

Executive Summary
Madison River Recreation EA and Proposed Rules
April 19, 2018

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) is proposing a recreation management plan and administrative rules for the Madison River from the outlet of Quake Lake downstream to its confluence with the Jefferson River near the town of Three Forks, Montana. A recreation management plan and administrative rules are warranted to provide guidance for managing river recreation and FWP-managed access sites on the Madison, in a way that protects the outstanding natural resource values of the Madison River and improves the quality of the recreation experience for all users. While not a resource management plan, this plan does recognize the vital role that resources play in the recreation experience and the potential impacts that recreation can have on those resources.

Overview

FWP has gathered information on Madison River use through mail-in and on-site surveys, scoping meetings and informal public comment to provide insight into how satisfied people were with their Madison River experience. The results indicated several areas of concern including crowding of recreationists on the river and at access points, perceived over-use by commercial outfitters and the increasing amount of visitor impacts to natural resources. These social conflicts led to the displacement of some Madison River users, especially among Montana residents. No proposal is made to manage the heavy tuber use which occurs between Warm Springs Recreation Area and Black's Ford Fishing Access Site during July and August on the lower Madison River due to the occurrence of higher water temperatures which acts to minimize the angling effort during peak tuber use.

The Madison River can be divided into 4 distinct reaches of river based on the predominate recreational use. The upper reach from Quake Lake to Lyons Bridge, is used predominately by wade/bank anglers. Lyons Bridge to Ennis Bridge is predominately float anglers. Ennis Bridge to Ennis lake is dominated by wade/bank anglers. Finally, the lower reach from Madison Dam to the confluence of the Jefferson River is typically made up of recreational floaters and float anglers.

Recreational Use Trends

Data indicates that overall recreational use on the Madison River continues to increase. This is likely due to a combination of an increasing population in nearby towns, a healthy fishery and a general increase in the popularity of river recreation. The total number of out-of-state angler days has increased significantly. To date, fish populations have remained relatively stable despite the significant increase in river use. However, FWP has concerns that increased use may reach a level that negatively impacts fish populations, especially during warm summer months.

Commercial use on the Madison River is rising annually. The reach between Lyons Bridge FAS and Ennis FAS is the most heavily impacted by commercial users but the numbers of trips in all reaches of the River is rising. Between 2007 and 2017 FWP has issued 306 Madison Special Recreation Permits (SRP) to individual permittees. Of the 306 permits that have been issued, 294

permits were for fishing outfitters and the remaining 12 were issued to shuttle services and scenic trips. In 2017, there were 203 permits issued to fishing outfitters, the highest number to date in a single season. Madison River trips reported by commercial outfitters has increased by 72% since 2008.

FWP began the process of developing a recreation plan for the Madison River based on the best information available and in accordance with the river recreation rules process. FWP, Region 3 staff organized a Madison River Citizen Advisory Committee (MCAC) in 2012 which included 7 members representing fishing outfitters, landowners, anglers and local business owners. The MCAC recommendations made to FWP were presented to the public for comment in 2013. At the recommendation of the MCAC, FWP conducted a mail-in survey in 2016 and a year-long on-site survey in 2017 to gather additional river user information. In 2016 FWP reinitiated the Madison River process by conducting three public listening sessions, and in 2017 drafted a Madison River management plan environmental assessment and associated rules. In 2016, FWP also changed the fishing regulations to open the reach between Lyons Bridge and McAtee Bridge to year-round angling as recommended by the MCAC.

The recommendations made by the MCAC included thresholds of use to aid the department in future recreation management on the Madison River. The recommendation states that when social crowding data indicates that an established threshold on a particular reach of river has been exceeded, FWP should consider "least to most restrictive" management actions. When FWP began drafting the Madison River EA and proposed rules in 2016, the thresholds of use that the MCAC recommended had been exceeded. A recommendation by the MCAC also included maintaining the lower Madison River reach between Greycliff and Milwaukee as a "primitive reach".

