



## Fish Creek Recreation Planning

### Public Meetings Summary

Held in Missoula on Tuesday, February 28<sup>th</sup>, online via Zoom on Wednesday, March 1<sup>st</sup>, and in Superior on Thursday, March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2023.

#### Public Meeting Objectives:

- Provide an overview of MT Fish, Wildlife & Park's (FWP) Fish Creek Recreation Planning process
- Share proposed strategies for managing recreational use on FWP lands in Fish Creek
- Collect public comments and feedback
- Outline next steps and additional opportunities for engagement

**Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) Staff:** Randy Arnold, Liz Bradley, Mike Kustudia, Ladd Knotek

**Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC):** Amy Helena

**Facilitators:** Charles Besancon - Global Park Solutions; Travis Anklam, Nick Maya, Taylor Tewksbury - University of Montana, Center for Natural Resources and Environmental Policy (CNREP)

**Attendees:** Approximately 80 people in Missoula, 20 people online via Zoom, and 30 people in Superior

### Summary of Public Meetings

#### Welcome and Introduction

Facilitators and FWP Region 2 Supervisor Randy Arnold welcomed participants and provided an overview of the meeting objectives (see above) and the recreation planning process being implemented by FWP for FWP-managed lands in 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 available on FWP's [website](#)). In 2013, FWP created a State Park Management plan, but did not finalize and implement all of the plan in response to 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 recreation management strategy for FWP lands in the Fish Creek area. In recognition of the previous planning process's shortcomings and the complex mosaic of ownership within the drainage, FWP is taking a more holistic approach to this process that aims to be inclusive of perspectives from all user groups and partner agencies interested in recreational use management of the watershed. As a result, the process involves a much longer period of stakeholder engagement than is usual for FWP. The area of interest includes the state park, the wildlife management area, two fishing access sites along the Alberton Gorge, and School Trust lands managed by the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC). While United States Forest Service (USFS) lands are not directly involved in the planning of the state-managed lands in the Fish Creek drainage, the USFS is an important partner agency and continues to be involved from that perspective as they begin their forest plan revision process for the Lolo National Forest.

### Stakeholder Outreach and Public Engagement to Date

Following the planning process overview, Travis Anklam (CNREP) provided a summary of stakeholder outreach and public engagement conducted thus far in the planning process. The planning team set out early in the process to conduct stakeholder outreach and public engagement aimed at understanding the range of interests and perspectives regarding recreation management in the Fish Creek Area, prior to FWP making management decisions or creating a draft recreation management strategy.

From July to December 2022, CNREP and Global Park Solutions conducted stakeholder interviews, hosted two exploratory stakeholder mapping workshops, and held one stakeholder site visit in Fish Creek. In total, the project team conducted over 40 interviews with stakeholders representing diverse perspectives including hunters, anglers, hikers, floaters, mountain bikers, motorized recreation users, local landowners, local businesses, local outfitters, Mineral County Commissioners, state and federal agencies, conservation groups, wildlife interests, and access advocates. Conversations with stakeholders explored diverse interests, concerns, and recommendations regarding recreation management in the Fish Creek Area. Throughout, people highlighted their experiences and connection to Fish Creek, their care for the area's resources, and their desire for the area's resources to be well managed and sustained into the future.

Although conversations with stakeholders revealed a diversity of values and interests, several common themes regarding recreation management in the Fish Creek Area emerged across nearly every discussion, including:

- **Responsible stewardship.** Nearly all stakeholders expressed their interest in FWP and other land management agencies responsibly stewarding the resources – including the



fisheries, wildlife, wildlife habitat, and recreational resources – of the Fish Creek Area for future generations.

- **Provide diverse opportunities for recreation.** Almost all stakeholders identified a spectrum of recreation opportunities for diverse users within the Fish Creek Area.
- **Balance recreational use with wildlife management.** While nearly all stakeholders engaged agreed that it is important to provide recreational access to the Fish Creek Area for a diversity of users, most interests also voiced a concern that too much recreational pressure can negatively impact fishery health and wildlife in the drainage. For many, protecting fishery health and wildlife is the priority in the Fish Creek Area.
- **Coordinate across Agencies.** Many stakeholders and every agency partner engaged highlighted their interest in seeing effective coordination between FWP, DNRC, and the USFS around recreation and resource management in the Fish Creek Area.
- **Provide a seamless visitor experience.** Nearly all stakeholders engaged agreed that visitors should not be burdened with understanding boundaries between Montana land agencies (FWP, DNRC) and the different regulations associated with each agency.
- **Be transparent & inclusive.** Many stakeholders underscored the importance of clear, transparent communication from FWP explaining why certain management decisions could be made and if any existing gaps in data may need to be filled to inform management decisions.

During these conversations, Stakeholders also offered specific interests and concerns. Many stakeholders voiced the need to increase safety and accessibility for recreationists, enforce rules and regulations, and clarify rules, regulations, and recreational opportunities in the Fish Creek Area for the public. Maintaining Fish Creek Road and increasing FWP presence in the drainage came up frequently. Most stakeholders also expressed concern regarding the impacts of dispersed camping, especially on fishery health, wildlife habitat, and recreational opportunities. Many stakeholders would like to see enhanced developed, designated camping opportunities that concentrate use while limiting the growth of dispersed camping in the area.

The need to protect fishery health and wildlife populations was expressed in most conversations with stakeholders, with many people highlighting the importance of Fish Creek for bull trout and cutthroat trout habitat and/or the area's importance for wildlife habitat and habitat connectivity. Protecting elk and deer winter range came up frequently in conversation. Multiple stakeholders suggested closing Fish Creek to recreational floating to prevent the removal of woody debris by floaters and protect the fishery resource. Some stakeholders identified additional recreational opportunities that could be developed, including repairing



and opening Williams Peak Lookout for the public and expanding motorized recreation and mountain biking opportunities. However, many stakeholders also called for limiting additional recreational development to safeguard the area's fishery health and wildlife habitat.

