



Fish Creek Recreation Planning

Stakeholder Field Trip

Meeting Summary

Of stakeholder field trip held on Wednesday September 28th, 2022

Starting at Big Pine Fishing Access Site

Objectives:

- Provide an update on the Fish Creek Recreation Planning process
- Visit sites along Fish Creek to explore the watershed's assets, as well as challenges and opportunities for managing recreation in the area
- Explore options for managing current and future recreational use in the Fish Creek watershed and associated wildlife, habitat, recreational use, and economic impacts
- Connect with other stakeholders, FWP staff, and the watershed
- Highlight next steps and additional opportunities for engagement

Participants:

- Clark Fork Coalition, FWP Region 2 Citizen Advisory Committee members, Great Burn Conservation Alliance, Hellgate Hunters and Anglers, local anglers, local hunters, local landowners, local outfitter, local residents, Mineral County Conservation District, Mineral County Resource Coalition, Mountain Bike Missoula, Western Montana Trail Riders Association
- Randy Arnold, Liz Bradley, Morgan Dollinger, Ryan Klimstra, Mike Kustudia, Hope Stockwell, Pat Saffel, Charlie Sperry, Montana Fish, Wildlife, & Parks (FWP)
- Amy Helena, Jessica Hoag, & Ryan Weiss, Montana Department of Natural Resources & Conservation (DNRC)
- Silas Filas & Zac Larson, Ninemile Ranger District, United States Forest Service (USFS)

Facilitators:

- Charles Besancon, Global Park Solutions (GPS)
- Travis Anklam, University of Montana (UMT)



Field Trip Summary

Welcome and Introduction - Big Pine Fishing Access Site

The Field Trip began at the Big Pine Fishing Access site, which has existed since prior to the acquisition of Fish Creek State Park, is the most developed FWP managed area in the drainage, and receives a lot of use throughout the year. Facilitators and FWP Region 2 Supervisor Randy Arnold welcomed participants, invited introductions, and provided an overview of the field trip objectives (see above) and the recently initiated FWP-led recreation planning process for the Fish Creek Area.

Fish Creek was acquired by FWP in 2010 from the Nature Conservancy, establishing both the Fish Creek State Park and Wildlife Management Area in the drainage and on the north side of Interstate 90 and the Clark Fork River. The drainage currently comprises a mosaic of FWP, DNRC, and USFS lands (an Area Map is included in Appendix A, below). In 2013, FWP attempted to create a State Park Management plan, but did not finalize and implement the plan given concerns expressed during the public comment period.

After the recent reorganization of FWP and major increases in recreational use over the past several years, FWP is now working to establish a new management framework for the Fish Creek area. Initiated in the second half of 2022, FWP is now advancing a planning process that is taking a holistic look at the drainage and will be inclusive of perspectives from all user groups and partner agencies interested in recreational use management in the Fish Creek watershed. The process is looking at recreation management across the Fish Creek area, including the state park, wildlife management area (WMA) south and north of I-90, two fishing access sites along the Alberton Gorge, and School Trust lands owned by the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC). FWP has also hired the University of Montana and Global Park Solutions to lead the engagement process and assist in the creation of a planning document to guide future recreational use management in the Fish Creek area.

Following the welcome and overview, field trip participants were invited to share comments and questions. Several participants asked who is responsible for road maintenance along the main Fish Creek Road. Agency staff highlighted that the main road in the drainage is managed and maintained by the USFS, and that FWP is interested in supporting road maintenance by the USFS but has policy constraints that limit their ability to investment in the maintenance of roads they do not own and manage. FWP is interested in potentially using an existing gravel pit to provide gravel for resurfacing in the future if current invasive species management efforts at the gravel site are successful. One participant also suggested placing barriers near culverts to prevent vehicles getting stuck in those areas during the winter. Multiple participants underscored their concerns around winter safety without clearer information online or on signage regarding winter access. Participants also suggested creating a master sign at big pine or the main road, as well as changing signage to provide a warning around limited winter access. Several participants emphasized the need for better parking at trailheads for horse trailers, motorized users, and anglers.



