



Parks and Outdoor Recreation
Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks
P.O. Box 200701
Helena, MT 59620-0701
Ref 018-22
February 2, 2022

Dear Interested Citizen:

Thank you for your thoughtful comments on the Draft Environmental Assessment (EA) that considered updates to the 2009 Smith River State Park and Smith River Corridor Management Plan.

Enclosed you will find a Decision Notice that describes our decision in detail, a summary of the public comments, and agency responses to questions raised.

FWP intends to propose rules to the Parks and Recreation Board at its March 3, 2022 meeting pursuant to implementing some of the management actions identified in this Decision Notice. Information pertaining to the Parks and Recreation Board, including meeting details, can be found on the FWP website (fwp.mt.gov).

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact the Smith River Park Manager, Colin Maas, at (406) 454-5857 or cmaas@mt.gov. Thank you for your interest and participation.

Sincerely,

Hope Stockwell
Division Administrator
FWP State Parks and Outdoor Recreation Division
E-mail: hstockwell@mt.gov



Smith River State Park and River Corridor 2022 Recreation Management Plan Update

Final Environmental Assessment Decision Notice

February 2, 2022

I. INTRODUCTION

This Decision Notice pertains to the November 10, 2021 Draft Environmental Assessment (EA) that assessed proposed updates to the 2009 Smith River State Park and River Corridor Recreation Management Plan Update. The proposed updates were prepared by Montana Fish, Wildlife, & Parks (FWP) in partnership with staff from the U.S. Forest Service's Helena Lewis & Clark National Forest (HLCNF).

The Decision Notice was informed by input from the Smith River Planning Advisory Committee (PAC), extensive review of public comments, applicable state and federal laws, and further discussion with state and federal partners. The Decision Notice is organized according to the key management issues considered in the EA (listed below). The document includes a brief description for each of the issues (refer to EA for details), FWP's decision, and the rationale for the decision. Please refer to Appendix A for a summary of the public comments that helped inform this Decision Notice.

- Management of Camp Baker
- Human Waste Management
- Natural and Cultural Resource Impacts
- Floater Opportunities

II. KEY MANAGEMENT ISSUES

A. MANAGEMENT OF CAMP BAKER

Issue Description

The EA considered whether Camp Baker should be managed for day-use only, and whether to continue phone or online floater registration, payments, and boat camp assignments.

Decision

The Department's decision is to adopt a modified version of the Preferred Alternative (Alternative C): *Manage Camp Baker for day-use only with the exception that overnight use would be allowed from September 1 through November 30*. Outside of these dates, the department would continue to register groups and assign boat camps via phone or online. The Department will recommend that the Parks and Recreation Board adopt rules pursuant to this decision.

Rationale

The public comments were largely supportive of managing Camp Baker for day-use only with 64.1% of commenters offering support for the agency's Preferred Alternative. Commenters recognized that historically, much of the camping at Camp Baker emanated from people wanting to establish a place in line for selection of preferred boat camps. Commenters shared that online and phone registration, payment, and boat camp selection have the potential to be more convenient and less stressful compared to how Camp Baker and floater registration were managed prior to the COVID-related changes enacted for the 2020 and 2021 float seasons. Those that experienced this revised system were particularly supportive of the change.

Since there was interest in allowing overnight use at Camp Baker during the fall, the department modified the Preferred Alternative to reflect this interest.

Additionally, with the change to day-use only, some commenters expressed support for the prospect of greater economic benefits for the White Sulphur Springs community as a result of more people potentially staying overnight there. Several Smith River Planning Advisory Committee members echoed this sentiment. The Department will continue to be in contact with local economic development experts as changes unfold.

With the change in overnight use for Camp Baker, and in alignment with the view of some commenters, the Department believes it will be important to monitor use and resource impacts on nearby public lands in proximity to Camp Baker where floaters may alternatively choose to camp. Tribal representatives and advocates for the state's important cultural and historical preservation work echoed their support for this approach as well as for the reduction in camping activity at Camp Baker.

B. HUMAN WASTE MANAGEMENT

Issue Description

The EA considered human waste management within the Smith River corridor and the potential to require floaters to pack out solid human waste (discontinuing use of pit toilets).