While the planning team reached a diverse and representative sample of stakeholders – which they defined as people, groups, and organizations interested in and affected by recreation management decisions in the Fish Creek Area – *the project team recognized that they likely did not reach all potential stakeholders or stakeholder perspectives.* In response, the project team collected input through a 60-day public survey posted online and widely shared through fliers and a press release to reach individuals who had not yet been engaged in the planning process. The planning team expected that members of the public may also be considered stakeholders and that they may offer different perspectives depending on whether they are being asked to contribute as an individual or on behalf of an interest group they may belong to.

A summary of responses to the public survey is available on the planning page's [website](#). In addition, a more detailed summary of stakeholder perspectives than what was offered at the public meetings will be included in the draft recreation management strategy that will be released online for public comment in late April 2023. Public comments or questions regarding this planning process are welcome and can be submitted to [fwprg22@mt.gov](mailto:fwprg22@mt.gov).

### Proposed Recreation Management Strategy

Charles Besancon (Global Park Solutions) and Travis Anklam (CNREP) then provided an overview of the proposed draft strategy for managing recreation on FWP lands in the Fish Creek Area. Before presenting the proposed strategy, facilitators emphasized that the proposed management directions being shared at the public meetings are **draft proposals** that will be developed and refined in response to public feedback offered at the meetings and through submitted comments. A draft recreation management strategy document will be released in late April for a 30-day public comment period. After the comment period, a recreation strategy will be finalized by FWP and shared. Any proposed development included in the final strategy will be subject to an Environmental Assessment process and will include additional opportunities for public comment.

Facilitators then provided an overview of the planning framework used in this process – the Interagency Visitor Management Framework – which is regularly implemented by state and federal agencies for planning processes across the country. The planning framework utilizes several steps, including (1) building a foundational understanding of the area and the purpose and need for action, (2) defining desired conditions to guide visitor use management, (3) identifying management strategies for realizing desired conditions, and (4) implementation, monitoring, and evaluation to achieve desired conditions.



Facilitators then provided an overview of the draft desired conditions for four zones of FWP lands in the Fish Creek drainage, including the description, desired environmental conditions, desired visitor experience, appropriate recreational uses and amenities, and management direction(s) for each zone. Facilitators also reviewed draft guiding principles for managing recreation on FWP lands in the Fish Creek Area, which included:

1. The primary management objective in the Fish Creek drainage is to protect the natural and cultural resources, ecosystems, and wildlife. FWP will provide recreation opportunities that align with the stewardship of these natural and cultural resources.
2. The level of developed recreation amenities will decrease the further one travels from Interstate 90 traveling up the Fish Creek drainage, with some exceptions.
3. The overall level of recreation development in the Fish Creek drainage will remain “rustic.”
4. Visitors to the Fish Creek drainage should not have to navigate different regulations from different state agencies. To the extent possible, regulations should be aligned to provide a seamless visitor experience.
5. Where appropriate and feasible, recreation uses will be separated to prevent conflict.
6. Any additional recreational development suggested by this strategy is subject to available human and financial resources and to an environmental assessment and additional public review as required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) prior to implementation.

Facilitators then reviewed proposed recreation management directions to be potentially included in the draft strategy:

**1. Dispersed camping will be redesigned to better protect the natural environment and visitor experience.**

Soil erosion, garbage, and human waste have increased in the Fish Creek drainage as dispersed camping has increased, including newly pioneered campsites. These biophysical impacts also impact visitor experience. Many new sites have been created directly adjacent to existing sites, which impacts some visitor’s quest for solitude. To redesign dispersed camping, the following management actions will be taken, subject to available resources:

- a. Dispersed camping will only be allowed in designated sites that are clearly marked.
- b. Existing dispersed campsites will be better delineated with boulders and downed trees.
- c. Some current dispersed sites too close to water and to other dispersed sites will be removed and rehabilitated. Human waste will be managed near clusters of dispersed campsites, subject to available resources.

**2. Create more developed camping opportunities.**

To better manage the impacts associated with camping, additional campsites will be added in Big Pine and Forks Campgrounds, subject to available resources. These



increases are likely to be offset by decreases in dispersed sites as some sites are removed and rehabilitated. The Williams Peak Lookout may also provide additional opportunities to diversify camping opportunities in the Fish Creek drainage. Expansion of the Big Pine and Forks Campgrounds would be subject to an environmental assessment and additional public review as required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) prior to implementation. To better manage the impacts from camping, the following management actions will be taken, subject to available resources:

- a. Increase the number of developed campsites at Big Pine and Forks Campgrounds.
- b. Explore options for additional site presence in the Fish Creek drainage. This could eventually include having staff stationed at Big Pine Campground that can oversee Big Pine and Forks Campgrounds, as well as the dispersed sites in the road corridor from I-90 to Forks.
- c. Repair and upgrade the Williams Peak lookout. This could create a unique future camping experience not currently available anywhere else in the Montana State Parks system. The 1.6-mile road from Williams Pass to the summit of Williams Peak would be gated and maintained for administrative purposes. In order to better protect the lookout, the road would be closed to visitor vehicles. Lookout visitors would be required to hike, bike or use horses to travel the road.

### **3. Developing purpose-built trails for hikers and mountain bikers will be further explored**

In order to expand and diversify recreation opportunities in the Fish Creek drainage, the development of separate hiking and biking trails will be further explored. Any hiking or biking trail development is subject to available resources, an environmental assessment, and additional public review as required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) before implementation. Recognizing that there is already an extensive closed road system, those roads could be the foundation on which to build trails. Mountain bike trails should be purpose-built (berms and smooth, one-way trails). Hiking trails should be single-track.

### **4. Preserve and maintain two existing OHV routes**

Currently, there are hundreds of miles of dirt roads in the Fish Creek drainage available for OHV use. These roads would be subject to seasonal closures to protect winter range for wildlife, and many roads would continue to be closed year-round in the future as the recovery process in the Fish Creek drainage continues.

