Wildlife Advisory Committee Recommendations for Teton County Recreation Master Plan Revision

The Teton County Wildlife Advisory Committee appreciates the opportunity to submit recommendations for the Recreation Master Plan revision. We strongly support the essential goal of balancing the utilization of our natural resources for recreation with the necessary protection of our wildlife and their habitats. This aligns with the core 'natural resources and outdoor recreation' vision statement in the Teton County Comprehensive Plan: "Preserve natural resources and a healthy environment, which is essential for creating viable future economic and recreational opportunities for all users" (Chapter 5, Teton County Comprehensive Plan). It also supports the 2024 Teton County Idaho Economic Plan to "coordinate and balance recreation with wildlife and resource protection."

During our recent meeting with Harmony Design and the Recreation District, we learned that this revision effort will function as a high-level inventory of current facilities and a needs assessment of recreation gaps. We believe this is a foundational step towards a future master plan, which would typically incorporate additional elements such as core values, guiding principles for how recreation interacts with wildlife, working lands, and neighboring jurisdictions, and a public process that engages the many entities with a stake in Teton Valley's landscape. The assessment and inventory represent valuable work, and we want to see the effort succeed. With this in mind, we would like to suggest that the Recreation District consider incorporating into the inventory and assessment the following ecological safeguards that will help protect our valley's natural resources and balance the needs of wildlife and recreational enjoyment:

- Infrastructure Siting, Habitat Health, and Connectivity
    - Direct development and human activity away from sensitive areas.
    - Avoid establishing new recreational access points in intact, largely unfragmented habitat, including migration routes, winter range, parturition and nesting areas, and habitat important to federally protected and state-recognized Species of Greatest Conservation Need.
    - Prioritize the siting and development of new recreational infrastructure in locations that minimize habitat loss or fragmentation and actively preserve established wildlife corridors and important habitat.
    - Impacts to wildlife should be considered and balanced with recreational use when considering improvement of existing infrastructure (e.g., larger parking lots).
    - Consult with state and federal wildlife management agencies, as well as local conservation entities, prior to the design phase and after construction when developing recreational access or improving existing infrastructure in Teton County.

- Data-Driven Evaluation & Baselines
    - Integrate comprehensive, localized biological data and habitat monitoring into the evaluation and approval process for all proposed recreational developments or expansions. Include pre- and post-project ecosystem assessments.
    - Collaborate with local and regional conservation and wildlife experts to establish ecological baselines so that impacts can be appropriately addressed.

- Adaptive Management & Seasonal Protections
    - Implement adaptive management strategies across public access points and trail networks, utilizing seasonal closures and usage thresholds to protect migration routes, important winter range, calving areas, and nesting habitats during biologically vulnerable periods.
    - Design recreation management frameworks to be responsive to ecological changes, ensuring that access can be modified if negative impacts to local ecosystems are observed.
    - Ensure that recreational users are in compliance with utilization rules aimed at preserving wildlife and habitat.
    - Require site-specific ecological mitigation strategies at all recreational sites, ensuring that protective measures—such as strict physical setbacks, seasonal closures, and invasive species treatments—are integrated into the site's ongoing management.

- Riparian & Aquatic Ecosystem Safeguards
    - Drawing on expert knowledge, establish clear design standards and protective setbacks for all river access improvements and pathway expansions to conserve the ecological health of riparian zones.
    - Balance the development of water-based recreation with the behavioral and ecological needs of river-associated wildlife and the preservation of bank stability and critical aquatic habitats.

Ultimately, integrating these principles and safeguards into the ongoing recreation planning ensures that Teton County's recreational expansion enhances, rather than compromises, the natural assets that define our valley. It also ensures smooth project implementation, reducing time to completion and costs. We view these recommendations not as a final submission, but hopefully as the foundation for an ongoing collaboration. As your team moves from this initial assessment into drafting specific policies and strategies, the Wildlife Advisory Committee looks forward to providing more input and assistance.

Best regards,
Teton County Wildlife Advisory Committee
Kathleen O'Neil, Chair