



Environmental Assessment Decision Notice

Diversified Lodging at Tongue River Reservoir & Cooney Reservoir State Parks August 2022

Description of Proposed Project

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) is proposing increasing lodging opportunities at various state parks including Tongue River Reservoir State Park (TRSP) and Cooney Reservoir State Park (CRSP). FWP desires to offer more diversified lodging by adding up to five rental cabins and a day use shelter at Tongue River Reservoir State Park and up to eight rental cabins and a day use shelter at Cooney Reservoir State Park.

Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) Process and Public Involvement

FWP released a draft environmental assessment (EA) for 30-day public review period on March 21, 2022, with comment closing April 20, 2022. The EA was advertised through media releases and legal notices in the *Billings Gazette*, *Sheridan Press*, *Carbon County News*, and *Helena Independent Record*, as statewide press release and on the FWP website and social media (Facebook and Twitter). Copies of the EA were available from the Miles City FWP office, on the FWP website, and at the Montana State Library. The EA was also sent to all adjoining landowners and others that requested a copy. A full list of recipients is available at the FWP office in Miles City.

The EA evaluated the potential impacts of the following alternatives:

1. Alternative A: No Action

No cabins would be added to either park and FWP would continue to provide RV and tent camping to visitors with their own gear. Park users would have no opportunity to rent cabins on the reservoirs.

2. Alternative B: Proposed Action

Implement a project that would result in up to five cabins at Gooseneck Bay offered as a rustic, waterfront experience at Tongue River Reservoir State Park and up to eight cabins at Red Lodge Campground at Cooney State Park located on the south Red Lodge Campground hill with viewshed of Cooney Reservoir.



Summary of Public Comment with Responses:

FWP received four public emailed comments, a letter from DNRC, and several calls with questions about the proposed project. The comments are summarized and listed below with a response for each comment.

1. Comment: Make cabins basic in design, easily maintained and easily winterized.
Response: TRSP and CRSP cabins will be primitive in design and easily maintained compared to other diversified lodging alternatives (teepee, yurt, wall tent). The cabins will not have running water and will be easily winterized.
2. Comment: Cabins will be hard to monitor and could be vandalized due to their remote location.
Response: The cabin site at TRSP is less than two miles from the park office and is easily accessed by staff. This area is expected to have the same level of exposure to vandalism as other areas of the park.
Cabins at CRSP would be near the largest, busiest campground and would be monitored by resident hosts during peak season and frequented by recreation staff and enforcement year-round.
3. Comment: The proposed site is currently used by park visitors and the statement "...the use of this area is very infrequent" is incorrect.
Response: The proposed area at TRSP is referred to as lightly used in the EA based on regular patrols conducted by staff and minimal evidence of use found at the site.
The proposed cabin location at CRSP has no current public use.
4. Comment: Additional information about listed alternatives is needed. Perhaps other alternatives not listed could be considered including Sand Point and Rattlesnake.
Response: For TRSP, the EA listed Alternative A as no action and Alternative B as up to five cabins at Gooseneck Bay. Placing cabins within the existing campground was not considered an alternative due to crowding.
Not applicable for CRSP.
5. Comment: This project destroys the mostly pristine environment that exists within the park.
Response: The TRSP project site is waterfront property within the boundary of a small state park and is undeveloped but disturbed from grazing and light public use. The project site is not considered pristine.
Location at CRSP is not considered pristine. The area is made up of grasslands already impacted by the development of the existing campground.