This recreation strategy calls for at least two existing OHV loops to be maintained south of I-90, at locations to be decided. A designated parking area for OHV users could be established, depending on the availability of resources.



The development of a parking lot would be subject to an environmental assessment and additional public review as required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) prior to implementation.

**5. *Visitor experience will be improved through better informational signs and streamlined regulations across agencies***

To better protect the resources in Fish Creek, an information kiosk within 2 miles of Exit 66 on I-90 will be established. This kiosk will list all regulations and safety warnings about road travel during snow and other inclement weather.

Additional informational signs will be erected, subject to the availability of resources, at Big Pine Campground and Forks Campground. All developed and designated dispersed campsites will be appropriately signed. Important road junctions will be signed.

As FWP and DNRC manage state lands in the Fish Creek drainage, an agreement will be finalized to align camping and recreational regulations. Visitors to the Fish Creek drainage will no longer be burdened with following two different sets of regulations, that can change multiple times over the course of a few miles of travel.

To enrich the visitor experience, additional interpretation will be used at specific sites, such as Big Pine, and Williams Peak Lookout, as well as ecologically important habitats or areas.

Facilitators also provided a high-level overview of the monitoring protocol included in the draft strategy. Ecological and social monitoring, already being conducted in the Fish Creek drainage by FWP staff, will continue and include the collection of data on soil erosion from camping, trails, and OHV routes. FWP staff will continue to identify, map, treat and monitor noxious weeds. Data will be collected on the prevalence of recreational floating and its association with altered woody debris (that is important for fish habitat) and floater/wade angler conflict. If the thresholds selected for any ecological or social impacts from the above recreational activities are exceeded, additional protection measures (including potential restrictions on recreational use) would be taken to protect resources.

After presenting the draft strategy, facilitators and FWP staff welcomed questions, comments, and feedback from attendees while underscoring that the planning team will revise the draft strategy in response to public comments prior to releasing a full document for review and additional public comment in late April. A recording of the presentation and information offered at all three public meetings is available on FWP's website at <https://fwp.mt.gov/conservation/fish-creek-watershed-recreation-planning>. The website also includes summaries of past stakeholder meetings, a summary of public survey responses, and information about the Fish Creek Area and planning process.



## Public Questions and Comments by Theme

At all three public meetings, 90 minutes were reserved for public questions and comments. All questions and comments asked or submitted in writing at the public meetings are summarized below, by theme. Where possible, answers to questions asked at the meetings are provided by FWP staff and the planning team under each question. Unanswered questions may be addressed in the draft strategy, which will be shared on FWP's website and for a 30-day public comment period in late April. Comments submitted via email to FWP following the meeting will be included alongside the final recreation management strategy document that will be released later in 2023.

Additional comments are welcome and can be submitted to [fwprg22@mt.gov](mailto:fwprg22@mt.gov). The planning team will read all submitted comments and consider them during the planning process.

### Accessibility

- Q: How about ADA campgrounds? *(Written)*
- The current draft strategy lacks a discussion of ADA. Currently, there are only 2 sites with ADA access, and the new strategy needs to include ADA accessibility to the Creek. *(Missoula, 2.28.23)*
- Among representatives from the disability advocacy community, there are concerns about access for people with disabilities. There is a concern about creating more barriers when designing or implementing trails for mountain bike users. It is important to include all user groups, including folks with disabilities that use hand cycles. Make trails wide enough for folks using devices like powered wheelchairs. Within the conversation about dispersed camping, there are concerns about placing boulders and logs. FWP should prioritize not creating more barriers for people in wheelchairs. Again, with Williams Peak, FWP should allow folks with mobility challenges to access it. Minimize manmade barriers and make it possible for people to go around a gate. If people are allowed to access the peak beyond that gate, perhaps it would be helpful to have a permitting system for motorized use beyond the access gate. *(Remote, 3.1.23)*

### Camping

- Q: Will the strategy limit the stay lengths for dispersed camping sites? Fourteen days is a long time, especially in busy areas. How far does a party need to move from the site before setting up again? What strategies will be used to prevent sites from growing or pioneer sites from popping up? *(Missoula, 2.28.23)*
  - A: FWP Staff - That is the standard approach now. There have been instances where people have stayed a long time, which is a different management issue of moving people along when they exceed the limit. We hear about conflicts occasionally. Wardens hear more about it, but there is some. The length of stay (around 14 days) is spelled out in the Public Use Rights. It is unlawful to pioneer new sites. The presence of a law enforcement officer would nip that.





- Would like to see the dispersed camping decreased from 14 days to maximum of 7 days since this is a busy area. *(Written)*
- I appreciate the reduction of dispersed campsites. *(Written)*
- Establish places for people. Don't allow dispersed camping and instead develop campgrounds like Big Pine. Leave the rest to wildlife. *(Missoula, 2.28.23)*
- There is a third campground at Healan camp, where there is already power and water. People used to live there, so it could provide access to housing for people living/working there. It could also release some dispersed camping pressure, given the access to roads. *(Superior, 3.2.23)*
- Consider eliminating dispersed camping and only allow camping in designated (enlarged) campgrounds at Big Pine and Forks in deference to the WMA corridor in-between. *(Written)*
- Developed campgrounds--consider Upper Osprey FA as a site – less impacts to Fish Creek riparian *(Written)*
- To maintain a pleasant, safe and rustic experience campground hosts enforcing generator noises, maintenance of toilets & garbage is essential. *(Written)*
- Four campsites are currently blocked by boulders. Move the boulders so people can access them. They have been camping by the creek for years. It has been great but don't see it getting better. *(Missoula, 2.28.23)*
- Open the campgrounds that you guys have blocked off. *(Written)*

