Region 2
3201 Spurgin Road
Missoula, MT 59804
November 21, 2018

Dear Interested Citizens:

Thank you for your thoughtful reviews and comments on a proposal by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) to accept the fee-title donation from a private landowner of 6.25 acres along the Bitterroot River near Stevensville in Ravalli County. FWP proposes to acquire this land with the intention of providing additional public access to the river and developing it as the Stevensville Bridge Fishing Access Site (FAS). Proposed developments at the FAS would include: designated parking areas, gravel access road, primitive camping area, concrete vault latrine, boundary and interior fencing, bicycle/pedestrian and ADA trail connections, and informational signs. The privately owned site has been used locally for river access without facilities, and the existing area where boaters have traditionally launched would continue to serve as the designated launch at the FAS. In addition to improving recreational opportunities along the Bitterroot River, development of the site would provide opportunity to restore the riparian vegetation by revegetating portions of the streambank denuded by past heavy recreational use.

Enclosed is a decision document in which I explain my rationale for recommending that the Fish & Wildlife Commission approve the acquisition and development of the Stevensville Bridge FAS as proposed under Alternative B (which includes additional parking and latrine use on the Town of Stevensville's River Park to the north of the proposed FAS). Upon completion of the public involvement process and by inclusion of the amendment and information noted in this Decision Notice, FWP accepts the draft environmental assessment (EA) as final. The decision document also includes public comment on the proposed acquisition and development.

FWP will request approval for the acquisition and development of this proposed FAS at the regular Fish & Wildlife Commission meeting scheduled for December 10, 2018 in Helena. This meeting is open to the public, as are other regularly scheduled Commission meetings.

Please feel free to contact me at 406-542-5500 with any questions you may have. Thank you for your interest and participation.

Sincerely,

Randy Arnold
Regional Supervisor

RA:sr

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Decision Notice for the Draft Environmental Assessment: Stevensville Bridge Fishing Access Site Proposed Acquisition and Development

November 2018

AMENDMENTS, ADDITIONS OR CLARIFICATIONS TO THE DRAFT EA

1. After the EA was published, the official land survey for this proposal was completed, and the acreage offered for donation to FWP is approximately 6.25 acres (vs. the "approximately 7 acres" used in the draft EA). This change is reflected below in this Decision Notice.

2. It was not specifically stated in the draft EA, but phrases like "accept the donation of . . . acres of private land" meant that FWP was expecting to accept fee title to the private land.

3. The fee-title land acquisition would include a reversionary clause that requires FWP to develop and manage the land as a public fishing access site (FAS). If FWP did not do so, the land would revert to the private landowner.

4. In accepting the donation, FWP would agree to develop a Management Plan specific to the development and maintenance of the FAS and to meet regularly with the private landowner regarding the plan.

PROPOSAL

Type of Proposed State Action

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to accept the donation of approximately 6.25 acres of private land in Ravalli County along the Bitterroot River at Stevensville Bridge for the purpose of providing public access to the Bitterroot River and developing a fishing access site (FAS). This FAS would be adjacent to the south of the existing Stevensville River Park (River Park), owned by the Town of Stevensville (Town). Proposed developments include: designated parking areas, gravel access road, primitive camping area, concrete vault latrine, boundary and interior fencing, bicycle/pedestrian and ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) trail connections, and informational signs. The existing area where boaters have traditionally launched would continue to serve as the designated launch. The launch area has several tiered natural gravel rises, which accommodate launching at all water levels. In addition to improving recreational opportunities along the Bitterroot River, development of the site would provide an opportunity to improve the riparian vegetation on the site by revegetating portions of the streambank denuded by past heavy recreational use.

NARRATIVE SUMMARY OF THE PROPOSED ACTION

Bitterroot River

The Bitterroot River, a tributary of the Clark Fork River, originates at the confluence of the East Fork Bitterroot River and the West Fork Bitterroot River near Connor, Montana. It flows 84 miles north through the Bitterroot Valley to its confluence with the Clark Fork River at Missoula. With the Sapphire Mountains to the east and Bitterroot Mountains to the west, the Bitterroot Valley is especially scenic, contributing to its popularity for angling as well as for tourism and other recreational activities. Fort Owen, founded in 1841 and considered the first European settlement in Montana, is now a Montana State Park and is located 1/2 mile east of the proposed Stevensville Bridge FAS.

The Bitterroot River is prized by fly fishermen along its entire length and is the third-most fly-fished river in Montana behind the Madison and Big Horn rivers. The proposed Stevensville Bridge FAS is located on the Bitterroot River at river mile 35; it would be the only FAS with a boat launch between Florence Bridge FAS (river mile 23 downstream) and Bell Crossing FAS (river mile 40.5 upstream).

According to recent FWP surveys, the estimated average number of angler days per year from 2009 to 2015 on the 38-mile stretch from the mouth (river mile 0) to Bell Crossing FAS (river mile 38) was 36,447, with a low of 30,445 in 2015 and a high of 41,169 in 2011. The regional (FWP Region 2) ranking for this river stretch averaged the 3rd-most fished body of water, and the state ranking for this stretch of river averaged the 15th-most fished body of water in Montana out of more than 1,400 stream reaches, lakes, and reservoirs in Montana surveyed annually by FWP. Because the proposed Stevensville Bridge FAS would provide much needed public access to this stretch of the Bitterroot River, it would likely be frequently used as a put-in and take-out site for floaters and boaters, as well as for anglers on the river.

Details of the Proposed Action

The 6.25-acre Stevensville Bridge FAS proposed for FWP acquisition is currently located on private land (MGY Ranch, LLC) that has been historically used for agricultural purposes and wildlife habitat. Previous and current landowners have informally allowed public access to the Bitterroot River at this site for many years (with no facilities or improvements). Currently, a pioneered boat launch and a pioneered parking area are located on the proposed acquisition site. The unimproved access road that crosses the private land also provides access to the adjacent Stevensville River Park to the north, which is owned and managed by the Town of Stevensville. Portions of the riverbank at the proposed FAS are denuded of native riparian vegetation due to heavy recreational use. The site is popular and heavily used for angling, floating, swimming, picnicking, wildlife viewing, and dog walking.