Decision

The Department's decision is to adopt a modified version of the Preferred Alternative (Alternative B): *Mandatory human waste pack-out using a department-approved toilet system*. The Department will recommend that the Parks and Recreation Board adopt rules pursuant to this decision.

Rationale

Sixty-five percent of the public comments supported the preferred alternative. Commenters acknowledged the resource impacts and health concerns associated with the pit toilets. Commenters also noted that mandatory pack-out systems are the standard for most high-use and/or resource-sensitive permitted rivers. Supporters of the proposed pack-out requirement provided input as to how this requirement should be implemented, a desire for extensive public education and outreach, and careful monitoring and enforcement for compliance. The latter recommendation is based on a concern that noncompliant floaters might improperly dispose of human waste at boat camps and/or on land within the corridor.

The Department plans to conduct extensive education and outreach to familiarize the public with the pack-out system and use of related equipment. Details for transporting and disposing of human waste will be determined in the subsequent rulemaking process.

Opposition to a mandatory pack-out requirement raised concern that this could deter some people from wanting to float the Smith River. While this concern was in the minority, the Department is attentive to the importance of making sure the pack-out system is not overly burdensome or cost-prohibitive, and that there is an ample education campaign that describes the important ramifications of this change so that all who plan to float can adequately prepare for their trip.

C. NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCE IMPACTS

Issue Description

The EA considered the increasing levels of natural and cultural resource impacts occurring at boat camps and river landings within the Smith River Corridor due to higher visitation levels and early season use, the prospect of creating incentives for reducing these impacts, and potentially closing the river to early season use and reallocating only a portion of the cancelled permits.

Decision

The Department's decision is to combine components of the Preferred Alternative (Alternative E) with Alternative A: *The Department will continue to utilize recreation ecology measures. In addition, the Department will research, monitor, and evaluate natural and cultural resource conditions at or near boat camps. The Department may*

develop and implement mitigative management actions. Such actions may include creating incentives to promote smaller group sizes, reducing the maximum group size allowed and/or the number of groups allowed to launch per day in the early float season, and considering adjustments to the existing cancellation policy for the purpose of addressing resource impacts attributed to usage of the sites.

The Department does not intend to recommend that the Parks and Recreation Board adopt rule changes for resource protection reasons at this time. Nor does the agency intend to recommend changes to the cancellation policy for the time being. Non-regulatory recreation ecology measures will continue to be a part of regular boat camp maintenance operations.

Rationale

It is apparent from the public comments that people value the natural and cultural resources within the corridor and support some means for protecting them from overuse. At the same time, as described in the Floater Opportunities section of the EA, there is a desire to increase the opportunities for certain cohorts of individuals to float the Smith River without adding to the overall amount of use and/or further degradation of the resources. Addressing people's interests in resource protection and floater opportunities requires careful consideration of tradeoffs.

In general, there was broad support for mitigating negative impacts for natural and cultural resources; however, the feedback on the suggested approaches was mixed. As a baseline, the Department will continue to utilize recreation ecology measures informed by site monitoring and evaluation efforts

The public comments were more supportive of incentive-based actions for addressing impacts such as promoting smaller group sizes and reducing the maximum group size allowed and/or the number of groups allowed to launch per day. Commenters were less supportive of implementing an early-season closure or changes to the cancellation policy.

There were some comments and questions regarding how the Department would apply mandated resource protection measures for floaters and whether they would apply to all users (private, commercial, and landowner floats). The Department believes that mandatory resource protection measures should be applied equitably to all users.

The Department recognizes the complexity in making simultaneous changes to management actions and thereby has modified its approach to both address concerns raised and to better evaluate impacts of its actions on a case-by-case basis. The Department intends to further explore and refine options that could be used in the future to address negative resource impacts, including incentives and/or rules to lower the maximum group size and/or the total number of daily launches allowed in the early season, seasonal and/or site closures, and potential changes to the

cancellation policy. The Department is not recommending that the Parks and Recreation Board adopt changes at this time.