### **Community Partnership**

- The Western Montana Trail Riders wants more OHV trails. The group has a history of obtaining grants and maintaining trails with their 50/60-person membership. They are willing to contribute grant money, volunteers, trail maintenance/management, and sign setup. *(Missoula, 2.28.23)*
- I am disappointed the current plan is to not open up Williams peak but understand how people are. Our collaborative group would also like to provide fundraising efforts and advocates that one week a summer, motorized access be allowed so folks who can't physically access the site can enjoy the peak with motorized help. *(Remote, 3.1.23)*
- It is understandable that William's Peak Road remains closed at the moment, but hopefully, as funds become available, we can look for opportunities to man the site 1-2 months of the year. Existing collaboratives (Mineral County Resource Coalition) have offered to help fund, maintain, and man the site. It is worth the trip to see what's up there, and everyone should have the opportunity to see it. *(Remote, 3.1.23)*
- Q: Is there any interest for new grants that we can discuss along with volunteer help for the trail maintenance and development? This would include sign acquisition and set up. *(Written)*

### **Enforcement**

- Q: Were interim management plan rules followed? *(Missoula, 2.28.23)*
- Q: What do you have in plan for enforcement? *(Superior, 3.2.23)*



- A: FWP Staff - We have a Superior game warden that hasn't been here for a while due to injury leave. There is a commitment from headquarters to have Western Montana staffing, but as of now, there has only been one person coming from the Missoula office. When they come to Fish Creek, they are there all day. FWP acknowledges it needs to do better. It doesn't necessarily need to be a game warden. The first layer is the clear communication of rules. The second layer is the presence of campsite hosts, maintenance, etc. that can communicate what is happening and the availability of campsites before visitors get too far in. The presence of a person with a patch and truck can do a lot. Then, the game warden comes in to give citations. It is important to improve communication, so enforcement doesn't have to be too present.
- Q: What type of enforcement will be included and when can it start happening (especially fishing licenses and where people can park/camp)? (*Remote, 3.1.23*)
  - A: FWP Staff – We do have enforcement staff, so existing regulations (e.g., campground stay limits, fishing licenses) will continue to be enforced. Enforcement is currently light and short-staffed, which needs to be addressed to fully enforce this strategy. Staff currently does not live in Fish Creek, so they travel there to work. When staff travels to Fish Creek, that is where they spend the day. FWP has an eye on increasing enforcement and site presence. It hopes to enact enforcement of designated sites but needs to designate the sites first. Parking spaces—have talked about this, need to be thoughtful about where these are occurring. When fish creek can be accessed at many places, it decreases fishing experience on fish creek. Be mindful of spreading out parking and access to the creek for angler experience.
- The priority of the creek should be endangered species like Bull Trout. Once you take a species out of the creek, it's gone forever. They have seen gutted fish and people fishing out of season, so they want to hear more about resource law enforcement. If people continue to use the resource unsupervised, the use will build, and we will lose the resource. Without meaningful enforcement (e.g., ticketing people that fish out of season), word will spread that there isn't enforcement. (*Missoula, 2.28.23*)
- There needs to be enforcement, not just ideas. For example, people use and saturate Forks Fishing Access as a campground, even though it isn't a campground. (*Missoula, 2.28.23*)
- It seems like shared use of the trails/roads with e-bikes, side by sides, 4x4s, and 4-wheelers is not necessarily a problem for me. It is the enforcement of those who ride around the gates that keep the rest of us legal and "in our lane" OUT of the area. Folks ride around gates or create their own roads just because they have a vehicle that can go there, and the drivers/riders don't seem to care about the damage they are causing, such as erosion, animal habitat, etc. (*Remote, 3.1.23*)
- People used to do the right thing, not so much anymore, so enforcement/authority presence is utmost important! (*Written*)
- Some know the rules only to get around them. (*Written*)



## Engagement Scope and Outcomes

- Q: Who was talked to during the survey? (Clarify the definition of stakeholders) (*Missoula, 2.28.23*)
  - A: 691 survey responses were submitted, with people self-identifying with a wide range of recreational uses and interests. A summary of public survey results is included on FWP's [website](#). The planning team defines stakeholders as people or organizations interested in and affected by recreation management decisions in the Fish Creek Area. The planning team expected that members of the public may also be considered stakeholders and that they may offer different perspectives depending on whether they are being asked to contribute as an individual or on behalf of an interest group they may belong to.
- Q: Can the survey still be filled out? (*Missoula, 2.28.23*)
  - A: The period for this survey is done, but the initial draft plan will be sent out and there will be opportunities to provide feedback during the 30-day comment period.
- Q: In outreach efforts, was there any designation between day-use sites and camping sites? (*Missoula, 2.28.23*)
  - A: Day use sites at the Forks FAS and Big Pine FAS have been acknowledged a few times throughout the planning process by FWP staff, conversations with stakeholders, and in public survey comments.
- Q: Were horse camps incorporated into the survey? (*Missoula, 2.28.23*)
  - A: There were comments shared by survey respondents on continuing to provide access for horse camping and also concerns about multi-use trails.
- Q: Did surveys include interests in mountain bike trails built on closed roads or just purpose-built mountain bike trails? (*Missoula, 2.28.23*)
  - A: Survey questions did not specify where mountain bike trails might be developed and simply asked if people would be interested in building purpose-built mountain biking trails. 41% of survey respondents indicated interest in purpose-built mountain biking trails being established in Fish Creek.
- You need to put your surveys on the news & where people know what's going on. (*Written*)

## Firewood

- Q: Can you please talk about proposed firewood cutting rules? Firewood gathering is ongoing yet in some of the area, it is prohibited, but no enforcement. (*Remote, 3.1.23*)
- More information on firewood cutting is needed. The participant shared a personal experience where it was difficult to navigate the process of getting a firewood/tree-cutting permit. The strategy needs to include monitoring and enforcing wood cutting. (*Remote, 3.1.23*)



