DECISION NOTICE:
Lolo Area Lease Agreement
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
3201 Spurgin Road
Missoula, MT 59804
(406) 542-5500

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED PROJECT
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to enter into a lease agreement for up to 5 years with current owners for a 1.27 acre site upon which a visitor center exists. This site in Lolo, adjacent to Travelers' Rest State Park, is part of a cooperative effort with the community of Lolo and the Travelers' Rest Preservation and Heritage Association (TRPHA). Leasing this site will allow FWP to create an administrative presence in order to establish a local management in the Bitterroot Valley to oversee the day-to-day activities for both Travelers' Rest and Fort Owen State Parks.

Since its inception, local residents, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai tribes, and local and county governments have supported Travelers' Rest. One of the most obvious collaborative efforts in support of the park is the unique management agreement between FWP and the nonprofit TRPHA. The state park is owned by FWP, however, the day-to-day management and operations of the park are the responsibility of TRPHA. Because of this arrangement, TRPHA has the ability to develop additional partnerships with federal agencies, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, and others for support of the organization's educational and interpretive activities at Travelers' Rest.

Need and Benefits
Travelers' Rest State Park encompasses a mixture of grasslands and cottonwood galleries with native shrubbery growing along Lolo Creek's floodplain. The site hosts numerous Lewis and Clark reenactments and historic presentations that incorporate the interpretation of natural and cultural aspects of the site. Since visitor data collection started in 2004, the park has seen a steady increase in visitor traffic. In 2008, Travelers' Rest received 16,500 visitors and of those, approximately 3,400 were local school children. This site holds significant potential for improved tourism revenues in the community.

Presently, the visitor center is housed in a 30' yurt (approximately 700 sq. ft.), which has provided accommodations for the visitor center desk, interpretive area, retail merchandise, and presentations. During peak programs, the yurt is too small to accommodate large groups of people and still provide space for an open reception area.

On a 1.27-acre site adjacent to the State Park, the owner built the 10,400 sq. ft. building, included in the proposed lease agreement, to house a portion of their heritage and artifact collection. This building is not open to the public. The Owner collection focuses on Native Americans, Lewis and Clark and the history of logging in Western Montana as it all relates to Travelers' Rest State Park and Western Montana.

During the past two winters, the park has offered an educational and interpretive storytelling series about the history and cultural resources of the site. In 2008, these programs were conducted in the 30' yurt and the average attendance for these presentations was 30 people. Now in 2009, the owners have allowed this series to be housed in their building and attendance is averaging around 70 attendees. Staff partially attributes this increase to having the presentations in the heated building.

The opportunity for FWP to lease this building would allow FWP to establish a dedicated visitor reception area with a small retail space, separate park administration offices, a dedicated presentation area that can accommodate 100 participants and manage the museum. Besides the new visitor center space and office space, under FWP management, the museum would be open to the public, which would provide additional tourism and recreational opportunities for the public. With these changes, the yurt could be used for educational programs presented by the TRPHA staff and volunteers.

In addition to improvements to the facilities available to FWP and the public under the lease, the creation of FWP parks administrative offices would assist FWP in establishing a local presence in the Bitterroot Valley to oversee the day-to-day management of both Travelers' Rest and Fort Owen State Parks. Fort Owen is located approximately 15 miles south of Travelers' Rest along Highway 93 and preserves the remains of the first white settlement in Montana. Fort Owen was used as a regional trading post in the 1850s and its remaining adobe and log buildings are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Supervision of both parks is currently administered from FWP's regional headquarters in Missoula.

Alternative A: No Action.
If FWP declines the opportunity to lease the building for office space, a visitor center, and museum adjacent to Travelers' Rest State Park, the Owners will continue to operate their museum as they are now, which is currently closed to the public except by appointment. TRPHA lacks the funds to operate the site and park management may be impacted while public benefit will be reduced.

Alternative B: For FWP to enter into a lease for up to 5 years for the site adjacent to Travelers' Rest State Park.
The lease of the building would provide FWP with enough space for a formal visitor center for Travelers' Rest State Park. The lease would also transfer the day-to-day management of the building and its heritage collection from the Owners to FWP, which will allow the collection to be viewed by the public during the normal hours of operation of the park.

