



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region 4
4600 Giant Springs Road
Great Falls, MT 59405

July 13, 2021

Dear Interested Party:

Thank you for your input and feedback on the environmental assessment (EA) for the Marias River acquisition project. The goal of the proposed action is to accept terms of a permit for recreation site with Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) and develop approximately one acre of land owned in title by the State of Montana, MDT along the Marias River for the purpose of providing public access to the Marias River and developing a fishing access site (FAS).

Enclosed is a decision notice document in which Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) explains its rationale for proceeding with the proposed action and response to public comments received during the public comment period.

Please feel free to contact Vicki Robinson, Fishing Access Site Program Manager, at 406-454-5854 or email at vrobinson@mt.gov with any questions. Thank you for your interest and participation.

Sincerely,

Region Supervisor
FWP Region 4



ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT DECISION NOTICE ON MARIAS CROSSING FISHING ACCESS SITE PROPOSED PERMIT FOR RECREATION SITE & SITE DEVELOPMENT

Proposed Action

FWP proposes to accept terms of a permit for recreation site with MDT and develop approximately one acre of land owned in fee title by the State of Montana, MDT along the Marias River for the purpose of providing public access to the Marias River and developing a FAS. FWP has received a draft copy of the Recreational Use Permit from MDT for the use of the property for recreational purposes. Proposed developments at the site include a single-wide gravel boat ramp, designated gravel parking area, gravel access road, boundary fencing, and informational signs. The site would provide an important, safe access point on the Marias River for boaters and floaters. If the site becomes an FAS it will increase the ability of FWP to complete maintenance at the site and ramp thereby better meeting the needs of the public.

Montana Environmental Policy Act

FWP is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess potential impacts of its proposed actions to the human and physical environments. In compliance with FWP's MEPA Public Involvement Policy, an Environmental Assessment was prepared by FWP for the proposed project and released in May 2021 for public comment. The EA was titled "Marias River Access". The EA was the subject of an FWP press release and was posted on the FWP webpage. The EA evaluated the potential impacts of the following alternative in addition to the proposed action:

Alternative: No action Alternative

If no action was taken, and the 1-acre parcel of MDT land along the Marias River at the Highway 223 Bridge was not developed and managed as an FAS, anglers, floaters and boaters would continue to launch and take-out boats and rafts at the pioneered boat launch and park along the pioneered access road. The pioneered boat launch and parking area would continue to impact the vegetation and riparian area via tramping and unregulated vehicle travel. The undeveloped, unestablished parking would continue to minimize capacity of the site and pose continued traffic safety issues. Maintenance issues of the site and ramp will remain unresolved. Public access for recreational opportunities for boating, fishing, floating, and wildlife viewing along the Marias River would continue to be limited.

Summary of Public Comment and FWP Response

There were 2 comments submitted during the open comment period for this project. Both responses support the project as described in the EA. One of the commenters had comments on items outside the scope of this project.

Comment 1

“I strongly support this proposal. Having used the current launch area some 10 years ago for a 3 day float to Loma, this will be a needed improvement.

I suspect that there has been an increase in use of this float segment since my trip. I am concerned that this project may encourage even more use downstream. We found sections of public land for night camps, but increased use could result in some inevitable landowner/floater conflicts. (see Smith River for an extreme example of what the future may bring). The development of this FAS may accelerate that inevitability. Also, there was an exposed riverbank BLM archeological site of bison skeletons on this river segment that may need greater protection from vandals.

I don't mention this to discourage the project. It's just that we need to prepare for future increased use. Education of floaters and the stream access law must be emphasized. I don't wish for more regulatory control, but it's reportedly still illegal to just shoot assholes.

The EA is fully MEPA compliant in my opinion. FWP has always been the premier state agency in awareness and unquestioned MEPA compliance. The EA is certainly adequate and, if anything, over-achieving. I've seen less attention by other agencies for far more impactful decision proposals.

NOW – **PLEASE** put some effort into improving the total mess that is the launch point on the Dearborn River at the river bridge above Wolf Creek. Consider a road grader and some gravel at least! Given its proximity to population centers in Helena and Great Falls, and its popularity with day floaters, something **MUST** be done there. I'm sure that the agency is aware of the problems. It seems like another FWP/MDT opportunity to cooperate **BUT**, the landowner needs to sell, lease, or otherwise help out a bit here too. The existing space is inadequate for the demand. I trust that you have somebody working on a solution to this very real problem .

Thank you for your consideration and the opportunity to comment.

An ex hunter, a sometimes catch and release fisherman, and a full time recreationalist.”

Response:

Thank you for your comments and support of the proposed project.

Comment 2

“I am in full support of a new FAS on the Marias River.”

Response:

Thank you for your comments and support of the proposed project.

Decision

Based on the Environmental Assessment, public comment, and FWP evaluation, it is my decision to proceed with the project to acquire a permit to operate a fishing access site along the Marias River.

I find there to be no significant impacts to human and physical environments associated with this project. Public comments received during the comment period showed general support for the proposed action. Therefore, I conclude that the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis, and that the Environmental Impact Statement is not required.



Gary Bertellotti

Regional Supervisor

FWP Region 4