## Floating

- Q: I have a question about people floating on the creek. I work on streambank restoration, hunt, and collect firewood. Has anyone seen people float fish creek? (*Superior, 3.2.23*)
  - A: Members of the public said they've seen floaters in the spring high flow.
  - A: UMT explained that only a few public comments have expressed seeing floating, but there is a lot of concern surrounding what could happen like in Rock Creek and the West Fork of the Clark Fork (especially considering woody debris).
  - A: FWP explained the concerns around woody debris removal are proactive. While it is not really present now, if it starts, there is no stopping it. There are also concerns about conflict with wading anglers.
- Q: Can you clarify what floating is? Is it floating across to kill a bear? Floating 100 yards? Is it better to restrict woody debris take, rather than the use of the waterway? (*Superior, 3.2.23*)
  - A: FWP Staff – we are looking to make regulations clear and easy to understand and acknowledges the need to do so. Once the floating opportunity in Rock Creek took hold, woody debris quickly disappeared. We need to get ahold of it now because we cannot wind back once it starts.
- Monitoring woody debris is unnecessary. Just walk up Rock Creek to see the impact of floaters. (*Missoula, 2.28.23*)
- Fish Creek doesn't have the density that Rock creek does, so every bit of woody debris matters. Fish Creek is also mostly native fish, especially those that are endangered or of interest. When creating the four zones in this strategy, it is important to include exceptions, especially at the confluence. Extra considerations are needed there due to the confluence's importance. They recommend a cautionary approach beyond monitoring. (*Missoula, 2.28.23*)
- Fish Creek is more intimate than Rock Creek. People can't float by while you're fishing.
- Beavers are controlling floating. (*Missoula, 2.28.23*)
- Just because people aren't seeing floaters, doesn't mean it isn't starting. There are new types of crafts out there, including some motorized ones on the Blackfoot. (*Missoula, 2.28.23*)
- There is a stream (200csf-400csf) in Arizona that didn't seem floatable, and people raced it. (*Superior, 3.2.23*)
- Earlier, FWP noted the priorities are wildlife and safety. I have done a lot of kayaking and rafting and live at Fish Creek, and I have seen a tremendous increase in the use of Fish Creek. As far as safety goes, there may be people that don't know what they are doing and will think it is safe (as in the case of the Bitterroot River, which changes every year). There are a lot of out-of-state people on Fish Creek, some with 40 ft trailers, going up the road way too fast. Perhaps the bad shape of the road is a good thing. People with kids may see the stretches that are possible for inner tubes to float. On the Blackfoot, there are hundreds of inner tubes. They're on the Clark Fork where the dam was removed. People might start doing it here. Safety and liability-wise, there is a lot of woody debris on Fish Creek. New people might not see that, and you'll have liability and



deaths. Can FWP handle that liability? The best thing is to limit the floating before something like that happens. The Gorge—there were maybe half a dozen people doing it back then. Now hundreds of people do it every weekend. The primary thing here is to protect the environment. It doesn't need to be opened up here. Keep that type of recreation elsewhere. *(Superior, 3.2.23)*

- Why can't Fish Creek be closed to floating now? Once use is established it won't be terminated. Bull trout and cutthroat need wood debris. Tree length (not cut) is essential. *(Written)*
- FWP took no positions on restricting floating on Rock Creek. Are they prepared to close floating on Fish Creek? *(Written)*

### Funding

- Q: Will there be access to decision notices and funding/grant from the initial land acquisition (from Plum Creek)? Clarify how this funding links into site-specific requirements. *(Missoula, 2.28.23)*
- Q: How does the state plan on capturing financial resources from out-of-state users? With the increase in use, locals cannot access the sites, but taxpayers are supporting the maintenance of sites. *(Remote, 3.1.23)*
- Q: The more things you do and the more staffing and signage—Where does this money come from? Licenses? *(Superior, 3.2.23)*
  - A: FWP Staff - It comes from fishing licenses and hunting licenses from both residents and non-residents (which are the biggest source). This is matched with federal money. So, 25% comes from licenses and 75% from the Pittman–Robertson tax on shooting supplies. The state park also gets money from license plate funds and usage payments, but no general fund goes to the management of these sites. Right now, there is no toll to go into Fish Creek, and we don't expect to add one. There is current legislation proposed by Representative Loge for recreation use fees on recreation lands. It would ask users to buy a conservation license, like a fishing or hunting license. This would create a fund for FWP overall, and a portion would go to DNRC. These funds would not be able to be applied to roads, as statutes bind where license fees can be applied. FWP funds can go to FWP properties, but not to roads, as roads are under the FS.
- Everyone should understand the impact they have. I have had horses my whole life and know they have an impact and should recognize it. We should all be willing to help financially support the resources (esp. Williams Peak) and be part of that process. *(Remote, 3.1.23)*

### Great Burn Area

- Q: How will state park use not spill over into proposed Great Burn W.A.? *(Written)*
- If we get these user groups within a couple of miles of Surveyor Creek Road, they'll work their way up the drainage into the Great Burn. *(Written)*



- When planning for specific mountain bike trails and OHV trails PLEASE keep them further north in the drainage to help keep these user groups out of the Great Burn. *(Written)*
- How will increased mountain bike use adversely affect support for Great Burn wilderness designation? *(Written)*