FWP proposes to accept the donation of 6.25 acres of private land along the Bitterroot River at Stevensville Bridge for the purpose of providing public access to the Bitterroot River and developing a fishing access site. Under the Proposed Action (Alternative B), developments would include: designated parking areas; improved access road; a primitive camping area for RVs, camp trailers and tents; concrete vault latrine; boundary signing and fencing; pathway from the existing bicycle path along the adjacent highway; and informational signs. All roads and parking areas would be graveled surfaces. In addition to improving recreational opportunities along the Bitterroot River, development of the site would provide an opportunity to restore the riparian vegetation on the site by revegetating portions of the streambank denuded by heavy recreational use in the past.

Parking on the west side of the access road would be limited to five or six stalls to reduce compaction of soils in riparian areas and allow vegetation regrowth. Most of the new parking would be developed on the east side of the current access road, with additional overflow parking for approximately 8-12 vehicles being added to the Town's River Park property.

The parking area on River Park is also under consideration for designated shuttle-vehicle parking. Additional parking could potentially be developed on the west side of the river within the Town and Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) property. However, no analysis of these possibilities was considered in this draft EA; it is noted here for future reference purposes.

Development of the proposed campground loop and installation of the vault latrine would require Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), Ravalli County, and Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) review and approval of FWP's design. In the interim, FWP anticipates increased use of the River Park's existing latrine and would work cooperatively with the Town to compensate for the increase in use. Once a final design is decided on between all involved parties, it would be submitted to those agencies for approval. These can be lengthy permitting processes and are expected to extend beyond the 30-day public review/comment period of this EA. However, the review process may be less exhaustive in this case because, in keeping with FAS standards, the proposed campground loop would be primitive. FAS amenities would be limited to picnic tables and fire rings, and

would not include potable water, electrical hook-ups, sewage disposal facilities or a host campground-attendant site. This could potentially be a future project as well as the addition of more campsites if funding is available.

An additional area designated specifically for tent camping to accommodate people traveling on bicycles, motorbikes, and watercraft is contemplated for a future project in cooperation with the Town.

The existing access road off State Highway 269 (Stevensville Cutoff Road) and into the proposed FAS would continue to be used under the proposed action. During the earlier scoping process, including a public meeting FWP held in Stevensville, FWP received an alternative development plan from a member of the public, which included the access road being relocated towards the east on the donated parcel. That proposed plan was contemplated but not considered further due to the prohibitive cost, additional delays it would cause in construction, and the environmental impacts of developing a new road in an area that periodically floods.

The Town's existing road easement (right-of-way across the private parcel) to its River Park would be retained under any alternative. New bicycle/pedestrian and ADA trails would come off the existing nonmotorized trail along State Highway 269 into the FAS. This would accommodate bicyclists and pedestrians, as well as providing disabled access, and provide a safer route into the site by reducing their interaction with highway vehicular traffic.

FWP would confer with MDT regarding potentially adding one or more safety measures on the adjacent highway that could potentially include a turn lane, flashing lights, signage, and/or a reduction of the speed limit at this location.

The property would be managed under existing FWP public use regulations. Management of the FAS would include routine maintenance, control of vehicles and firearms, and other accepted FWP recreation area management policies. Protection of the natural resources, the health and safety of visitors, and consideration of neighboring properties would all be considered and incorporated into development plans for this site. The FAS would be available for day use as well as overnight camping. Development of Stevensville Bridge FAS would provide public access to the Bitterroot River for fishing, boating, and floating, and provide additional recreational opportunities for camping, swimming, hiking, dog walking, picnicking, and wildlife viewing.

DESCRIPTION OF REASONABLE ALTERNATIVES

Alternative A: No Action

If no action was taken, FWP would not accept the donation of the 6.25-acre parcel and the proposed developments would not constructed. Public recreational access to this stretch of the Bitterroot River would continue to be limited and at the discretion of the private landowners, and public recreational opportunities for boating, fishing, floating, swimming, picnicking, camping, wildlife viewing, and walking along the Bitterroot River would also continue to be limited. Continued erosion of the existing pioneered parking area, unimproved access road, and riverbank would continue to contribute to sedimentation of the Bitterroot River.

Alternative B: Acquisition and extended development—Proposed Action

FWP would accept the donation of 6.25 acres of private land along the Bitterroot River at Stevensville Bridge for the purpose of providing public access to the river and developing a fishing access site. Proposed developments at the FAS would include: designated parking areas, a gravel access road, primitive campsites, a concrete vault latrine, boundary and interior fencing, a pathway, and informational signs. A portion of the development (overflow parking and existing latrine) would be on the Town's land, immediately adjacent to the north of the donated land. The existing area on the donated land where boaters have traditionally launched, would continue to serve as the designated launch. The launch area has several tiered, natural gravel rises, which accommodate launching at all water levels. FWP would work cooperatively with the Town of Stevensville to provide parking and sanitation facilities on the Town's River Park.

Alternative C: Acquisition with restricted development
Under this alternative, FWP would accept donation of 6.25 acres of private land along the Bitterroot River, but all development and FAS facilities would be limited to the new FWP land. This alternative would occur if the Town chooses not to (or is not able to) participate in the FAS development project. In other words, the Town's River Park would remain separate and not be a part of the FAS development.

PUBLIC REVIEW PROCESS

Public Notification

A draft environmental assessment (DEA) for the proposed project was made available for public review and comment for a 30-day period from June 7 through July 6, 2018. The DEA was also posted on FWP's website http://fwp.mt.gov, under "Recent Public Notices") from June 7 through July 6, 2018, and comments could be made directly on the EA's webpage[1] or submitted to Region 2 FWP via mail or email. Legal notices were published twice each in the *Bitterroot Star* (Stevensville, June 6 & 13), *Independent Record* (Helena, June 6 & 8), *Missoulian* (June 4 & 6), and *Ravalli Republic* (Hamilton, June 6 & 8) newspapers. FWP distributed 25 printed copies of the DEA, and 63 email-notifications of the DEA's availability, to adjacent landowners and interested individuals, groups and agencies. A statewide News Release was prepared and distributed June 11, 2018 to a standard list of media outlets interested in FWP Region 2 issues.