PUBLIC PROCESS AND COMMENT
The EA was sent out and the public comment period began April 21, 2009, and ran through May 12, 2009. Legal notices were published in the *Missoulian*, the *Helena Independent Record* and the *Ravalli Republic*. There were 17 full copies, 46 electronic versions, and 136 post cards about the EA that were sent to interested parties consisting of neighbors, friends, conservation groups, Montana state legislators, county & state departments or agencies. The Travelers' Rest State Park – Owner Building Lease EA was posted on the MFWP web site April 21, 2009. A statewide news release was also sent out.

There were nineteen individuals from the public that gave comments regarding the EA, all were in favor of the proposed action to lease the Owner Building and associated land the building occupies. Within the comments received, there were many who went on to say how important this proposal is to Travelers' Rest & Fort Owen State Parks. Here are many of them:

- "Would prefer a longer or permanent term."
- "Have attended lectures at the Owner's museum that were very informative and generally well attended. These presentations, many by Native Americans and Natural

Historians will continue under the lease arrangement. Agree that these presentations are and will increasingly become an important tourism magnet." "It would be better to purchase these buildings as proposed during the last legislative session than to lease them as currently proposed. However, it is vitally important that the function of this building be maintained."

- "Feel that the lease of the building-museum and land adjacent to Travelers' Rest would be a great addition for the public. This would be a great historic destination for tourists as well as local residents. The education value in itself would be significant." "In favor of FWP establishing a local presence in the Bitterroot Valley through this 5 year lease agreement."
- "Travelers' Rest State Park must have a stable, all weather facility to continue growth and to more fully serve the area. Leasing this building and ground will allow creation of the facility described above as well as offering a State Parks presence in the Bitterroot Valley."
- "Having an on-site museum and actual building for presentations is great! This park needed something to make it stand out a bit more and become more of a community focus."
- "Great idea."
- "Register my wholehearted approval of the proposed 5-year lease for the Owner building. This facility offers a wonderful opportunity for Travelers' Rest to function not only as a state park and National Landmark, but also as a means to present and preserve the history of the site and to be the special place it has become."
- "It has major tourism potential for the state of Montana. Bringing the site to it's next level is more than a small volunteer group can do and the state's assistance would be valuable."
- "The opportunity to move the Travelers' Rest office space from it's existing location to the Owner building would provide better management, and the visible presence of FWP at Travelers' Rest State Park would be a positive improvement to the management and public recognition of the Park."
- There is no mention of the needed changes in road access or parking. *FWP response: Will make appropriate temporary changes for road access until a more permanent project can be implemented.*
- "The building provides room to continue preserving and displaying the artifacts associated with the history of western Montana and our nation as well. Since there was so much early history made in the Bitterroot Valley, including Fort Owen State Park is just a natural addition and opens up another great interpretive opportunity."
- "In 1997, Missoula County adopted the *Missoula County Parks & Conservation Land Plan*. While the plan is primarily a Missoula County Parks Plan, it also recognizes and acknowledges the importance of parks and recreation areas managed by others. A stated Lolo community goal, at the time the plan was adopted, was the need for additional historic-based park areas. Since the adoption of the plan, the Travelers' Rest State Park has come to fruition. The local and national heritage associated with Travelers' Rest and the Lewis & Clark Trail will play an important role in the future of the region. FWP's plan to enter into a lease agreement with the current owners of the building adjacent to Travelers' Rest is consistent with the Missoula County plans noted above."

DECISION

Based on the analysis in the Environmental Assessment (EA) and the applicable laws, regulations and policies, I have determined that this action will not have a significant effect on the natural or

human environment. Therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement will not be prepared. It is my decision to implement Alternative B, the *Proposed Action* and proceed with FWP' proposal to lease the Owner Building and associated land. This action also requires the approval of the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission. By notification of this Decision Notice, the draft EA is hereby made the final EA with the FWP responses in this Decision Notice. The final EA with Decision Notice may be viewed at or obtained from Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks at the above address. The EA is still available for review at http://fwp.mt.gov/publicnotices/archive_2006,4.aspx.

Lee Bastian 5-19-2009

Lee Bastian **Date**
Regional Park Manager