### **Increases and Changes in Use**

- Q: What will you do when numbers increase after new highway signs are installed? What is your strategy for controlling use and accommodating the influx as people enter? What communication will be had with people as they come off the interstate, especially large trailers? *(Missoula, 2.28.23)*
  - A: FWP Staff- The current recreation demand being met by Fish Creek is day use. The most significant impact is camping, which would be restricted by designated sites, presence, and signage for dispersed opportunities. It will be communicated when camping opportunities are full.
- Q: What commercial uses are interested in utilizing Fish Creek (e.g., guided hunts or more activities on the creek)? With increased commercial use, there is a concern of overfishing. *(Remote, 3.1.23)*
  - A: FWP Staff - There is currently no lawful commercial use. There are some special commercial use permits for white water rafting in Alberton, and there could be some at the recreation sites, but FWP has been resistant to this as of now. The preference is to keep it residential, not commercial.
- Q: What is the mechanism to turn off visitor use levels to protect both the experience & resources? *(Written)*
- Be proactive and get ahead of the user increase. Once new roads are built or a new spot is established among users, there is no going back. *(Missoula, 2.28.23)*
- There is a wariness of new highway signs that act as an invitation for greater use. *(Missoula, 2.28.23)*
- There are more out-of-state people, which is neither good nor bad. *(Missoula, 2.28.23)*
- There is an 80:20 ratio of resident to non-resident users across Montana's state parks. There may be more residents dispersing across the state to use sites with Covid. *(Missoula, 2.28.23)*
- Note that many of the people present at this meeting have been going up to Fish Creek since the 70s when Reserve Street was a dirt road. Everyone here wants the same thing, to go out. The problem is it has expanded so much, and there are many more people. Now there is a huge amount of people trying to get into a small amount of land. *(Missoula, 2.28.23)*
- If you build it they will come!! (Less development) Less people. *(Written)*
- There's no big, long stretch on the creek. People can wade across. When it comes to out-of-staters, if you build it, they will come and exceed those boundaries. They always do. Everyone wants to be a naturalist and recreationalist. The worst thing is backpack hunting because people take what they want from the animal and leave the rest. I don't like the idea of William's Peak as a campsite. I understand it is already coming in and we



can try to control it, but the more you enhance it the more you will have to control it. It will become a mini glacier national park. It will expand. I used to hunt in Fish Creek and wouldn't see anyone for a month. The road hunter pressure is shocking now. I hope that keeping a bunch of those roads closed with help with that. There is a sweet spot but how do you control it? No floating on Fish Creek. (*Superior, 3.2.23*)

### **Interagency Dynamics & Cross-Boundary Approaches**

- The Forest Service has been doing this for a long time, including recreation considerations and resource impacts. Go to them to ask them what hasn't worked (e.g., What resource damage issues haven't they been able to mitigate and why?). For example, Rock Creek was a wading creek before floating was such a big deal. Fish Creek is even more imminent than Rock Creek, so talk to the Forest Service. (*Missoula, 2.28.23*)
- There has been talk about cross-boundary management with DNRC, but not a lot about cross-management with the Forest Service. There is a need for management in a cross-boundary manner (including FWP, FS, DNRC, etc.). I understand FWP can't dictate to the Forest Service what they can do, but I hope FWP will approach the strategy in a cross-boundary way (e.g. wildlife, insects, etc.). I have provided a map with suggestions and see very little country will open up. Mineral County Resource Coalition would be glad to assist in the facilitation of cross-boundary conversations. It is already engaged across boundaries (including DNRC, BLM, FS, etc.) and it works in a collaborative manner. (*Remote, 3.1.23*)
- Glad you brought up agencies. I considered mentioning this tonight, but didn't, and I feel like it is an elephant in the room. For many Montanans, TRUST with the Forest Service is very slim these days, due to incidents like Holland Lake. (*Remote, 3.1.23*)
- FWP cannot mandate the FS, but through collaboration, it can mandate the Forest to be involved in this process (through a facilitated conversation). The Montana Forest action plan should be talked about. (*Remote, 3.1.23*)
- I want to acknowledge that Chris from the Forest is here. I want to reach out to him and ask the Forest to take a serious look at being part of this program. Many of the issues raised today can be mediated by people not taking big rigs up roads, but it would need FS involvement. The amount of traffic in Fish Creek will not get better. We need to be proactive about doing some of these things. FWP has a gravel pit (filled with an invasive species that needs to be controlled) that could be a source for management things for fish, such as putting gravel down on roads. Ventenata is a difficult weed to control. Wildlife knows no boundaries, so cross-agency communication and collaboration is needed. A big-picture view is needed. (*Superior, 3.2.23*)
- Enact food storage order that meshes with the Forest Service's for bear safety. (*Written*)
- People need to look at the gravel pit that is on FWP land and continue the process (and not only with weeds). As a visitor to Fish Creek, it is amazing to see what you've already done with the weeds. You must keep that going. The collaborative (Mineral County Resource Coalition) already provides support in the area. The Forest may not be in the position to lead that charge, but it should be involved. (*Remote, 3.1.23*)



### Local Access

- Q: Clarify Williams Peak lookout access. Is it closed? (*Missoula, 2.28.23*)
- There are places Montanans can't go now because of reservations. This is an opportunity to protect the opportunities for locals to get access. There is intense pressure from DNRC to gain revenue by booking, which would encourage out-of-staters to reserve well in advance, but exclude locals from access. (*Superior, 3.2.23*)
- I appreciate the things FWP is trying to do with Fish Creek. I live in Alberton and have used Fish Creek for 40 years. I hope it remains a place where people without the means to buy conservation licenses can still go up to Big Pine. I hope you keep it rustic and don't fix the road. I hope future generations can see Big Pine and see a moose again as it is now. (*Superior, 3.2.23*)

### Monitoring and Existing Knowledge

- Riparian habitat is important for songbirds. We need monitoring and benchmarks for riparian habitats so we can watch for a tipping point. This should include habitat and recreation conditions. (*Missoula, 2.28.23*)

### Planning Process, Communication, and Resources

- Q: Who is driving this plan? (*Missoula, 2.28.23*)
  - A: See answer included above under the *Welcome and Introduction* section.
- Q: When in April will the draft plan be put out? A 30-day comment period is short for people to really digest it, so is it possible for this timeframe to be changed? (*Missoula, 2.28.23*)
  - A: The draft will be released in late April. The 30-day comment period is about getting information back to partners, but we are not wedded to it. If others also say 30 days to comment is too short, we may be able to shift.
- Q: Has there been outreach to the tribes, as the original stewards of the land? (*Remote, 3.1.23*)
  - A: Yes, the team reached out to the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) and has included CSKT staff in communications regarding this planning process.
- Q: Who are the stakeholders? (*Written*)
  - A: See answer included above under the *Engagement Scope and Outcomes* section.
- Q: How do I become a stakeholder? (*Written*)
  - A: If you are interested in and affected by recreation management by FWP in the Fish Creek Area, then you are a stakeholder. If you would like to be engaged in this planning process and we have not yet reached you, please contact us at [fwprg22@mt.gov](mailto:fwprg22@mt.gov) and the planning team will include you in future comment and engagement opportunities.
- Q: Will there be electronic copies of meeting resources available? (*Missoula, 2.28.23*)





