

December 15, 2021

Steve Brown, District Ranger
Bitterroot National Forest
Stevensville Ranger District
88 Main St.
Stevensville, MT 59870

CC: Matt Anderson, Nell Highfill, Caleb George, Shawn Johnson, WMTTC Board

RE: Bitterroot National Forest Climbing Management Plan, Reply to Milner

We understand and appreciate the BNF's commitment to developing a climbing management plan through a collaborative process. We hope you recognize that our behaviors demonstrate our commitment. However, we do not believe other stakeholders are committed to genuine collaboration. We were disappointed with Gary Milner's email because it contains no positive contributions to this process. It is devoid of any hint of goodwill toward other stakeholders. It is merely a repetition of the same manipulative narrative we have heard from Gary Milner and Van Keele *ad nauseum* for nearly a decade. The 2012 Planning Rule states that collaboration "is a structured manner in which a collection of people with diverse interests share knowledge, ideas, and resources while working together in a cooperative manner toward a common purpose." Milner's email demonstrates a long and consistent pattern of uncharitable, adversarial behaviors that clearly demonstrates a lack of commitment to cooperation and collaboration. We are seriously concerned that the continued adversarial tactics of a small group of activists will corrupt this process. If these tactics continue to influence this process, we fear the outcome will be an ineffective CMP. The climbing community will see it as being unfairly influenced by the unscrupulous tactics of a few overzealous activists. We believe that it is crucial to the success of this collaboration process to point out and confront Milner's tactics.

- Stakeholders have been asked to move beyond the nearly decade-old controversy over Mill Creek. The fact that Milner and Keele continue to point to the same evidence and repeat this tired narrative after the rest of us have invested so much time and energy into this process is discouraging.
- Milner's email lists grievances that are now nearly a decade old and ignores the many positive things that have taken place during that time. Repeating them at this late stage in this collaborative process is, at best, counterproductive. Climbers acknowledge that one purpose of the CMP will be to educate climbers on relevant CFRs. Climbers did stash gear and use rebar to mitigate erosion. However, instead of seeing this as a productive learning experience that can inform a successful CMP, Milner and Keele continue to repeat this episode and show these dated photos to support their manipulative narrative.
- Lifting the off-handed comment of one climber from the Zoom meeting's chat Milner implied that it is evidence of a pervasive attitude is fallacious and unfair to the climber who posted the comment, and to the climbing community. The statement is abstracted from any context and the person who posted the remark is given no chance to elaborate or clarify.

- Milner and Keele have used this tactic in past meetings. They have taken off-handed comments from public meetings that they can use to support their narrative and presented them in the press as evidence of a prevailing attitude shared by all climbers. Participants who have previously been in meetings with Milner and Keele are aware of this tactic and guard their words carefully. This adversarial tactic has made open, cooperative dialogue impossible.
- Implicitly labeling local climbers as unethical is corrosive to cooperation and collaboration. Milner uses the vague standard of “ethical” climbers he once knew to imply that today’s climbers are unethical. The question also seems to be unaware that climbing norms have evolved over the years. To be clear, the type of recreational climbing activity in the area he is implicitly referencing is consistent with the accepted norms of the climbing community. Hundreds of similar climbing areas, most of which are far more extensive, exist on Forest Service lands across the country without controversy.
- The questions asked in Milner’s email do not appear to be honest attempts at cooperative dialogue to gain mutual understanding through sharing knowledge. They are poisoned with presumptions, and amount to asking: Why are local climbers unethical, unconcerned with their impact and incapable of self-management? The questions are adversarial and undermine cooperation and collaboration.
- Milner’s email ignores the fact that Forest Service officials and climbers have spent hours in these meetings attempting to make progress on the issues that he raises. For example, the email ignores the fact that the WMTCC has submitted a serious proposal for a climbing management plan. Our proposed CMP is largely copied from the Pike National Forest’s CMP, which is the most extensively developed CMP for a national forest. The CMP we submitted is organized to follow the BNF’s story map and address Milner’s concerns. A genuine attempt at collaboration would acknowledge our proposed CMP, and direct questions toward that proposal.
- The email ignores that the local climbing community has diligently worked with BNF wildlife biologist, Dave Lockman, to avoid disturbing nesting raptors. Milner and Keele have loudly sounded an alarm that climbers are a serious threat to raptors, but this process has demonstrated that what climbing communities have been doing for years has effectively addressed the possible impacts of climbing on nesting raptors.
 - It is worth noting that Milner and Keele have been using photographs of the carcass of a golden eagle to raise alarms about climbing impacts on raptors. Milner and Keele have acknowledged finding the carcass at a local climbing area and photographing it. We know from the CMP process that Milner and Keele have researched the possible impacts of climbing on nesting raptors. They are intelligent enough to know that climbing activity could not have contributed to the death of an adult eagle. Using this photograph as evidence against climbers is maliciously dishonest and undermines trust.
- Climbers have demonstrated their concern of their impacts at staging areas and access trails. We have tried repeatedly, but unsuccessfully, to work with BNF officials to organize stewardship projects to address impacts at staging areas and access trails. For example, this summer we invited the Access Fund’s stewardship director, Ty Tyler, to meet with district ranger Steve Brown to discuss a possible stewardship project and what it would involve. During his visit, Ty Tyler participated in an extensive stewardship project to address climbing impacts at staging areas and access trails we had organized with BLM officials at Rattler Gulch.

- The email ignores that we have fully supported the moratorium on no new bolts at the lower Mill Creek climbing area and agreed with the rationale behind the moratorium. We have repeatedly posted information about the moratorium in WMTCC newsletters and on our social media accounts. In her letter, dated February 15, 2017, former forest supervisor Julie King provided a list of regulations for how Mill Creek would be managed. Climbers have adhered to those management requirements. BNF officials have made yearly site visits to the area and have documented the fact that climbers have fully complied with those management requirements, which include applying Leave No Trace practices.
 - It is also important to note that one of the primary goals of this process is to reduce social conflict. The climbing community has been consistently cooperating with BNF officials to reduce social conflict. As just shown, climbers have supported and followed former Supervisor King's interim regulations for managing climbing in Mill Creek since it was issued, February 2017. However, this current process was initiated following the January 4, 2020, Missoulian article, "Sticks and Stone." The article noted that a person, or persons, were taking actions that created social conflict, blockading social access trails to the climbing areas and sabotaging expansion bolts that climbers use for safety. These aggressive and dangerous tactics, which constitute criminal endangerment, were taking place nearly five years after BNF officials had taken sufficient actions to resolve the conflict. These subversive tactics not only demonstrate bad faith, but they undermine the conditions for a successful CMP. Climbers will be extremely unlikely to share information about the existence and location of new climbs if they are afraid that safety equipment will be sabotaged, and access blocked.

An effective CMP must be based on trust and cooperation, but Milner's email represents a consistent pattern of adversarial tactics and behaviors. If this behavior is not addressed, it will undermine this process and lead to an ineffective CMP. Milner's email insults the many climbers who have devoted long hours in sharing knowledge and working cooperatively to achieve the stated goal of the CMP as stated on the story map -- "to provide for recreational climbing while minimizing/mitigating the impacts of recreational use on sensitive resources."

We hope that you will recognize the harmful effects of these adversarial tactics and not allow them to be repeated and undermine this process.

Katie Williams
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