Alternatives and Analysis

1. No Action Alternative

The no action alternative would mean that the current memorandum of understanding with the BLM, where the SRP governs the recreational use on the Madison River, would remain.

If the No Action Alternative was selected, recreational use levels would likely continue to increase. This could lead to a further erosion of the public's satisfaction with the recreation experience. It may result in physical impacts to streambanks, erosion, trail making, littering, and trespassing and may result in ecological impacts negatively affecting the fishery. There is potential for unchecked increases in use to have a negative effect on the local tourism economy if undesirable recreational conditions result in fewer people choosing to recreate (and spend money) on the Madison River. Increases in commercial use would increase SRP revenues for FWP. However, increasing use levels also increase administrative costs, including Madison River SRP administration, latrine pumping, road repair, general maintenance, and enforcement.

2. Preferred Alternative

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks developed the preferred alternative and its management strategies based on years of data collection, surveys, public meetings, working groups, field observation, commercial use reports and MCAC recommendations.

- Establish a cap on the number of outfitters at current use levels.

- Restrict commercial use based on the reach of river and 2016-17 levels of use.
- Designate a day of the week as non-commercial use in rotating reaches of the river.
- Prohibit the use of a vessel or float tube to gain access for angling in the two walk/wade reaches of the river.
- Prohibit the use of glass containers on the Madison River from the Quake Lake outlet to the confluence with the Jefferson River.
- Prohibit commercial use from Greycliff FAS to the Madison River's confluence with the Jefferson River to maintain the unique resource value of that reach.
- The Commission will review the rules governing recreational use on the Madison River every five years.

The preferred alternative is designed to improve the recreation experience on the Madison River by reducing crowding and social conflicts between users while attempting to ensure minimal economic and administrative impact. Increasing use necessarily puts increased stress on natural resources, including fisheries. The preferred alternative may alleviate potential degradation of environmental quality along with increased stress from boats, anglers, diseases, and climate change. The five-year review period would allow the Commission to regularly review the data accumulated over each five-year period to ensure that the rules are effective.

The preferred alternative takes into consideration what limiting new outfitters and trip restrictions on the Madison River will do to recreationists and businesses on other area rivers, such as the Yellowstone, Jefferson, or Missouri. FWP anticipates that these rules will not cause any measurable changes to the use of other rivers because it is not attempting to reduce current Madison River use, only maintain use at current levels. Any increase in use on these other rivers, therefore, is a natural outcome of the unrestricted growth in angling days and commercial fishing outfitter numbers.

3. MCAC Recommendations

The MCAC recommendations are divided into three sub-categories: general river-wide recommendations to be implemented immediately; river-wide thresholds (standards) and triggered management actions; and recommendations for specific river reaches including access sites.

- Collect accurate recreation data for each reach of the Madison River.
- Conduct an annual survey of SRP permittees.
- Develop and implement effective education outreach efforts.
- Evaluate effectiveness of management actions.
- Baseline for the acceptable number of users could be determined from the initial three years of user surveys.
- If the number of users is exceeded by 10% for two successive years, management actions may be triggered. Similarly, if user satisfaction falls to below 80% for two successive years, management actions may also be triggered.
 - Use the least restrictive management option if a threshold is met or exceeded before proceeding to more restrictive actions.
 - Capital improvement projects at FASs and BLM Recreation Areas designed to alleviate congestion.

- Public outreach and education about expectations during peak use
- Open river from Lyons Bridge to McAtee Bridge year-round.
- Prohibit glass containers.
- Reduce litter on the lower Madison through cooperative agreement and enforcement.
- Increase FWP and BLM enforcement presence and patrols during the peak season to regulate crowding and on the lower Madison
- Designate the reach of river between Black's Ford FAS and Milwaukee FAS to maintain the current recreational values of this unique reach of river for those who enjoy the solitude it affords.