



Fish Creek Recreation Planning Workshop

Meeting Summary

Of stakeholder workshop held on Wednesday, August 17th, 2022

Alberton Community Center

Objectives:

- Provide an overview of the recently initiated Fish Creek Recreation Planning process
- Explore participants' vision(s) for future recreational use in the Fish Creek watershed and associated wildlife, habitat, and economic impacts
- Explore participants' interests and concerns regarding future recreational use in the Fish Creek watershed
- Discuss next steps and additional opportunities for engagement

Participants:

- Mineral County Commissioners; Local Outfitters; Local Landowners & Residents; Mineral County Resource Coalition Members; Great Burn Conservation Alliance
- Randy Arnold & Ryan Klimstra, Montana Fish, Wildlife, & Parks (FWP)

Facilitators:

- Travis Anklam, Zachary Hummel, Kaitlyn Reintsma, University of Montana (UMT)
- Charles Besancon, Global Park Solutions (GPS)



Meeting Summary

Welcome and Introduction (FWP & UMT)

Facilitators and FWP Region 2 Supervisor Randy Arnold welcomed participants and provided an overview of the meeting objectives (see above) and the recently initiated recreation planning process for the Fish Creek area.

Fish Creek was acquired by FWP in 2010 from the Nature Conservancy, establishing both the Fish Creek State Park and Wildlife Management Area in the drainage and on the north side of Interstate 90 and the Clark Fork River. The drainage currently comprises a mosaic of FWP, DNRC, and USFS lands (an Area Map is included in Appendix A, below). In 2013, FWP attempted to create a State Park Management plan, but did not finalize and implement the plan given concerns expressed during the public comment period.

After the recent reorganization of FWP and major increases in recreational use over the past several years, FWP is now working to establish a new management framework for the Fish Creek area. Initiated in the second half of 2022, FWP is now advancing a planning process that is taking a holistic look at the drainage and will be inclusive of perspectives from all user groups and partner agencies interested in recreational use management in the Fish Creek watershed. The process is looking at recreation management across the Fish Creek area, including the state park, wildlife management area, two fishing access sites along the Alberton Gorge, and School Trust lands owned by the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC). FWP has also hired the University of Montana and Global Park Solutions to lead the engagement process and assist in the creation of a planning document to guide future recreational use management in the Fish Creek area.

Visioning the Future of Fish Creek

Following the introduction, participants were then invited to share their visions for future recreational use management in the Fish Creek Area. After a group brainstorming session, participants outlined a future where users have a diversity of recreational experiences available to them and recreate responsibly in a way that sustains the area's infrastructure, fisheries, wildlife, and forest health. Many participants also envisioned a future where recreation management in Fish Creek is compatible with rural values, provides economic opportunities for Mineral County, and ensures the area's roads and campgrounds are safe and well maintained.

Nearly all participants present highlighted that the future management of Fish Creek should effectively balance diverse recreation opportunities with the stewardship of the area's natural resources, to provide economic and recreational benefits for the local community.

Identifying Interests and Concerns in the Fish Creek Area

Following the visioning exercise, participants were invited to identify (1) current recreational assets in the Fish Creek Area that they value, (2) areas of concern and potential resource



degradation. Participants highlighted the area's natural resources, diversity of recreational opportunities, and cultural history as valuable assets in the Fish Creek drainage. Participants especially emphasized the area's fishing, hunting, camping, hiking, motorized recreation, and floating opportunities as valuable recreation assets. Most participants appreciated the range of recreation options available in the area and acknowledged the challenge of managing recreation across multiple land jurisdictions and agencies.

When discussing interests and concerns in the Fish creek area, most participants expressed the need to improve the economic value of the drainage to Mineral County. Ideas for realizing greater economic benefits from the drainage included expanding motorized recreation opportunities – including loop trails – and expanding camping amenities in the area to better accommodate large RVs and trailers. Participants also stressed the need to preserve natural resources in the drainage, including wildlife habitat and fisheries resources. As with the stakeholders present at the Missoula workshop, most participants agreed that areas in the upper reaches of the drainage should continue to be maintained for “primitive” recreational use (e.g., hiking, hunting, dispersed camping) while areas closer to Interstate 90 and the Clark Fork River are better suited for more “developed” recreation opportunities (e.g., established campgrounds, motorized recreational use). Most participants present underscored the need to maintain and ideally expand motorized recreation opportunities in the drainage, given the economic value that motorized recreation brings to Mineral County.

Like the first stakeholder workshop held in Missoula in late July, participants also highlighted the challenge of managing expanded recreational use in the Fish Creek area. Most participants present suggested expanding recreational amenities in the Fish Creek area, especially at existing campsites. Most participants suggested expanding established camping opportunities to better guide camping impacts on resources in the drainage and provide accommodations for a diversity of users, such as motorized and equestrian recreational users. Several participants would also like to see more frequent maintenance of the Fish Creek Road, a greater law enforcement presence in the drainage, and fees for recreational use of the area. Many participants expressed their concerns around limited enforcement and maintenance resources, and highlighted safety as a cornerstone of effective recreation management in Fish Creek going forward.

Throughout the discussion, participants indicated areas with important recreation assets, areas of interest and concern, and areas where future recreation opportunities could be expanded, on maps of the Fish Creek area (see Appendix A). The results of this exercise will be shared in the form of several maps that reflect the interests and concerns of stakeholders present, later in this planning process. The maps generated from these workshops do not necessarily reflect the interests of FWP and are intended to serve as a preliminary resource to aid in brainstorming and conversation as the planning process moves forward.



Conclusion

To conclude the meeting, facilitators thanked participants for their engagement and highlighted that this workshop is just the beginning of the recently initiated and ongoing planning process aimed at understanding and incorporating the interests and concerns of diverse perspectives invested in future recreation management in the Fish Creek area. No decisions are being made at this point in the process. Instead, this workshop, along with additional stakeholder engagement efforts currently being conducted, is designed to identify the range of interests and concerns regarding the future of Fish Creek and potential management options that could be included in a planning document. There will be many more opportunities for engagement through the remainder of 2022, including:

- Interviews with stakeholders (ongoing)
- Site tour with stakeholders (September)
- Online survey (October)
- Public meetings (November/December)
- Draft strategy/plan for review (February 2023)
- Final strategy/plan (March 2023)

Facilitators also invited participants to offer suggestions for additional stakeholders to engage and include in the process via email at travis.anklam@umontana.edu.



Appendix A: Fish Creek Participatory Mapping Exercise Map

Fish Creek Participatory Mapping Exercise