D. FLOATER OPPORTUNITIES

Issue Description

The EA considered floater opportunities and public concerns that have long been expressed regarding the difficulty in obtaining a permit and/or floating the river as part of someone else's permit. The EA considered whether to pursue ways for increasing the opportunities for unsuccessful permit applicants as well as for people who have not recently (or ever) floated.

Decision

The Department's decision is to adopt the Preferred Alternative (Alternative B): *Explore the development of a system to increase floater opportunities for unsuccessful permit applicants and others who have not recently (or ever) floated the Smith River.*

The decision means that the Department will continue to examine ways to increase floater opportunities without compounding negative impacts to the natural and cultural resources. More work is needed to figure this out and thus the Department is not recommending changes to the Parks and Recreation Board at this time.

Rationale

Overall, there was broad public interest in developing ways to increase floater opportunities for the groups identified. Seventy-seven percent of commenters expressed support for the Preferred Alternative. The Department acknowledges this desire and is conscientious that any action undertaken needs to be executed without increasing overall use on the river. The Department further recognizes that the means for accomplishing the floater opportunity objectives merits careful consideration.

Furthermore, the direction to explore a system of enhanced floater opportunities for certain groups is closely intertwined with the measures that the Department undertakes to address resource management challenges. For example, it is possible that an incentive-based approach could become part of efforts to increase opportunities for unsuccessful permit applicants if such applicants agree to a smaller group size. Likewise, there could be an incentive or 'bonus point system' for smaller groups to procure a cancelled permit in the future. No actions of this nature are going to be taken now, but the Department will be further weighing such possibilities.

When launched, the Department's new licensing system, XMT, could increase the department's ability to consider options such as a bonus-points system or a weighted lottery. Additionally, there will need to be more discussions with the

public about whether a new system should give preference to residents of Montana, which was a desire expressed by several commenters. It will take time to develop the best approach and thus, the Department has decided not to pursue changes to floater opportunities at this time. The updated management plan will provide guidance for exploring this issue further.

III. MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT (MEPA) PROCESS AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

FWP released a Draft EA for public review on November 10, 2021 and accepted public comment until December 15, 2021, for a 30-day comment period.

Legal notice of the proposal and availability of the Draft EA was published in newspapers throughout the state of Montana. Additionally, FWP issued a statewide press release and published a public notice on the FWP webpage. Social media platforms across the agency's statewide Facebook pages were also used to help reach a broad audience.

Additionally, FWP held two public informational sessions over Zoom during the comment period – one on December 1 and another on December 7, in which 35 individuals participated. FWP also emailed notifications of the EA's availability, to adjacent landowners, interested individuals, groups and agencies, and other key stakeholders. The EA was available for public review and comment on FWP's web site (<https://fwp.mt.gov/stateparks/smith-river/management>) beginning on November 10, 2021.

IV. PUBLIC COMMENTS

FWP received a total of **104** comments during the 30-day public comment period. Ninety-nine comments were received through FWP's webpage (online submissions) and five written submissions were received.

- Eighty-nine comments were received from Montana residents; five comments were received from non-residents; ten commenters did not indicate their residency status.
- Four organizations offered comments, including: American Rivers, Hellgate Hunters and Anglers, Montana Trout Unlimited, and the State Historical Preservation Office.

Comments covered a wide range of issues, including perceived ecological issues; the importance of maintaining the recreational value of the Smith River State Park and Smith River Corridor; and acknowledgements of the growth in demand and use.

V. DECISION ON NEED FOR EIS

Based upon the Draft EA and the applicable laws, regulations, and policies, we have determined that the proposed actions will not have significant negative effects on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, we conclude that the EA is the appropriate level of analysis, and preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is not warranted. By notification of this Decision Notice, the draft EA is hereby made the final EA.