Dispersed Camping Sites – Mid-way between Big Pine and Forks Fishing Access Site

Following the introduction, participants then drove and stopped at dispersed camping sites mid-way between the Big Pine and Forks Fishing Access Sites along the main road. FWP and DNCR staff explained ongoing concerns from diverse recreational users around the expansion of dispersed camping, including expanded impacts to the road, more fire rings near the creek, and trammeling of vegetation in the area. The areas where dispersed camping is taking place includes a mix of FWP and DNRC lands.

Participants emphasized a range of interests and concerns around dispersed camping. Several individuals underscored that the lands where dispersed camping are publicly owned, and that access should be maintained for those who want it into the future. Several individuals also expressed concern around ongoing impacts to wildlife, fishery health, and the experience of recreators if dispersed camping continues to proliferate and degrade natural and recreational resources in the area.

Many participants emphasized the need for greater FWP presence in the drainage to address the impacts of dispersed camping and other issues. Ideas included: more frequent visits from an FWP game warden, biologist, or recreational staff; keeping a campground host at the Big Pine Fishing Access Site; and greater FWP law enforcement presence. Several participants suggested developing existing designated camping areas at the Big Pine and Forks Fishing Access Sites – or developing and additional campground in the drainage – to concentrate use and mitigate impacts of dispersed camping. Others suggested that additional development will only invite more users and recreational pressure, and that individuals engaging in dispersed camping man not want to camp at developed, designated campsites.

Participants also commented on the need to consider thinning timber along the road, citing concern around hazard tress. When asked about woody debris removal from the creek and a potential float closure, participants shared that they were not concerned around woody debris removal and suggested FWP gather more information to understand if it is happening in the Fish Creek Area before closing the creek to floating. One local outfitter suggested few people float the creek each season.

Developed Camping – Forks Fishing Access Site

The next stop on the field trip was the Forks Fishing Access Site, where FWP staff invited conversation around designated, developed camping opportunities. Participants highlighted the diversity of interests in camping, concern over increased camping and associated impacts, and discussed the idea of creating reservable campsites. Most participants felt that reservable sites might limit access, would require additional FWP staff resources, and sometimes limit access for locals.



Participants also discussed the Williams Peak Lookout, including broad interest to see it repaired and accessible for the public, including as a rentable lodging for overnight stays. FWP staff acknowledged the need to repair the lookout to make it accessible, and their interest in doing so.

Motorized Recreation and Interest in additional Camping Opportunities – White Tail Flats

The next stop on the field trip was White Tail Flats, at the northern-most end of Fish Creek State Park, to discuss motorized recreational use and some stakeholders' interests in developing additional designated camping opportunities in the area. White Tail Flats is often used by motorized recreational users in the summer and is important winter habitat for elk and deer. The area is also sloped and requires a drive up a steep and curvy road to access the site.

While some participants had expressed interest in developing new camping opportunities at White Tail Flats in the past, nearly all participants present acknowledged it would be a poor site for a campground, would lack ready access to power and water, and is important wildlife habitat that should not be degraded. Several participants suggested keeping the area open to diverse recreational uses in the summer and opening closed roads to access to the Williams Peak Lookout. Several participants also underscored the need for additional designated, developed campsites in the drainage and suggested expanding opportunities at the Big Pine Fishing Access site, which currently includes several developed camping sites.

Additional comments from participants included the importance of agencies working together across jurisdictions, maintaining public access, and ensuring wildlife and fishery resources are protected. Participants also thanked FWP for hosting the event.

Conclusion

To conclude the field trip, facilitators thanked participants for their engagement and highlighted one of the goals of this planning process as being aimed at understanding and incorporating the interests and concerns of diverse perspectives invested in future recreation management in the Fish Creek area. No decisions are being made at this point in the process. Instead, the field trip, along with additional engagement efforts currently being conducted, is designed to identify the range of interests and concerns regarding the future of Fish Creek and potential management options that could be included in a planning document. There will be many more opportunities for engagement through the remainder of the process, including:

