

Madison River Non-Commercial Recreation Plan Overview

SUMMARY:

The increased growth of watercraft recreation on the Madison River has raised concerns related to social crowding and the potential for degradation of the resource. A comprehensive river recreation plan will provide a shared responsibility from all users to avoid overuse of a limited resource if current growth trends continue. This plan should include a component that establishes a maximum capacity for non-commercial watercraft usage on the river.

OBJECTIVES:

1. Address the social crowding derived from watercrafts.
2. Protect resources, both physical and biological, from the threats of unregulated growth of recreational watercraft use on the river.
3. Ensure that the current quality of watercraft recreation on the Madison River is preserved.

PLAN OVERVIEW:

1. Develop a 5-year implementation schedule for non-commercial watercraft use beginning in 2024.
2. Foot access will remain unlimited and will not require a pass, but passive monitoring will be established in popular wade angling zones in case future management tools are needed to address growth in wade angling.
3. Establish a seasonal "High Density Zone" between Warm Springs and Greycliff FAS where large group floating is permitted during peak season dates of June 1st through September 15th.
4. Watercraft passes will be required for all non-commercial users that float the Madison River beginning in 2024. Watercraft passes will be unlimited in 2024, 2025 and 2026.
5. Data from watercraft passes will be used to establish daily use capacities. Capacities will be set for the 2025 season with higher capacities in summer months with higher flows and lower capacities in shoulder months. Capacities shall be initially set so that no more than 5 "high use" days per month would be above capacity in 2025.
6. Develop an education program to inform the public on which dates are likely to be "high use" and encourage them to recreate on other days as an alternative to capping use through a reservation system.
7. Beginning in 2027, "high use" days that continue to remain above capacity will be capped and require a reservation to ensure that those dates do not exceed capacity. All other days will remain unlimited. In 2027 capacities will be reviewed so that no more than 5 "high use" days per month shall require a reservation while the remaining days will continue to be unlimited.
8. A work group shall be established to regularly review and adjust capacities. Capacities will be reviewed and adjusted annually through 2028 and then every 3 years beginning in 2029.
9. In future years, if demand continues to grow, more days may require a usage cap. If an "unlimited day" exceeds capacity, then it will then be converted to "high use day" and be capped in the following year.
10. Reservable watercraft passes for high use days will be released in batches starting 9 months in advance. The final 30% of passes will be released within 1 month of a given date to ensure that local Montana residents have adequate access to float the river with shorter planning windows.
11. Passive monitoring of watercraft use using camera counts and car counts at access points will be used by the Department to annually calibrate passes issued vs. actual use to account for passes reserved but not used.
12. MT residents or individuals physically employed in Montana may obtain an "evening only" watercraft season pass which is valid for floating after 4pm.