Appendix A

Smith River State Park and River Corridor Public Comment Summary

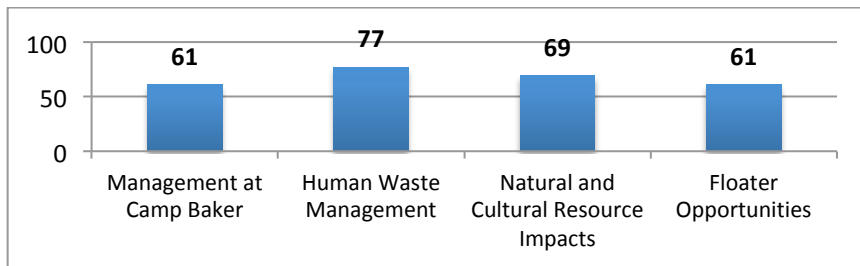


SNAPSHOT

FWP held a 30-day comment period for the Draft Smith River Management Plan Environmental Assessment (EA) that concluded on December 15, 2021. There was a total of **104** comments - 99 through FWP's webpage and five written comments. FWP also received general feedback from tribal representatives through its Tribal Liaison.

Eighty-nine comments were submitted by Montana residents; five from non-residents; and ten commenters that did not indicate their residency status. Four organizations offered comments, including: American Rivers, Hellgate Hunters and Anglers, Montana Trout Unlimited, and the State Historical Preservation Office.

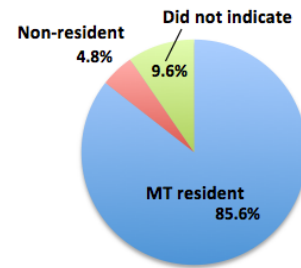
The EA considered four key management topics. These included: (A) Management at Camp Baker, (B) Human Waste Management, (C) Natural and Cultural Resource Impacts; and (D) Floater Opportunities. Each of these four areas generated a fair amount of interest from the public. The chart below depicts the number of commenters who shared input for each respective management topic.



Two overall themes mentioned by commenters included general support for addressing management changes to the 2009 plan; and the need to steward such an important resource, especially given the high interest in floating and growing use.

A synopsis of what was heard as well as several questions and FWP responses follows.

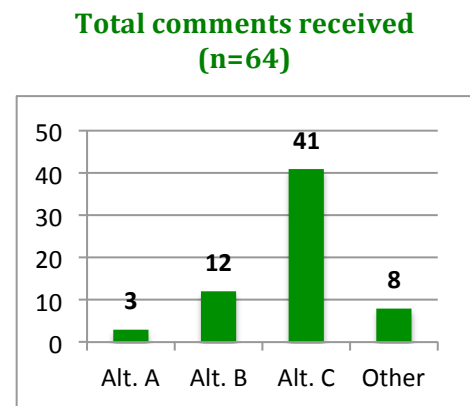
WHO PROVIDED COMMENTS?



A. MANAGEMENT AT CAMP BAKER

Overall, there were **62** commenters that provided input on management issues for Camp Baker. This represents **59.6%** of all commenters. (Two commenters provided support for more than one alternative.) Alternative C, the preferred alternative, which was to manage Camp Baker for day-use only and continue to register groups and assign boat camps via phone or online was the most popular choice, supported by **64.1%** of all commenters.

Alternatives	Total (% of all)
Alternative A (No Action): Return to allowing overnight camping while registering groups and assigning boat camps on site.	3 (4.7%)
Alternative B: Return to allowing overnight camping but continue to register groups via phone or online.	12 (18.8%)
Alternative C (Preferred Alternative): Manage Camp Baker for day-use only and continue to register groups and assign boat camps via phone or online.	41 (64.1%)
Other Comments	8 (12.5%)



Of the commenters that supported the preferred alternative, approximately one-third mentioned that they felt the system implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic has worked well. Many stated that the process was less stressful, was time- and cost-efficient, and that the convenience of pre-trip phone conversations with FWP staff helped them adequately make plans. A handful of commenters also mentioned that they felt positive about the prospective economic benefits that such a change could represent for local communities such as White Sulphur Springs through the provision of additional lodging and hospitality. Others suggested that with this change, FWP contemplate potential site design changes to help make pre-launch activities more efficient. Tribal representatives were generally in favor of more tightly managing use at Camp Baker as a way to help mitigate potential impacts to cultural and heritage resources.

Just a small portion of commenters did not support the preferred alternative. Of this cohort, some voiced concerns about the loss in opportunity to talk with staff in person, while others suggested that a complete transition to only using Camp Baker for day-use purposes was unnecessary. In support of their views, they suggested that FWP continue to allow camping during low-use times, such as shoulder seasons, or for small groups. A small handful of commenters raised concerns with the potential extra expense of finding a place to stay and mentioned that the night at Camp Baker has represented an important time for group organizing and socializing with other floaters.