Public Comment

FWP received 24 emailed, mailed and telephoned comments related to the proposed acquisition and development proposal for the Stevensville Bridge FAS (Appendix). One comment each was received from the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT, Helena), Bitterroot Trail Preservation Alliance (BTPA, Lolo), and Ravalli County Fish and Wildlife Association (RCFWA, Hamilton), and 21 comments were from individual persons. The individual commenters represented various Montana locales: 5 from Stevensville; 4 from Missoula; 3 from Florence; one each from an adjacent landowner, Corvallis, Emigrant, Hamilton, and Noxon; and 4 from unknown locations.

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENTS

Relative to FWP accepting the donation of land and developing it as an FAS, 22 of the 24 commenters (including BTPA and RCFWA) support acquisition and development. (Two of the 24 comments received did not indicate support or opposition: MDT asked to be notified if the FAS development would impact MDT's right-of-way, and one person mentioned land for sale.) Of the 22 commenters supporting the acquisition and development as an FAS: 20 (including BTPA and RCFWA) support FWP's proposed action for development (Alternative B), one person supports the Alternative C development, and one person supports a different development plan.

Comments supporting the acquisition included [number in brackets refer to the Commenter # in the Appendix]:

- **Gratitude to land donor**
  - Great opportunity made possible by a very philanthropic individual [9].
  - We are deeply grateful for the generosity of the landowner. We would appreciate you letting them know [14.4].

[1] Draft EA available (and accessed 24 July 2018) on FWP's website at:
http://fwp.mt.gov/news/publicNotices/environmentalAssessments/acquisitionsTradesAndLeases/pn_0217.html

- We [have] profound gratitude to the willingness of the new owner . . . for her gracious offer to work with you (and thereby the public) in this endeavor. That was truly a breath of fresh air in our community [24b.3].

- **Overall project**
  - Looks like a great deal for everyone. Thank you [1].
  - Great idea; can't wait for it to be done [2].
  - As the recreational use continues to grow, this will be of great asset [3].
  - What a beautiful thing!! A great addition to FWP's extensive and enlightened public fishing access site resume!! Great for the public . . . great for local commerce . . . great for our kids future. Keep up the good work [6]!!
  - Proposal looks great especially the camping portion. Much needed in the Bitterroot [17].
  - Campsites are a rarity in the Bitterroot and with the development of the Stevensville Bridge site the site would provide one more amenity for the Bitterroot River. In addition, the development of the site would contribute to the economy of Stevensville and the surrounding area [23].

- **Location & History**
  - This donation of land to MFWP would help solve a lot of past problems and provide the public with a much needed access site to the Bitterroot. [4.1].
  - This site is a very important river access point [5].
  - The Stevensville boat launch is crucial to floating the mid-river and the site as it has existed is less than ideal. With the sheer volume of use the Bitterroot gets, it has needed a well designed FAS for a long time. [7.1, 7.2].
  - This is a much needed improvement to fishing access on the Bitterroot River [8.1].
  - I wish to express complete support for increase and development of the Stephensville fishing access. The site is heavily used and improvements would be used extensively [13].
  - For decades we have used the area of the proposed FAS for fishing and other recreational purposes [14.1].
  - As a fisherman and Stevi resident, description of proposed actions sounds great to me [15]!
  - This is a great solution for all parties involved. Both private families and commercial fisherman use this site daily. The primitive camping will be an added bonus [20].
  - The fishing access and river park are within the Bitterroot River Important Bird Area (IBA). More than 240 species of birds have been recorded within the IBA, with at least 115 species breeding there. In 2016, there were two pairs of Lewis's Woodpeckers that raised young in the Stevensville River Park and use snags next to the river at the FAS to store food and feed young. We take Lewis's Woodpeckers for granted in the Bitterroot, but we are a hotspot for this species in Montana [21.2].
  - It is exciting to see this site finally moving toward a permanent resolution for public access [22.2].
  - Ravalli County Fish & Wildlife Association . . . has been actively involved in the pursuit of a permanent fishing access at the Stevensville Bridge ever since the initial talks began several

years ago. Public accesses to our Montana water always have been and remain a goal of RCFWA members. Last year, RCFWA members donated $1,000 for reconstruction work at the site so that it would remain usable to floaters and fishermen. whatever occurs there, we plan to stay as involved in the process as we've been for the past couple of decades [24b.ii, 24b.iii].

Comments supporting aspects of the proposed development plan (Alternative B) included:

- **Camping** (11)[2]: Much needed in the Bitterroot; nice amenity or bonus to the FAS
- **Boat launch** (2): Much needed on Bitterroot River, especially for floating the middle portion of river
- **Riparian areas** (2): Planned development would increase riparian resource (vegetation) protection.
- **Parking** (1): Designated parking areas solves existing problems

Suggested changes to (or issues with) the proposed development plan (Alternative B) focused on:

- **Adjacent highway and entry/exit to the FAS** (4): Safety issues related to turning onto/off highway from/into FAS, vehicle speed, roadside parking, and the bridge; consultation with MDT.
- **Camping** (2): Do not want camping at the FAS
- **Parking** (2): Need to guarantee parking for users of the Town's River Park; change location of one or more parking areas.
- **Riparian area and/or vegetation** (2): Vegetation and/or wildlife (bird) habitat protection
- **Access road and right-of-way (ROW) leading into and within the FAS (and continuing on to the Town's River Park)** (1): Move the location of where the road and ROW enters the property as well as where it crosses FAS land
- **Vault toilet** (1): Location
- **State Park** (1): Develop land as a state park, not an FAS
- **Old dump on Town's River Park** (1): Would it be affected by proposed action?

RESPONSE TO PUBLIC COMMENTS

The following comments and FWP responses include specific questions, suggestions or comments received during the public comment period. We acknowledge and thank those who provided positive comments, but responses are not given below. *Public comments* below were grouped and paraphrased for FWP Response below. [Numbers in brackets refer to the Commenter # in the Appendix.]

***1. Camping**: Do not like the idea of primitive camping sites. This location is so heavily used that people staying extended periods will only exacerbate the problems even after the area is improved. Very close to the highway and is not a good fit for that type of site. It would be better to have day-use picnic areas instead of camping sites [8.1].*

RCFWA does not believe it advisable to establish overnight camping at the site and request that you withdraw that component from your development plans [24b.2].

[2] Numbers in parenthesis in this (and the next bulleted-subsection) indicate the number of commenters mentioning (or supporting) this topic.

