road reconstruction and seven miles of new mountain bike trails, *within* two roadless areas that straddle the Continental Divide in the Helena National Forest. The Tenmile project is slated to occur over the next 15 years and – in total – includes over 17,000 acres of logging, burning and related road activities.

After submitting extensive comments, meeting with Forest Service personnel about its concerns, and exhausting all available options and remedies, the sportsmen’s groups are pursuing this civil action as a last resort in order to protect the biological integrity and habitat in the two roadless areas.

The Lazyman Gulch roadless area was included in prior Congressional wilderness bills and would be protected as wilderness today if not for a 1988 pocket veto by President Reagan. The value of this rare, undisturbed forested area for wildlife, a travel corridor and biological reserve, as well as for human recreation is high and increasing. While the groups generally support the greater Tenmile project as it pertains to wildfire risk abatement, they feel its authorization of logging, road reconstruction, and new mechanized trails in the two roadless areas goes too far. Notably, the broad-based Tenmile-South Hills Helena Collaborative analyzed and provided input to the Forest Service and recommended not using mechanized equipment for logging in the Lazyman roadless area, with the exception of private land buffers. The Forest Service ignored this recommendation as well as the sportsmen’s.

“We have been watchful and engaged stewards of these two areas for more than 50 years as local residents. We are compelled to maintain our strong convictions for these areas today with this action,” said Powell.

“We have worked hard to secure protections for these two roadless areas for many decades and remain committed to ensuring the Forest Service properly manages these roadless lands for big game and other wildlife species in accordance with the Helena National Forest’s Forest Plan,” said Bill Orsello, board member of Helena Hunters and Anglers.

“After five years of constant participation in the Forest Service process surrounding this project, Helena Hunters filed an objection with the Northern Region last October. However, that objection was rejected, leaving us with no other course of action but to litigate to protect big game security in the last remaining roadless areas,” Orsello said.

“The Tenmile project changes how big game habitat is managed on the Divide landscape west of Helena,” said Marcus Strange of Montana Wildlife Federation, “particularly the amount of hiding cover and secure habitat for elk and other big game. Decades of studies around the West demonstrate that secure habitat is critical if elk are to survive on public lands.”

“Frankly, I’m surprised we got to this point” said Matthew Bishop, an attorney with the Western Environmental Law Center representing the groups. “Keeping the skidders, earthmovers, and bulldozers out of the Jericho and Lazyman roadless areas to preserve big game habitat and the biological integrity and value of these areas didn’t seem like a big ask – especially since it’s in line with the forest plan and enjoys broad public support.”

“The implications of the Forest Service’s actions set a precedent that extend far beyond the borders of the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest,” said Gayle Joslin, board member of Helena Hunters and Anglers Association. “Our suit represents a last-ditch attempt to sustain wildlife populations and opportunity for hunters, both immediately and in the long term. The stakes are high, and we are committed to assuring that untrammeled roadless areas continue to provide for wildlife, and opportunities for sportsmen and women and the general public. Intact roadless areas are essential for all of us, as well as the landscape, both immediately and in the long term.”

“Properly defining and managing for big game habitat will be a key issue for the Forest Service during the upcoming Forest Plan revision process,” said Bill Geer, President of Montana Wildlife Federation. “Hunting organizations look forward to working with the Forest Service to conserve the priceless wildlife habitat found on our national forests.”

[MAP: Tenmile – South Helena Vicinity showing locations of Jericho and Lazyman inventoried roadless areas](#)

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