6. Comment: Diversified lodging commercializes the state park unnecessarily and the park does not need to attract more visitors.
Response: Diversified lodging is a recreation opportunity that provides a camping experience for visitors without the need for a camper. The proposed cabins at TRSP and CRSP are primitive and do not include indoor plumbing and many other common amenities. The primitive cabins will increase use at the park minimally while diversifying opportunity.
7. Comment: Tongue River Reservoir State Park should have the entrance road repaired prior to building cabins.
Response: Access to TRSP is via a county road which is outside of FWP's authority to perform maintenance. The road receives regular maintenance from the county; however, it quickly reverts to washboard / dusty conditions due to lack of base and high weekend traffic.
8. Comment: What plans exist to deal with the spread of noxious weeds at the project site.
Response: Noxious weeds will be managed through construction and during all ground disturbing activity. These sites will then be included in the existing TRSP and CRSP noxious weed management protocols.
9. Comment: What plans exist to manage vehicles and trailers at the site?
Response: The finalized TRSP and CRSP site plans will include a finite number of parking spaces for cabin users and day users to the area. Parking will include two vehicles per cabin with overflow parking in the main campground or at the day use area.
10. Comment: Can emergency services access the site?
Response: The sites at TRSP and CRSP have very good accessibility via the county roads and all emergency services can travel to the project site.
11. Comment: Has the tribe and Sheriff reviewed the project?
Response: The draft EA was sent to Big Horn County, Carbon County, and the Northern Cheyenne Tribe. No comments were received.
12. Comment: What species of those listed in appendix B of the EA have been documented at the site?
Response: No listed species are known in this location. Additional research and field inspection for sensitive species can happen prior to construction.
CRSP was identified as having Yellowstone cutthroat trout. FWP has a history of stocking this species in the reservoir from 1971 to 2012. Development of cabin sites will not affect this species.



13. Comment: Review Draft EA lodging impacts and consider changing to minor, and cultural impacts and consider changing to unknown.

Response: The impacts to local or state tax base and revenue in the Draft EA (10b) are identified as “none” because no changes in consumer behavior by visitors to the area are expected. The primitive cabins are not comparable to a modern motel room and will attract a different user group. Visitors using the primitive cabins will utilize local gas stations, grocery stores and other amenities as any visitor would. Additionally, it should be noted that FWP does pay applicable lodging taxes.

The impacts to unique cultural values in the Draft EA (12b) have been changed to ‘unknown’ however the implementation of this project will comply with all applicable laws in avoiding adverse impact to cultural resources.

14. Review Appendix A, Letter A. and C. and address possible road construction.

Response: The Draft EA Appendix A (Project Qualifications Checklist), Letter A. has been amended to include access road construction. Access road construction at TRSP will measure 24’ wide by 650’ long. It is estimated that 60% to 70% of the construction will occur on undisturbed land.

At CRSP an access road will be constructed on undisturbed land and will be 24’ wide by 800’ long.

The Draft EA Appendix A (Project Qualifications Checklist), Letter C has been amended to include the excavation associated with access road construction. At TRSP access road construction will require 700 cubic yards of excavation.

At CRSP access road construction will require approximately 500 cubic yards of excavation.

15. Comment: Cooney Reservoir State Park has poor ADA access.

Response: The site and nearby roads of the proposed cabins would be graded, leveled, and potentially include a retention wall. New latrines would be installed adjacent to the cabins and would also be on levelled ground. Any future construction would improve accessibility. One proposed cabin meets the guidelines for outdoor recreation and trails accessibility. An ADA fishing pier is included in the Preliminary Land-Use Plan but is not part of this project.

FWP Recommended Alternative and Final Decision

We have evaluated the EA and applicable laws, regulations, and policies and have determined that the proposed action will not have any significant adverse impacts on the human environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement (EIS) will not be prepared.

Based on the analysis in the EA, we find Alternative B (the Proposed Action) to be the preferred alternative. Funding is secured for the TRSP proposal, the project will commence upon issuance of this decision notice. The CRSP proposal will not commence until funding is secured.

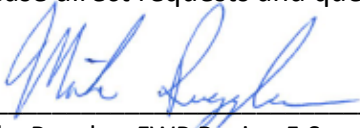


Comments were received indicating that litter, trespassing, and vandalism are of concern. FWP will continue to have an enforcement, maintenance, and park staff presence at both locations to address any issues.


Overall, this EA and public participation process found that the proposed action of Alternative B best fits the need for additional lodging opportunity at these two State Parks.

The final EA will be updated to meet the concerns and comments as referenced in the responses above.

Please direct requests and questions to:


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8/11/2022
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