FWP Response. During the public comment period, 24 comments were received. Of the 24 commenters, 13 addressed camping directly or indirectly. Four commenters specifically mentioned supporting camping while two commenters specifically were opposed to providing camping. Seven other commenters made comments such as:

"I support Alternate B, to accept the donated land & do all the improvements . . . "

"I support the proposed acquisition and development as outlined in the Draft EA."

"As a fisherman and Stevi resident, description of the proposed actions sounds great to me!"

During the scoping process of this project and over the last several decades, FWP has heard from the public that more camping opportunities are needed in the Bitterroot valley.

Also, the entire area west of the access road will be designated as day-use only and will have picnic tables for the public to use while enjoying the river.

2. Land donor recognition. *Would it be possible to show some formal recognition to the donor in either the name of the site or some other signage [9].*

FWP Response. Thank you for this thoughtful suggestion, but the person donating the property does not want any special recognition. However, it may be possible to erect an informational sign to share the passionate desire of the donor to exhibit and encourage good stewardship of the property by the donor, government and public users alike.

3. Riparian area protection from vehicles. *Concrete barriers were the best thing that ever happened towards protecting the cottonwood trees north of the area most commonly used to launch boats. Development needs to have aesthetic but functional barriers to prevent creation of new ramps and protect the soil around the cottonwoods [12].*

FWP Response. FWP is planning to reduce compaction of soils on a sizable portion of the site west of the access road to allow vegetation regrowth. Most of the parking will be eliminated in the area west of the access road and will be relocated on the east side of the access road (away from the riverside) as shown on the preliminary concept site plan for Alternative B in the draft EA. Interior fencing (and any associated barriers) would be designed to allow vehicle use only on the interior roads, parking areas, and gravel boat launch area, thus helping to protect riparian areas and vegetation. Overflow parking would be designed into the Town's existing River Park parking lot to the north. Ideally, future planting of trees in the area along the riverbank would expedite the recovery process and add to the few poor-condition cottonwood trees that currently exist west of the access road.

4. Removing hazard trees and snags, relative to bird habitat. *The FAS and River Park are within the Bitterroot River Important Bird Area (IBA). In 2016, two pairs of Lewis's Woodpeckers raised young in the River Park and used snags next to the river at the FAS. Concerned that creation of the vehicle and trailer parking area and the camping site will remove cottonwood gallery forest trees, including cottonwoods, some pines, and snags. Snags provide important habitat for two of the [Montana] species of concern, the Lewis's Woodpeckers and Pileated Woodpeckers, as well as other cavity nesters. Please be careful to selectively remove snags and dying trees that are particularly hazardous but leave as many as possible and leave large cottonwoods and the understory. If I had to choose between a few camping sites and the presence of snags and mature cottonwoods, I'd choose the snags and cottonwoods [21.2, 21.3].*

FWP Response. A great deal of consideration was given to individual tree removal during site planning, and every tree is evaluated as to whether removal is necessary. If any tree is a hazard and is within falling distance of an improved part of the site (road, boat launch, parking, campsite, trail, etc.), that tree would either be pruned or removed (depending on condition) for visitor safety. Retaining as much wildlife habitat as possible is a critical component of the project. FWP has planted many trees at FASs throughout Region 2 in recent years and recognizes the importance of trees to fish, wildlife and people. Cavity and snag trees will be retained throughout the undeveloped portion of the property.

5. MDT permitting and consultation. *If the FAS development will impact MDT right-of-way, please contact MDT's Missoula District Maintenance Chief, to discuss the review and permitting process [18.1].*

The analysis states that FWP will confer with MDT. Does that mean MDT has not been consulted to date about the safety concern of turning off the highway or bridge into the FAS [22.14]?

> **FWP Response.** The historic use of this site goes back many years and has involved multiple landowners, the Town of Stevensville, and MDT. It is reasonable to conclude that discussions have occurred over the years on a variety of topics pertaining to this location, although existence of specific conversations, decisions and written records is largely unknown. Whenever MDT right-of-way property is involved in an FWP construction project FWP complies and coordinates with MDT requirements. MDT is aware that FWP is proposing to establish a public fishing access site in this location, and several meetings and discussions between the two state departments have been held to discuss the project. MDT reviewed the DEA for this project and stated it had "no comments at this time. However, if the FAS development will impact MDT right-of-way, please contact . . . to discuss the review and permitting process." FWP will work closely with MDT in trying to implement safety improvements to the design of the access.

6. Highway access off Stevensville Cutoff Road [MT Hwy 269]. *Planning for a left turn lane on the highway [heading east] would be very advisable. This road is busy and more access will mean more traffic and potential for accidents. A turn lane and widened access off the main road would be necessary to mitigate the issues [8.2];*

We have some safety concerns regarding traffic and offsite parking. Although these are not specifically FWP issues, we would appreciate these concerns being passed on to the appropriate entities [14.5].

Traffic safety: Traffic leaving Stevensville and heading toward Highway 93 tends to pick up speed and is often substantially exceeding the speed limit by the time it reaches the bridge. This raises concerns about the safety of ingress and egress at the FAS. Additional signage and traffic enforcement would be helpful [14.6]

Offsite parking safety: We own the parcel at the southwest corner of the bridge, kitty-corner from the FAS. Between our parcel and the road is an extra-wide MT DOT right-of-way that is already frequently used as parking for people fishing and recreating on the river. The right-of-way contains an old bridge abutment with a substantial unbarricaded drop-off of about 15 feet. A couple of years ago, an elderly man died after driving over the abutment. When we were contacted by MDT about recent upgrades to the Stevi Cutoff, we asked MDT to install a concrete barricade on the abutment. Nothing happened. We would appreciate FWP reminding MDT that this is an obvious safety issue that could easily be addressed [14.7]

The safety hazard of the access road being so close to the bridge abutment: A left hand turn bay may not be feasible because the deceleration lane would probably be on the bridge. As use at this site increases, the traffic safety hazard posed by trailered boats turning into the site will only increase. In the long run, the cost of road construction cannot be weighed against potential loss of life caused by a traffic accident. [22.14]

Also the effect of moving the access point was not evaluated fully with a different design to the parking lot. Was there any conversation with the MDT on possible funding sources to make this a feasible alternative? Slowing the speed and putting in flashing lights is a poor alternative to fixing it with a proper access point that considers ultimate future growth in popularity and use of the site [22.15].

