DECISION NOTICE:
RUSSELL GATES MEMORIAL FAS
IMPROVEMENT PROJECT

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
3201 Spurgin Road
Missoula, MT 59804
(406) 542-5500

Proposed state action:
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes site improvements at the Russell Gates Memorial Fishing Access Site (FAS), including creating a day-use parking area with up to 30 parking spaces, building a new gravel boat ramp, installing a vault latrine, as well as revegetation and stabilization of the river bank. The existing pioneered boat ramps and pioneered parking areas will be reclaimed. The proposed work will provide better separation of the day-use and camping areas while protecting riparian vegetation and reducing human caused sedimentation into the Blackfoot River. The purpose of the proposed project is to accommodate public recreational use of the site and to stabilize and restore the riverbank to prevent further degradation along this stretch of river.

Montana Environmental Policy Act
The Montana Environmental Policy Act requires Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (MEPA) to assess significant potential impacts of a proposed action to the human and physical environment. In compliance with MEPA, an Environmental Assessment (EA) was completed for the proposed project by FWP and released for public comment on October 27, 2009.

Public Process and Comment
The EA was sent out and the public comment period began October 28, 2009, and ran through November 30, 2009. Legal notices were published twice in the *Missoulian*, the *Helena Independent Record*, *Silver State Post*, and the *Seeley Swan Pathfinder*. Also, there was a statewide press release and a posting on the FWP website. FWP distributed copies of the draft EA (or postcard notification of its availability) to 216 neighbors, friends, private organizations and businesses, conservation groups, Montana state legislators, county & state departments or agencies, and individuals (including adjacent property owners), before the comment period began. Email notification of the EA's availability was sent to 33 people in 6 State of Montana agencies and offices. The EA was available in its entirety on FWP's Internet web site (http://fwp.mt.gov, under "Recent Public Notices") beginning October 27, 2009.

Alternative A: No Action
If no action is taken, users of this site will continue to park haphazardly and degrade current vegetation along the road and around the trees, and the

bank vegetation will continue to erode and the sloughing banks will continue to add sediment into the river and lateral erosion will continue to threaten campsites and the access road to the campsites at Russell Gates Memorial FAS. Furthermore, the likelihood that the road and campsites along the river could be lost over several years of heavy scouring is a possibility. If this were to happen, FWP would have to close off the lost section of road. This alternative would leave the longevity of the site in continual question.

Alternative B: Develop Downstream Boat Ramp:
This alternative would provide fewer parking spaces than Alternative C and the gravel boat ramp would be downstream of the existing campsites. This alternative would provide more distance between the established eagle nest and the boat ramp and would provide more vegetative cover between the boating activities and the nesting site. However, this alternative costs significantly more than the proposed preferred alternative, due to the additional work required to add a road and to protect known cultural sites at this location. Furthermore, this alternative would not include the bank stabilization work due to the higher costs of the work necessary at this downstream location, not meeting all the objectives as well as the preferred Alternative C.

Alternative B Cost Estimate for Downstream Site $220,000.

Alternative C: Preferred Alternative: Develop Upstream Boat Ramp:
The preferred alternative will develop approximately 30 designated parking spaces to protect the native vegetation and will replace and reclaim the pioneered boat ramps with a new gravel boat ramp in a better location, as well as stabilize and revegetate along the riverbank. The proposed work will also provide better separation of the day-use area from the designated camping area and add a new vault latrine. This alternative meets guidelines for eagle nesting security.

Currently the project budget is $150,000 and the preferred alternative is within that budget and best meets the objectives to accommodate the numbers of users of the site and to preserve and to stabilize the riverbank to prevent further degradation along this stretch of river as well as provide better separation of the day-use area and the designated camping area.

Alternative C Preferred Alternative Cost Estimate for Upstream Site $150,000.

Summary of Public Comment

A 30 day public comment period extended from October 27, 2009, through November 30, 2009.. Eight comments were received with seven in favor of the proposed project and one not supporting the project as proposed. A synopsis of the comments and FWP's response to the comments and concerns are described in the following.

Comments in support of the proposed action:

- *" we would like to comment in support of the Russell Gates FAS improvements. This site seems to have been seeing increased use by both floaters and campers the last few years, so updated facilities would be helpful and nice. A good boatramp, streambank stabilization and reveg, and more parking space would top the list for us."*

- *"I totally support the preferred alternative C. I see no reason to have to complete an EIS to complete the proposed alternative. The EA adequately covers the work to be done and the impacts to the area with and with out the improvements.*

  Although I do not live in the area presently, I am well aware of the public use impacts to the area at present and compared to my use of the areas in and around the subject site 30 years ago. Please do proceed with this project. It is necessary and a good use of recreational funds for the preservation of the area, safety of the users and travelers alike."