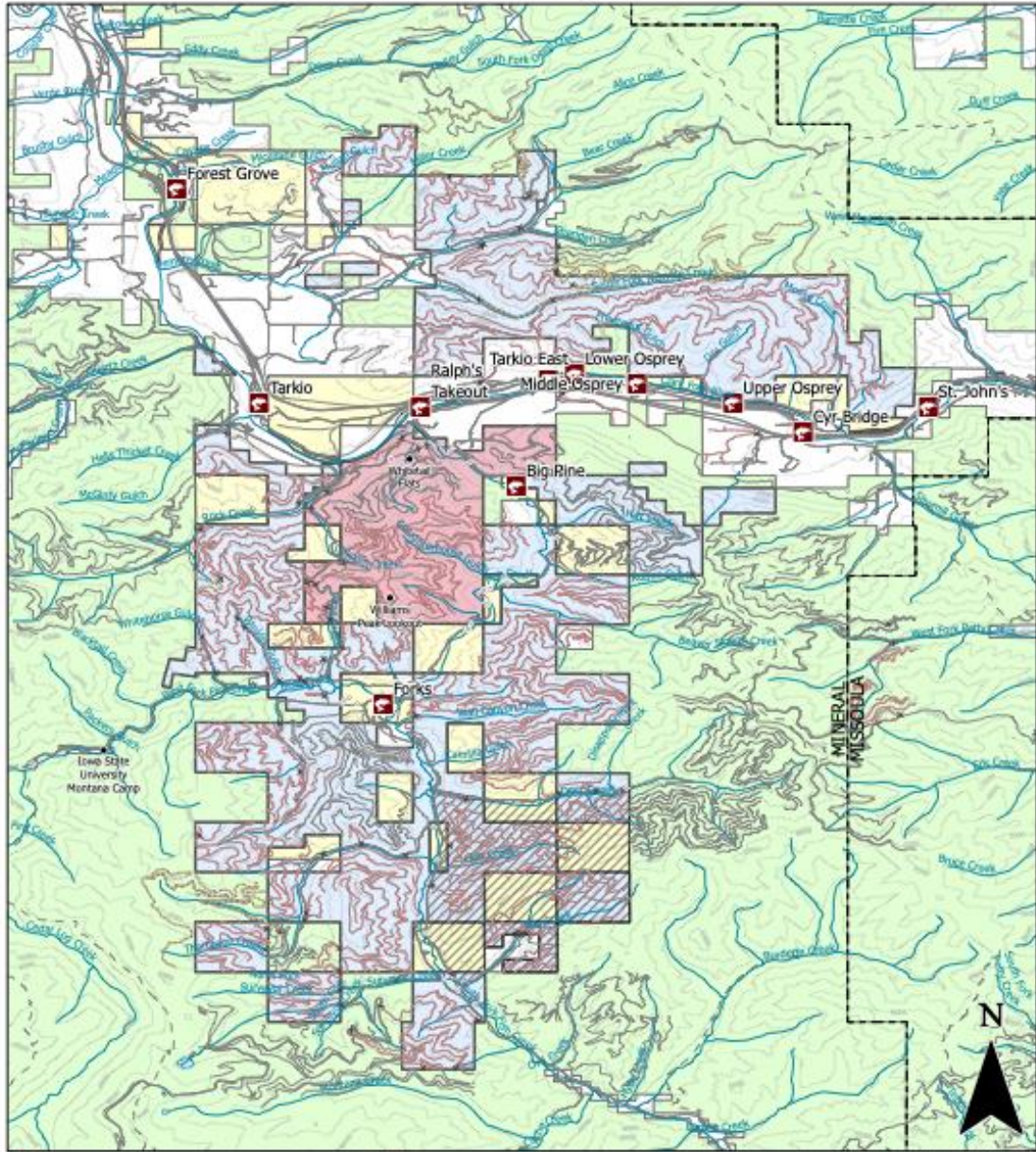
- Online survey (October-December 2022)
- Public meetings (Winter/Spring 2023)
- Draft strategy/plan for review (Spring 2023)
- Final strategy/plan (Spring 2023)

Facilitators also invited participants to offer suggestions for additional stakeholders to engage and include in the process via email at travis.anklam@umt.edu.



Appendix A: Fish Creek Area Map

Fish Creek Management



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|-----------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Fishing access points | Road Status | State Park |
| Point of Interest | Gated seasonally | Wildlife Management Area |
| Campsite | Closed | DNRC |
| Trail | Open & other | USFS |
| Gate or barrier | | Private & other |
| | | Winter area closure (12/1 - 5/15) |



Data source: MTFWP- Roads & road status