- A: Yes. All information shared at the public meetings – including a recording of the presentation provided by FWP staff and facilitators – is available on FWP’s [website](#).
- You already know what you are going to do. You are just going through the legal process. *(Written)*
- Leave Fish Creek the way it is. *(Written)*
- There is an appreciation of the deference to the public in this plan. *(Missoula, 2.28.23)*
- There is an appreciation that the proposed measures show you all listened and incorporated feedback. *(Remote, 3.1.23)*
- There is an appreciation for the amount of information disseminated in this process. *(Missoula, 2.28.23)*
- Note: please define the acronyms somewhere in written and/or printed documentation. *(Written)*

### Recovery Zone

- The concept of four zones is good but the Recovery Zone didn’t include a lot of discussion. The state land is riddled with weeds, and as more people come in, we need to get after the weeds now before they spread more. *(Missoula, 2.28.23)*
- I understand this is a recreation plan/strategy, but probably 90% of the state managed lands fall into the “Recovery Zone.” The Recovery Zone needs work – there are too many weeds; too many roads; and a lot of degraded habitat. Reforestation needs are high. *(Written)*
- Can there be some mention about these restoration needs in this zone. *(Written)*
- The degradation of the area is incredible. *(Missoula, 2.28.23)*

### Roads and Infrastructure

- Q: If we have more traffic on Fish Creek Road, how will the roads and infrastructure be maintained? *(Missoula, 2.28.23)*
- Q: During the field trip, it was mentioned that whether the aim is to increase tourism or protect habitat, the Forest Service is responsible for maintaining the road. What cooperation have you had in this? *(Missoula, 2.28.23)*
  - A: The FS has been invited to all the meetings and there is a commitment to review the work that has already been done. The Lolo National Forest plan revision process is happening at the same time, so we will review this planning effort to ensure things are aligned. Roads are a long-standing issue. We are not proposing things that the FS is immediately concerned about. For example, when talking with OHV groups about new routes, this obligates the FS. We are trying not to obligate the FS in this process.
- Q: Parking spaces have sprouted up along the road. Will these be blocked off or addressed, even though it is not currently in the plan? *(Remote, 3.1.23)*
  - A: Parking spaces have been talked about, and FWP needs to be thoughtful about where they are occurring. When Fish Creek can be accessed at many



places, it decreases the fishing experience on Fish Creek. FWP will be mindful of spreading out parking and access to the creek for angler experience.

- There are concerns surrounding the increase in dust from roads as their use increases. *(Missoula, 2.28.23)*
- Roads – keep densities low. Keep them well-maintained. *(Written)*
- “State park” freeway sign & improved road will overwhelm Fish Creek. *(Written)*
- That road used to be a cost-share agreement with the FS and Plum. I am not seeing any travel management strategies in the plan. It seems like that would be all-encompassing of these travel issues. *(Superior, 3.2.23)*
  - A: FWP Staff – When FWP purchased the agreement, the cost-share agreement was between FS and Plum around how to share timber benefits and the cost of road maintenance. FWP sees the watershed in recovery status. In the future, there will be timber extraction and stewardship in that way. There are easement rights now, but at the end of the day, the commitment to maintain roads lies with the FS. A cost share doesn’t really exist now. Regarding a travel management plan, with the travel plan currently in place, many of the roads that were closed before FWP owned them will remain closed. Some arterials were open before and will remain open. Closed roads will remain closed. Arterials will remain open. There may be benefits to the seasonal closures (outside summer and hunting seasons) of some roads. The distribution of a map should be a product in this strategy or a soon next step.
- Open more existing roads to lessen congestion. *(Written)*
- Roads left open will stay open closed degrade, and reduce fire prevention process. *(Written)*

## Safety

- Q: Have you considered public safety in this process? *(Missoula, 2.28.23)*
  - A: Public safety has come up frequently throughout the planning process and will be addressed in the draft recreation management strategy.
- Q: Has there been any thought into recreational shooting as a safety issue? There are concerns about AR shooting as a safety issue, so more information is needed about recreational shooting. *(Remote, 3.1.23)*
  - A: FWP hopes to curtail the recreational shooting that has been happening.
- There must be considerations for public safety and coordination with the Forest Service. There are a lot of bad trees, especially at the North Fork trailhead. He lost his wife because a dead tree fell on them. The Forest Service is responsible for cleaning up dead trees and needs to take care of the roadways before letting more people in. *(Missoula, 2.28.23)*

## Strategy Scope

- Q: How does management work across fishing access points, terrestrial areas, and river surfaces? *(Missoula, 2.28.23)*