> **FWP Response.** One of the primary considerations to any FWP recreational design project is safety. The access site and highway approach as exists today have been used by recreationists for many years. Although there may be some long-term solutions which might make the approach the ultimate design in highway safety, it is of immediate concern to FWP to act in an expeditious manner to provide an immediately achievable site and approach design which is significantly safer than exists today. Then, all interested parties can continue to explore more complex and challenging options on how the approach on the highway may be even further

improved. FWP will inquire of MDT as to the feasibility of altering the highway and approach in the future.

FWP will advise MDT of offsite parking and abutment issue (made by Commenter 14) on the southwest corner of the bridge and will ask for MDT input on highway signage that likely would improve safety.

7. Nonmotorized trail bridge along Stevensville Cutoff Road. *Please encourage MDOT to rebuild the small bridge on the non-motorized trail [Bicycle Trail] that you will connect the FAS to [20].*

FWP Response. FWP will advise MDT of this comment (regarding a portion of the trail that would not be immediately adjacent to the FAS). We feel this trail is a unique situation and benefit--where a Town can be connected to a nearby river recreation opportunity. We are excited to pursue extending the trail directly into the river access site.

8. Use of the Town's River Park area for additional FAS parking. *Proposal calls for using some of the area in the Town's River Park parking lot for additional parking spaces for trailers and shuttle vehicles. Those of us who recreate at River Park want to be sure that there will be parking spaces set aside for River Park users. FWP and the Town need to figure out a way to reserve sites for River Park users so that all parking won't be taken up by FAS floaters who tend to spend hours on the river [21.4].*

FWP Response. Parking to accommodate all users is important and FWP will discuss this issue with the Town of Stevensville.

9. Move the access road within the FAS. *A design that considers moving the through road from alongside the river to the back of the parking area on the east side of the parking area should be considered. Using up the valuable space along the river for parking and a through road is a poor use of river side land, is a safety hazard, and impacts the riparian riverside zone. This area should be dedicated to riparian restoration and riverside use like picnicking and river play. Incorporate the day-use parking within the big parking lot foot print [22.8].*

I believe most of the "new" access road would be within the area offered by the land owner and improve the land owner's access point as well. If the reason was that the land owner absolutely would not agree to an easement to implement this alternative, so be it, but state it as such [22.16].

Having the access road to the River Park in-between the parking area and the edge of the river is a poor use of the valuable land next to the river. By moving the access road to the back of the parking area [east of the parking area,] the through traffic intersecting with river bank use could be eliminated, thus making full use of the river side for river play instead of using it up for a road [22.17].

Even if you cannot move the access from the highway to a safer location, then I would highly suggest that a re-configuration of the design of the parking lot be considered that moves the through traffic to the east side of the parking area, thus removing the through road between the parking and river's edge [22.18].

FWP Response. Many design alternatives were initially discussed but eliminated due to a range of factors. Ultimately, the proposed design was the only plan which fit the lengthy set of constraints of the project. Some of the key issues that needed to be considered were: wetlands and areas prone to flooding, floodplain restraints, minimizing tree removal, funding limitations, working within the existing legal road (ROW) easement, accomplishing the project within a reasonable amount of time without spending additional years of inquiry and process planning with the landowner and multiple federal and state governmental agencies as to feasibility.

10. Develop a State Park instead of an FAS. *Considering there is very limited public land of any amount along the entire length of the Bitterroot River and this site will only grow in popularity as the valley's population grows, it would be a great legacy to future generations if all vested interests would work together on a long-range vision for a Montana State Park here. It seems only logical that the State Park Division should be a "partner" in the development and operation and maintenance of this site in the long run [22.3, 22.4].*

FWP Response. FWP will discuss this suggestion with the FWP Regional Parks Manager who works out of the Region 2 (Missoula) FWP office.

11. Human Environment portion of the draft EA; design alternatives. *The EA contains a less thorough recreation discussion on the social environment and the site's location next to the Stevensville River Park and the area's use by more than just fishermen and people accessing the river. If a more thorough discussion had been made of the human environment and current and future recreation uses of the site, I believe you may have looked at other design alternatives [22.4]. This section doesn't describe anything about the actual recreation use of the site, the juxtaposition to the Stevensville River Park and its existing uses and management challenges, and the impact of adding this new use permanent use [22.20].*

FWP Response. FWP anticipates the types of recreational use at the site and at the adjoining Town property to remain relatively unchanged. Most users are looking for opportunities to fish, swim, launch a boat, picnic, camp, hike, bird watch and enjoy the viewshed—all recreational opportunities in this location. The neighboring Town property offers many of these same opportunities. The proposed design offers a wide opportunity to all these users with a minimal amount of impact to the total acreage, and at the same time starts the reclamation/revegetation process along the riverbank. Many of the features being built into the design came from citizens requesting specific considerations be added.

12. Location of the vault toilet. *The location of the vault toilet is a key component of the use and management of this site. Consultation with DEQ about the feasibility of a vault toilet and where it needs to be located should be done before the design of the parking area is finalized. If the FAS parking area is not going to be integrated with the Town's River Park, then a toilet is required. The toilet at River Park is too far from the launch area to be practical [22.9].*

FWP Response. As proposed in Alternative B in the draft EA, FWP is planning to install a new concrete vault latrine at the FAS, which ideally would be in a location central to the boat launch, day-use area, camping area, and parking lots. The Town's River Park also has existing toilet facilities. FWP will follow proper procedural processes with all agencies when seeking an installation location for a vault latrine. FWP believes a permanent concrete vault latrine will be permitted on the FAS property under the proposed development, but in the event it is not permitted, one or more portable toilet units could be installed.

13. Campground host. *Develop a host site for the campground loop, because this site is prone to be a problem place for law enforcement. Issues would be minimized by adding a host site, but a host site needs utilities to recruit and retain a host [22.10].*

FWP Response. FWP would consider supporting a host site. However, electricity, a vault holding tank, and running water would be necessary to develop a full-hookup host site. This may need to be considered as a future site improvement due to current budget limitations.

