



STATE PARKS AND RECREATION BOARD FWP PROPOSAL & INFORMATION SHEET

THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

Meeting Date: June 16, 2026

Agenda Item: Full Site Seasonal Closures at State Parks

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 30 minutes

Background: This is a request for the State Parks and Recreation Board to approve full site / seasonal closures at three state parks during the off-season. No public access would be allowed, including vehicles and pedestrians. The reason for the proposal is to reduce the risk of vandalism to historic sites during the off-season when there are fewer staff. During the off-season, FWP does not have seasonal staff to monitor and maintain the sites, provide visitor assistance, and deter vandalism. Following is a description of each of the three parks:

1. **Fort Owen State Park** is located north of Stevensville. The park has historic buildings listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Fort Owen State Park has relatively low visitation. From 2021 to 2025, the estimated average annual visitation was 4,358 visitors. Park management has been implementing a seasonal closure from November 1 to February 28 since 2021.
2. **Pictograph Cave State Park** is located 5 miles south of Billings. The site was designated as a National Historic Landmark in 1964 and has cave paintings, as well as artifacts in the visitor center. From 2021 to 2025, the estimated average annual visitation was 44,845 visitors. Park management has been implementing a seasonal closure on Mondays and Tuesdays from the third Monday in September to the third Thursday in May since at least 2021.
3. **Chief Plenty Coups State Park** is located 40 miles south of Billings. The park is a National Historic Landmark and features the log home and farmstead of Chief Plenty Coups, as well as artifacts in the visitor center. From 2021 to 2025, the estimated average annual visitation was 20,398 visitors. Park management has been implementing a seasonal closure on Mondays and Tuesdays from the third Monday in September to the third Thursday in May since at least 2021.

FWP is requesting the board's approval of these full site / seasonal closures because they represent a variance from the public use rules. Additionally, the Parks and Outdoor Recreation Division is reviewing state park rules to ensure variances like full site closures have been approved by the board. The board is charged with establishing rules governing the use of state parks in the interest of public health, public safety, public welfare, and protection of property and public resources (§§ 23-1-111(1)(c), MCA). In accordance with this authority, the board has approved standard public use rules in ARM 12.12.1. When the department needs to vary from the public use rules, these variance requests must be approved by the board. While the public use rules do not have a specific rule requiring state parks to be open year-round, FWP is treating full site closures like variances because of impacts to public access.

Public Involvement Process & Results: FWP will solicit public comment on this matter through June 11, 2026. Any public comment received will be posted online and provided to board members prior to the June board meeting.



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Alternatives & Analysis:

- A. No action. Fort Owen State Park, Pictograph State Park, and Chief Plenty Coups State Park would be open year-round. Without seasonal staffing coverage, there would be increased risk of vandalism.
- B. Adopt the proposed seasonal closures for Fort Owen State Park, Pictograph State Park, and Chief Plenty Coups State Park. The closures would reduce the risk of vandalism during the off-season when there is no staff presence, which would ensure the rules protect property and public resources, as outlined in § 23-1-111(1)(c), MCA. Visitors would not be able to use Fort Owen State Park year-round, but this would have a minimal impact given relatively low visitation. Visitors would be able to use Pictograph and Chief Plenty Coups state parks year-round except for Mondays and Tuesdays during the off-season, which are less popular visitor days.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: FWP recommends adopting the proposed seasonal closures for Fort Owen State Park, Pictograph State Park, and Chief Plenty Coups State Park. The benefits of reducing the risk of vandalism and protecting historic buildings and artifacts outweigh the minimal negative impacts to visitors.

Proposed Motion: I move the State Parks and Recreation Board adopt the following full site closures at state parks:

- Seasonally close Fort Owen State Park from November 1 to February 28.
- Seasonally close Pictograph State Park on Mondays and Tuesdays from the third Monday in September to the third Thursday in May.
- Seasonally close Chief Plenty Coups State Park State Park on Mondays and Tuesdays from the third Monday in September to the third Thursday in May.