- Q: Within the Zones, was there a differentiation between State Park and WMA? *(Missoula, 2.28.23)*
- Q: Does this plan/Zoning go all the way to the state line or stop as map indicates? *(Missoula, 2.28.23)*
- Q: Was there a decrease in fishing after the fire? No one went in after the fire until the great bloom. Is it the plan to bring more tourists in after the small fires in Fish Creek? *(Missoula, 2.28.23)*
  - A: No, that is not the plan.
- Q: Are desired future conditions only concerned with recreation, or are they also concerned with wildlife and habitat? *(Missoula, 2.28.23)*
  - A: This strategy is primarily concerned with impacts to place from recreation, including impacts on ungulates. It doesn't focus on biodiversity broadly, but it is concerned with the impacts of recreation on biodiversity.
- Q: How far does this plan go? Why did you pick Fish Creek drainage? Is this the first step, or does this become a national park? The drainage is small. With all the bike and hike trails, conflict with wildlife is a concern, so what is the long-term goal? There has been a dramatic change in a short period of time. I have spent a lot of time back there on horses and have seen issues with weeds (especially Hounds Tongue near Williams Peak). There are just so few places wildlife has sanctuary anymore, and wildlife is running out of places to go as people keep infringing on the WMA. Out-of-state cars park along the road and 50 ft rigs try to pull in and get stuck. There's just not a lot of land (40,000 acres isn't a lot). It is sad to see the pressure on the watershed and can wish it was like it was, but it's sad to see what it's turning into. Are the groups you talked to the people that have been using it for years and years? How have long-timer's and new-comer's usage differed? What do you do with these comments? Are they actually incorporated? What about the gravel road going in? If you are increasing activity and putting more on a road that is already stressed, what will you do to improve the roads (like fix drainage)? *(Superior, 3.2.23)*
  - A: FWP Staff - Looking at the map, the FWP jurisdiction is only 40,000 acres. FWP chose Fish Creek because it is one of the Wildlife Management Areas that has intense recreation pressure but the least infrastructure. FWP has similar priorities around other state parks and WMAs that have draft plans, but it is less concerned about recreation pressure there than at Fish Creek. Where does it go? This is the first real effort, and the life of a good plan is only as far as you can see. In some places, we are turning the clock back, and in others, we are trying to plan up to 10 years in advance. We are trying to set it up so the infrastructure and trajectory are ready for the near future (i.e., cap and corral dispersed site and add some recreation amenities, but that's it. FWP acknowledges the concern over the increased rate of change. We don't know what the plan is 60 years from now but have pride in how FWP has made decisions in the past to secure the resources used now. We will adjust as best as can.
  - A: Facilitators - The vast majority of people we reached out to have been using Fish Creek for a long time. About a quarter are relatively new and a few have not



used it yet. Several self-identified mountain bikers haven't been to Fish Creek yet but expressed interest. Comments taken will be incorporated in a draft strategy, which tries to thread the needle between diverse interests and the responsibilities of the agency. In the end, it's the agency's decision.

- A: FWP Staff - When FWP bought Fish Creek, the road had complicated ownership. The FS has responsibility and funding over the road. So, for us to ask for road funding from FWP, we can't apply FWP funding to roads for statutory reasons. The issue of roads is a challenging conversation. (Audible exasperated reaction to last night's question about paving the road one day, laughter about leaving it unpaved to slow down out of staters.) There has been discussion about increasing access to some campgrounds but not all. FWP has also heard issues around getting into those roads in winter, so it can better communicate that it's not safe in the winter. We are hoping these efforts are getting a cap on recreation pressure, not increasing it.

### Trail Use & Development

- Q: Was there anyone asking about e-bikes and what that looks like on the landscape? (*Remote, 3.1.23*)
  - A: Only one person has commented up on e-bike comments during the process. There were 2 legislations proposed this session around definitions, but they were both tabled. E-bikes are currently considered motorized vehicles. If FWP moves towards mountain bike trail conversations, e-bikes will need to be included in them.
- Q: Will there be a map/is there a map started for routes open for motorized vehicles on FWP roads? Right now, there are 3 loops on the south end of Fish Creek and 1 on the north end. There is concern that there will only be 2 maintained in the draft. (*Superior, 3.2.23*)
  - A: There will be a map. In conversations with motorized recreation interests, there was interest in a route near I-90, so highlighting that may cause some issues with parking, especially for nearby homeowners. Out some years, it may be better for developing parking, but this should be considered later. The strategy won't be closing any routes.
- MTB Missoula can speak to the concerns of mountain bike trail development. The organization values being cognizant of impacts on the land. People like mountain biking because they value an intact landscape. They are not looking to push mountain bike trails at all costs, nor are they looking to displace wildlife or add sediments to the water. There are limits that need to be set and not all landscapes should be under consideration. They want trail development in a responsible manner. (*Missoula, 2.28.23*)
- Absolutely no mountain bikes. (*Written*)
- I am interested in mapped routes for gravel bicycles using the existing road system. (*Written*)



- E-bikes have a place and need to be used to access the outdoors in the right places. *(Remote, 3.1.23)*
- Western Montana Trail riders pointed out that the draft didn't bring up trail width, but it should. The standard OHV width is 50 inches, and it's getting wider. *(Missoula, 2.28.23)*
- We had a grant back in about 2012 procured to maintain and develop trails and loops for OHV recreation. We had to apply to the Darby loop trails because of no action with the Fish Creek State *(Written)*
- We need OHV riding trails as there are only about 3 currently miles on the Lolo Forest system. *(Written)*
- To reiterate, if you build it, they will come. Especially with mountain bikes. You can do that anywhere and on the already closed roads that exist. As soon as you put that on the map and invite people to mountain bike there, more people will come. I don't want that. *(Superior, 3.2.23)*
- Put some of this discussion back on the recreators. Some places just aren't appropriate for certain activities. Take wider OHV rigs to a place where the trails are wider. Don't take electric bikes to places that aren't appropriate or trail systems that weren't designed for them. *(Missoula, 2.28.23)*

### **Wildlife and Natural Values**

- FWP is not treating this land as wildlife management. They need to include travel corridors and more law enforcement if use is going to increase (e.g., there is more garbage everywhere). Once something is established, there is no going back. In this state, people are currently put first, and this needs to change. Wildlife needs to come first. Wildlife needs to be a higher priority than people's fun and making money. *(Missoula, 2.28.23)*
- Fish Creek is a small place. The 41,000 acres include state park land and WMA, where the priority is fish, wildlife, and human enjoyment of fish and wildlife. Don't try to squeeze too many uses into Fish Creek. We need to know the existing conditions, including an empirical, detailed description of resources in Fish Creek. A lot of the area is a restoration site, so we need to make sure anything that is let in doesn't detract from the quality of the sites people will enjoy. *(Missoula, 2.28.23)*
- How are wildlife & fish prioritized? *(Written)*
- Fish & wildlife values (habitat, connectivity) should remain #1 objective and driver. *(Written)*