14. Old dump on the Town's River Park land. *Since no mention of the dump was made, we can only assume that if the preferred alternative is implemented with the additional parking sites added to the River Park, that excavation for these parking sites won't penetrate into the dump. But with no reference to the extent of the dump, who would know [22.20]? Has the state DEQ been consulted on potential impacts from creating a permanent public access to the river, right next to this old dump? I totally understand why this is a case of "let sleeping dogs lie" but the continued existence of a dump that is taking up valuable river side property is something that should be addressed. Between the town, county, state, and the Feds, it's time to develop a long-term plan to mitigate this ongoing barrier to the full potential use of this public property. Phase II perhaps [22.21]?*

FWP Response. The overflow parking stalls (long parking areas) FWP proposes to develop on the Town's River Park land would not be in or on top of the dump area. The stalls are planned for

the existing flat parking area where parking is currently occurring (see Figures 6 and 8 in the draft EA). The concrete parking stops will be repositioned, and the gravel will be regraded.

The DEQ is on FWP Region 2's standard (mandatory) distribution list for all EAs, and was contacted regarding this draft EA.

It would be ideal if the dump did not exist, because the acreage it occupies could serve as additional recreational area for the Town's River Park. But since the dump is Town property, it would be the Town of Stevensville that would need to initiate or address any future planning relative to the dump.

DECISION AND RECOMMENDATION

Based upon the Draft Environmental Assessment and the applicable laws, regulations, and policies, I have determined that the proposed action will not have negative effects on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, I conclude that the EA is the appropriate level of analysis and the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement is unnecessary.

This proposal for FWP to accept the donation of the 6.25-acre property and develop it as a fishing access site received overwhelming support during the public review period. In consideration of these facts and with the addition of this Decision Notice and its Amendment and information herein, I adopt the Draft EA as final.

I have selected the proposed action (Alternative B), to accept the fee-title donation of land from the private landowner and to develop that land as the Stevensville Bridge FAS. Therefore, I am pleased to recommend that the Fish & Wildlife Commission (at its regularly scheduled December 10, 2018 meeting in Helena) accept the fee-title donation of the 6.25-acre property along the Bitterroot River, with an expression of sincere gratitude to the private landowner for this generous gift to Montana. I also recommend that the Commission approve developing this land as an FAS, following the Alternative B development plan.

In accordance with FWP policy, an appeal may be made by any person who has either commented in writing to the department on the proposed project, or who has registered or commented orally at a public meeting held by the department on the proposed project, or who can provide new evidence that would otherwise change the proposed plan. An appeal 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 describe the basis for the appeal, how the appellant has previously commented to the department or participated in the decision-making process, and how the department can provide relief. The appeal should be mailed to: Director, MT Fish, Wildlife & Parks, PO Box 200701, (1420 East 6th Avenue,) Helena, MT 59620-0701.

Randy Arnold
Region 2 Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

11/21/2018
Date

APPENDIX. Comments received by FWP for the proposed acquisition and development of Stevensville Bridge Fishing Access Site.

Com-men-ter #	Via	Para-graph	*Comment*
1	E		*I support Alternate B, to accept the donated land & do all the improvements even the parking on Stevenville's land. Looks like a great deal for everyone. Thank you*
2	E		*Great idea can't wait for it to be done*
3	E		*As a river user, I fully support this acquisition. As the recreational use continues to grow, this will be of great asset.*
4	E	1	*It seems to me that this donation of land to MFWP would help solve a lot of past problems and provide the public with a much needed access site to the Bitterroot.*
		2	*I think MFWP should move forward with this acquisition and development.*
5	E		*I am in full support of FWP accepting this land donation and developing it as a FAS site as proposed. This site is a very important river access point.*
6	E		*What a beautiful thing!! A great addition to FWP's extensive and enlightened public fishing access site resume!! Great for the public .... great for local commerce .... great for our kids future. Keep up the good work!!*
7	E	1	*I'm writing to urge FWP to proceed with the preferred alternative. The Stevensville boat launch is crucial to floating the mid-river and the site as it has existed is less than ideal. The parking is a nightmare, the day-users spread out all over and degrade the streambank while making it difficult to drive a trailer to the water. I think that encouraging single vehicles to use the park lot is the smartest way to avoid problems with floaters.*
		2	*With the sheer volume of use the Bitterroot gets, it has needed a well designed FAS for a long time. Thank you.*
8	E	1	*This is a much needed improvement to fishing access on the Bitterroot River. I agree with plan C mostly, but do not like the idea of primitive camping sites. This location is so heavily used that people staying extended periods will only exacerbate the problems even after the area is improved. Also, it's very close to the highway and is not a good fit for that type of site. It would be better to use those spaces for day use picnic areas that allow people to use the site for water access and day activities only. Either of these will create more costs though because extended use in one area will lead to litter, damage, etc.*
		2	*Also, it may be out of scope somewhat, but planning for a left turn lane on the highway (heading east) would be very advisable. This road is busy and more access will mean more traffic and potential for accidents. A turn lane and widened access off the main road would be necessary to mitigate the issues.*
9	E		*Looks like a great opportunity made possible by a very philanthropic individual. Would it be possible to show some formal recognition to the donor in either the name of the site or some other signage.*
10	M		*We would like to state that we are in favor of the Stevensville proposed FAS plan by Montana FWP. Also, camping opportunities are needed in the Bitterroot.*
11	E		*I support the proposed acquisition and development as outlined in the Draft EA.*
12	E		*The concrete barriers were the best thing that ever happened towards protecting the cottonwood trees north of the area most commonly used to launch boats. Only thing is it prevented all boat trailer access. This spring the barriers were removed. Before the high water boaters were pioneering a new ramp site between the cottonwoods 100' north of the existing ramp. This area, north of the original ramp needs to have an aesthetic but functional barrier to prevent creation of new ramps and protect the soil around the cottonwoods. Thank you.*
13	E		*I wish to express complete support for increase and development of the Stephensville fishing access. The site is heavily used and improvements would be used extensively.*