- *"I offer my full support for the proposed improvements at the Russell Gates FAS. This is a key site for accessing the Blackfoot River and for campers. It is very important that these improvements occur to better facilitate the use of the FAS by all the different users. Good investment at a great time."*

- *"Having fished the Blackfoot much more than study during college 45 years ago (when the fishing was better!) and having read the EA prepared for the Russell Gates Memorial FAS project, I would recommend you select alternative C and proceed with haste--before it it completely ruined by over use."*

- *"The proposed improvements at Russell Gates sound great. Will address key issues I have noted over the years. Long overdue. Good luck on implementation."*

- *" After reading the Draft EA for the Russell Gates Memorial FAS Site Improvement Project, I believe Alternative C is the best plan. It not only improves the public access, but it also helps stabilize the banks of the Blackfoot River which will improve fish habitat and water quality for years to come."*

- *"Please consider the following improvements: 1) One-way entry/exit road, 2) Dust abatement--not necessarily paved, 3) Expand overnight campsites--ie. smaller RV and tentsites. Thanks for your consideration."*

FWP Response
The proposed action (Alternative C) to address the both human use/conflicts and resource impacts at the Russell Gates Memorial FAS is supported by most of the comments received. To address the comment suggesting alternative improvements FWP contends the proposed site design should significantly reduce the traffic volume in the camp area, decrease human impacts on the river bank and re-direct boat launch to a more suitable site thus minimizing the traffic congestion, dust and vegetative trampling. The design of the launch area, parking lot and roadway will achieve similar results to a one-way traffic flow at significantly less cost and smaller footprint on the landscape. There is no plan to asphalt the roads or parking areas. Dust abatement should not be necessary but is a future option. One of the project goals is to preserve the camping opportunity. There will be no net loss of campsites and FWP may convert some day use parking into campsites within the current footprint of the developed campground.

Comment not supporting the proposed action

- *"These are my comments about the proposed changes at Russell Gates:*

  I should have written and opposed the changes (I hesitate to call these improvements) to the Scotty Brown Bridge access. On one hand FWP is concerned about crowding on the Blackfoot in general and the Box Canyon in particular (see Blackfoot Mgmt. Plan proposals). On the other hand FWP makes it easier to park trailers and now at Russell Gates FWP proposes to make it easier to launch boats.

  How about no increased parking at access sites and engineering walk-in access and carry-in access? (Rhetorical Question)

  If FWP is proposing these changes to (and I quote you) "..... better accommodate the recreational pressure from campers, boaters, anglers....." then I think it shouldn't be done. The money and time should be spent on some better solutions; whether that is buying more access and building lower impact access (i.e. carry-in and walk-in).

  Thanks for the opportunity to comment."

FWP Response
The public involvement process for Scotty Brown Bridge FAS concluded in May 2007, with construction completed in December 2008. The facilities at Scotty Brown Bridge did not increase parking capacity and still require "hand launch" at Scotty Brown Bridge FAS.

The proposed improvements at Russell Gates are not intended to increase site capacity but rather re-direct current use in such a way as to minimize impacts to the river bank resources and reduce conflicts between recreational users. The "designated parking lot" and vehicle controls in the camp area will help to define a parking capacity at Russell Gates FAS. The improvements at Russell Gates are consistent with the Blackfoot River Management Direction and the proposed Draft Blackfoot Recreation Management Plan.

Presently FWP has no plans to purchase more public access sites in the vicinity of Russell Gates Memorial FAS. Scotty Brown Bridge FAS is 4 miles upstream and Sperry Grade (DNRC) is approximately one mile downstream from Russell Gates Memorial FAS, these three public sites provide reasonable access to this reach of the Blackfoot River.

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 C and develop approximately 30 designated parking spaces to protect the native vegetation and will replace and reclaim the pioneered boat ramps with a new gravel boat ramp in a better location, as well as stabilize and revegetate the riverbank. The proposed work will provide better separation of the day-use area from the designated camping area and add a new vault latrine. Camping opportunities will be preserved or enhanced within the footprint of the current developed campground.

Appeal

In accordance with FWP policy, this project is subject to appeal, which must be submitted to the Director of FWP in writing and must be postmarked or received within 30 days of this decision notice. The appeal must specifically describe the basis for the appeal, explain how the appellant has previously commented to the department or participated in the decision-making process, and lay out how FWP may address the concerns in the appeal. The appeal should be mailed to: Mr. Joe Maurier, Director, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, PO Box 200701, Helena, MT 59620-0701.

Lee Bastian 12/17/09

Lee Bastian **Date**
Regional Parks Manager