



Montana
Native
Plant
Society

To observe - conserve - educate

P.O. Box 8783 Missoula, MT 59807

7 March 2005

Ms. Nancy Curriden
Custer National Forest
1310 Main Street
Billings, MT 59105

Dear Ms Curriden,

We are writing on behalf of 500 members of the Montana Native Plant Society (MNPS). We are an organization dedicated to preserving, conserving and studying the flora of Montana and educating the public on the values of the native flora and its habitats. We are writing in support of the Forest Service's Research Natural Areas (RNA) system. As you know this far-sighted program has designated numerous pristine or near-pristine examples of representative ecosystems throughout the National Forest system. Custer National Forest has designated several important RNA's including the Lost Water Canyon RNA in the Pryor Mountains.

RNA's are protected from anthropogenic disturbance or influence in order that they may serve as natural baselines for management of similar systems in multiple-use landscapes. MNPS is concerned about the current management of the Lost Water Canyon RNA. The Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range (PMWHR) is adjacent to the Lost Water Canyon RNA. PMWHR is home to more than 100 wild horses. A recent survey conducted by the Natural Resources Conservation Service indicates that the horses are overgrazing the PMWHR. At one time Custer National Forest lands, including the Lost Water Canyon RNA were separated from the PMWHR by a pole fence. This fence has been breeched or dismantled in at least one place. The lack of a secure fence allows the wild horses to graze and perhaps overgraze Lost Water Canyon RNA. Grazing by wild horses or any other non-indigenous animals is not compatible with the mandate of the RNA system because it could damage the pristine nature of the area and compromise its value as a baseline for future reference. Just as important, allowing anthropogenic degradation of one RNA sets a bad precedent and undermines the integrity of the whole RNA system. We urge Custer National Forest to repair or reconstruct the fence protecting Lost Water Canyon RNA from wild horse grazing as soon as possible. This is important to prevent degradation of Lost Water Canyon as well preserving the integrity of the RNA system in Region One. Thank you for considering our comments.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Kuropat
President

Peter Lesica
Conservation Chair

cc: Steve Shelly, Sandra Brooks