14	E	1	*I am writing to provide comments on the proposed Fishing Access Site (FAS) at the Stevensville bridge. My wife [name], my son [name] and I are neighboring landowners. For decades we have used the area of the proposed FAS for fishing and other recreational purposes. We appreciate receiving a mailed copy of the Draft Environmental Assessment.*
		2	*We have a few comments on the proposed FAS.*
		3	*First, we enthusiastically support Alternative B. We will be excited to see it become a reality!*
		4	*Second, we are deeply grateful for the generosity of the landowner. We would appreciate you letting them know.*
		5	*Third, we have some safety concerns regarding traffic and offsite parking. We understand that these are probably issues that will need to be addressed by the Montana Department of Transportation (MT DOT), local government or other agencies. Although these are not specifically FWP issues, we would appreciate these concerns being passed on to the appropriate entities.*
		6	*With regard to traffic safety: Traffic leaving Stevensville and heading toward Highway 93 tends to pick up speed and is often substantially exceeding the speed limit by the time it reaches the bridge. This raises concerns about the safety of ingress and egress at the FAS. Additional signage and traffic enforcement would be helpful.*
		7	*With regard to offsite parking safety: We own the parcel at the southwest corner of the bridge, kitty-corner from the FAS. Between our parcel and the road is an extra-wide MT DOT right-of-way that is already frequently used as parking for people fishing and recreating on the river. The right-of-way contains an old bridge abutment with a substantial unbarricaded dropoff of about 15 feet. A couple of years ago, an elderly man died after driving over the abutment. When we were contacted by MT DOT about recent upgrades to the Stevi Cutoff, we asked DOT to install a concrete barricade on the abutment. Nothing happened. We would appreciate FWP reminding DOT that this is an obvious safety issue that could easily be addressed.*
		8	*We appreciate the opportunity to share these comments.*
		9	*Thanks for all the hard work on this excellent project.*
15	E		*As a fisherman and Stevi resident, description of proposed actions sounds great to me!*
16	E		[An adjacent landowner plans to sell property across the river from the proposed FAS and offered FWP a chance to purchase before listing the property for sale.]
17	M		*Proposal looks great especially the camping portion. Much needed in the Bitterroot.*
18	E	1	*I am writing to you regarding the Draft Environmental Assessment for a Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposal to accept a land donation and provide additional public access to the Bitterroot River and develop the Stevensville bridge Fishing Access Site (FAS).*
		2	*Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) staff has reviewed the draft EA and we have no comments at this time. However, if the FAS development will impact MDT right-of-way, please contact Steve Felix, MDT Missoula District Maintenance Chief, to discuss the review and permitting process.*
		3	*If you have any questions or need additional information, please don't hesitate to contact me.*
		4	*Thank you for the opportunity to comment.*
19	E		*I support this acquisition. It will provide increased recreational activities.*
20	E		*This is a great solution for all parties involved. Both private families and commercial fisherman use this site daily. The primitive camping will be an added bonus. Please encourage MDOT to rebuild the small bridge on the non-motorized trail (Bicycle Trail) that you will connect the FAS to.*
21	E	1	*I'm submitting these comments about the Draft EA for the Stevensville Bridge FAS. In general I support the proposal to accept the donation of 7 acres to add to the FAS, and I like many aspects of the proposal. I previous submitted comments prior to the public meeting and I'll repeat some below.*
		2	*1) The fishing access and river park are within the Bitterroot River Important Bird Area (IBA). More than 240 species of birds have been recorded within the IBA, with at least 115 species breeding there. In 2016, there were two pairs of Lewis's Woodpeckers that raised young in the Stevensville River Park and use snags next to the river at the FAS to store food and feed young. We take Lewis's Woodpeckers for granted in the Bitterroot, but we are a hotspot for this species in Montana.*

		3	*I'm concerned that creation of the vehicle and trailer parking area and the camping site will remove cottonwood gallery forest trees, including cottonwoods, some pines, and snags. Snags are a hazard tree and need to be removed near parking and recreation sites, but at the same time they provide important habitat for two of the species of concern, the Lewis's Woodpeckers and Pileated Woodpeckers, as well as other cavity nesters such as other woodpeckers, several species of ducks, chickadees, nuthatches, Vaux's Swifts, owls (a pair of Great Horned Owls nests in a snag next to the pond), squirrels, raccoons, and more. Therefore, please be careful to selectively remove snags and dying trees that are particularly hazardous but leave as many as possible, and leave large cottonwoods and the understory. If I had to choose between a few camping sites and the presence of snags and mature cottonwoods, I'd choose the snags and cottonwoods.*
		4	*2) The Draft EA also calls for using some of the area in the River Park's parking lot for additional parking spaces for trailers and shuttle vehicles, with the agreement of the Town of Stevensville. Those of us who recreate at River Park want to be sure that there will be parking spaces set aside for River Park users. MFWP and the Town need to figure out a way to reserve sites for River Park users so that all parking won't be taken up by floaters who tend to spend hours on the river.*
		5	*Thank you for the opportunity to comment.*
22	E	1	*General Comment:*
		2	*Thank you for the opportunity to comment. It is exciting to see this site finally moving toward a permanent resolution for public access.*
		3	*Considering the fact that there is very limited public land of any amount along the entire length of the Bitterroot River and the fact that this site will only grow in popularity as the population in the valley grows, it would be a great legacy to future generations if all vested interests in the valley would work together on a long range vision for a Montana State Park here. Short of that, I support the alternative to use the Stevensville River Park parking area a[s] part of the area available to provide additional parking.*
		4	*The EA appears to be very thorough in its evaluation of the environmental effects on the biological component. However, it contains a less thorough recreation discussion on the social environment and the site's location next to the Stevensville River Park and the area's use by more than just fishermen and people accessing the river. If a more thorough discussion had been made of the human environment and current and future recreation uses of the site I believe you may have looked at other design alternatives. Plus, since it will function as more than just a Fishing Access Site, it seems only logical that the State Park Division should be a "partner" in the development and operation and maintenance of this site in the long run.*
		5	*Specific Comments by Section:*
		6	*Details of Proposed Action:*
		7	*Page 5:*
		8	*Move the Through Road to River Park: A design that considers moving the through road from alongside the river to the back of the parking area on the east side of the parking area should be considered. Using up the valuable space along the river for parking and a through road is a poor use of river side land, is a safety hazard, and impacts the riparian riverside zone. This area should be dedicated to riparian restoration and riverside use like picnicking and river play. Incorporate the day use parking within the big parking lot foot print.*
		9	*Location of the Vault Toilet: The location of the vault toilet is a key component of the use and management of this site. Consultation with DEQ about the feasibility of a vault toilet and where it needs to be located should be done before the design of the parking area is finalized. If the FAS parking area is not going to be integrated with the River Park, then a vault toilet is required whether there is a campground loop or not. The toilet at the River Park is too far from the launch area to be practical.*
		10	*Develop a host site for the campground loop: This site is prone to being a problem place for law enforcement. Issues would be minimized by adding a host site, but a host site needs utilities in order to recruit and retain a host.*
		11	*Page 10:*

		12	*While I appreciate that my comments proposing a design alternative were included in the document, the response which says the reasons it was not considered further says it was "due to the prohibitive cost, additional delays…. and the impacts of developing a new road in an areas that periodically floods".*
		13	*I suggested this alternative for two big reasons:*
		14	*1. The safety hazard of the access road being so close to the bridge abutment: A left hand turn bay may not be feasible because the deceleration lane would probably be on the bridge. The analysis states that FWP will confer with MDT. Does that mean MDT has not been consulted to date about this safety concern? As use at this site increases, the traffic safety hazard posed by trailered boats turning into the site will only increase. In the long run, the cost of road construction cannot be weighed against potential loss of life caused by a traffic accident.*
		15	*Also the effect of moving the access point was not evaluated fully with a different design to the parking lot. Was there any conversation with the MDT on possible funding sources to make this a feasible alternative? Slowing the speed and putting in flashing lights is a poor alternative to fixing it with a proper access point that considers ultimate future growth in popularity and use of the site.*
		16	*I believe most of the "new" access road would be within the area offered by the land owner and improve the land owner's access point as well. If the reason was that the land owner absolutely would not agree to an easement to implement this alternative, so be it, but state it as such.*
		17	*2. Having the access road to the River Park in-between the parking area and the edge of the river is a poor use of the valuable land next to the river. By moving the access road to the back of the parking area (east of the parking area) the through traffic intersecting with river bank use could be eliminated. Thus making full use of the river side for river play instead of using it up for a road.*
		18	*Even if you cannot move the access from the highway to a safer location, then I would highly suggest that a re-configuration of the design of the parking lot be considered that moves the through traffic to the east side of the parking area, thus removing the through road between the parking and river's edge.*
		19	*Page 18: Human Environment*
		20	*This section doesn't describe anything about the actual recreation use of the site, the juxtaposition to the Stevensville River Park and its existing uses and management challenges and the impact of adding this new use permanent use to this location, nor the existence of the OLD DUMP. Since no mention of the dump was made, we can only assume that if the preferred alternative is implemented with the additional parking sites added to the River Park that excavation for these parking sites won't penetrate into the dump. But with no reference to the extent of the dump, who would know?*
		21	*Has Department of Environmental Quality been consulted on potential impacts from creating a permanent public access to the river right next to this old dump? I totally understand why this is a case of "let sleeping dogs lie" but the continued existence of a dump that is taking up valuable river side property is something that should be addressed. Between the town, county, state, and the Feds, it's time to develop a long term plan to mitigate this ongoing barrier to the full potential use of this public property. Phase II perhaps?*
		22	*Thank you for your consideration of my comments.*
23	E		*The Bitterroot Trail Preservation and Alliance endorses the acquisition of the 7 acres for a fishing access and campsite that is open to all users. Campsites are a rarity in the Bitterroot and with the development of the Stevensville Bridge site the site would provide one more amenity for the Bitterroot River. In addition, the development of the site would contribute to the economy of Stevensville and the surrounding area.*
24a	Ph		*The Ravalli Fish & Wildlife Association generally supports this proposal; we will submit formal comments later.*
24b	E	i	[cover letter] *Dear [Fish & Wildlife] Commission Members: The Board of Directors of the Ravalli County Fish & Wildlife Assoc. (representing the general membership) offer this cover letter showing full support of the letter drafted by life member and past President Dale Burk.*

ii	*Dale, along with other members has been actively involved in the pursuit of a permanent fishing access at the Stevensville Bridge ever since the initial talks began several years ago.*
iii	*Public accesses to our Montana water always have been and remain a goal of Ravalli County Fish & Wildlife members. Last year, RCFWA members donated $1,000 for reconstruction work at the site so that it would remain usable to floaters and fishermen.*
iv	*We ask that you please support this important and heavily used access site.*
1	[comment letter] *Reference is made to the fact that I phoned Rory Zarling, once in June and again on July 3rd, to advise him that I would be submitting a formal comment from the Ravalli County Fish & Wildlife Association regarding the FWP's recent proposal for action to develop the Stevensville Bridge Fishing Access Site. At that time I advised Mr. Zarling that RCFWA would be making a comment in general support of your recommended action and I apologize that a health situation on my part (recent heart surgery) precluded me from getting that message to you by July 6th. Nonetheless, I hasten to get this to you by email today, July 10th, because of the longtime involvement of our organization in the process to achieve an access site at this particular location and because whatever occurs there, we plan to stay as involved in the process as we've been for the past couple of decades. We trust that you will include our commentary in your record of decision.*
2	*For the record, the Ravalli County Fish & Wildlife Association appreciates your work, and particularly that of Rory Zarling and his crew, to proceed with development of this access site in the wake of the offer by new owner of the Fort Owen Ranch to work with you in this regard. As you know, it is imperative that we move ahead to accommodate not only the landowner's wishes in regard to the site, but the critical public need for a working public access site at this location. Toward that end, the Ravalli County Fish & Wildlife Association wants to go on record as standing in general support of your plan as presented at the public meeting at the Stevensville High School and we urge you to proceed posthaste to accomplish your plan, with one exception: we do not believe it advisable to establish overnight camping at the site and request that you withdraw that component from your development plans.*
3	*Beyond that, we acknowledge that the long and arduous process of establishing a public access at this point on the Bitterroot River has been an extremely frustrating endeavor for most of the people involved and we have appreciated the ability of our organization and others to be involved in the process. We wish you godspeed with your efforts, and we make that statement with profound gratitude to the willingness of the new owner of the Fort Owen Ranch for her gracious offer to work with you (and thereby the public) in this endeavor. That was truly a breath of fresh air in our community!*
4	*In regard to a number of suggestions and proposals raised by a variety of individuals at the public scoping meeting that certain additional components be added to or inserted into this project, we recommend that FWP acknowledge them but go ahead with its basic proposal as laid out at the public meeting and deal with these extraneous proposals in the future as time and additional funding permit. Get the basic job done now! This is a very critically needed public access site for fishermen, floaters, the general public, and all involved.*