Questions and FWP Responses related to Management at Camp Baker

- 1. If Camp Baker is solely used for day use, what is FWP thinking about the possibility of displacement of overnight campers to proximate sites (for instance Fort Logan and Newlan Creek FAS, or the Smith River WMA) and related potential resource impacts that could occur?**

With the change in overnight use for Camp Baker, and in alignment with the view of some commenters, FWP affirms the importance of monitoring use and resource impacts on nearby public lands in proximity to Camp Baker where floaters may alternatively choose to camp. The agency will work with partners to make a concerted effort to monitor and evaluate impacts at these sites to ascertain whether such use may begin to lead to an undesirable level of impacts. FWP will be poised to undertake a corrective management approach as deemed necessary.

2. Considering the potential for changes at Camp Baker, will FWP also evaluate the opportunity for improvements such as for staging areas, boat ramps, and parking lot areas? Even some minor improvements to boat ramps would be welcome.

FWP will prioritize any future site design plans and approaches that maximize safe and efficient launches, staff safety, floater checks, and importantly, upholding its mission of protecting natural, cultural, and historic resources. This approach also addresses a concern expressed by the State Historical Preservation Office surrounding unfavorable resource impacts that can occur in an "ad hoc" setting for staging, launching, parking and dispersed camping. Should FWP pursue any site design changes, a Montana Antiquity Act compliance review will be undertaken with the exact design and placement of any new or delineated areas undergoing a review of impacts for Historic Properties and Heritage Properties.

3. Couldn't FWP continue to offer camping and simply offer a reduced number of campsites or make camping available for smaller group sizes, perhaps less than six?

FWP's preferred alternative in the final decision notice is to establish Camp Baker as a day-use only site during the peak use season, to reduce congestion, improve the visitor experience and protect natural, cultural, and historic resources in the area. Offering a reduced number of campsites, or allowing camping for smaller group sizes, during the peak use season would fail to meet the desired conditions mentioned above. FWP will, however, allow for a limited amount of camping during off-peak times.

4. If crowding and congestion are concerns, couldn't FWP simply increase the number of campsites to accommodate more groups, or perhaps better delineate campsite areas?

Due to the continued growth in average group size and number of vehicles, trailers and watercraft, the limited space at Camp Baker is needed for parking and for the staging, rigging, and launching of watercraft.

5. It seems that many of the problems at Camp Baker are often associated with large groups -- excessive noise, after hours partying, and Leave No Trace infractions, as examples. Instead of prohibiting camping, could FWP increase its staff or enforcement presence to better manage Camp Baker?

Although increased staffing or enforcement presence might improve the overall visitor experience due to noise or other social issues, it would not address the issues of congestion or natural, cultural, and historical resource impacts.

6. Did FWP receive much feedback about the impact of a transition to online or phone registration on older generations or individuals who lack Internet capability?

There were just two commenters who expressed such a concern. It is FWP's hope that the phone conversations will help floaters adequately prepare. While there has generally been positive feedback from those who have participated in FWP's system during the pandemic, staff will seek to make continuous improvements to allay concerns that what was formerly done in person, is successfully undertaken online or over the phone. Moreover, utilization of the online system can bear significant time and cost savings to both the permit holder and FWP.

B. HUMAN WASTE MANAGEMENT

There were 77 commenters that provided input on proposed changes to FWP's human waste management, which represents 74.0% of all commenters. Alternative B, the preferred alternative, which was to move to mandatory human waste pack-out using self-contained toilet systems with disposal at or near the Eden Bridge take-out, was the most popular choice, supported by 64.9% of all commenters.

Alternatives	Total (% of all)	Total comments received (n=77)								
Alternative A (No Action): Continue to utilize pit latrines	19 (24.7%)	<p>A bar chart titled 'Total comments received (n=77)' showing the number of comments for three categories: Alt. A, Alt. B, and Other. The y-axis ranges from 0 to 60. The bars are green. Alt. A has 19 comments, Alt. B has 50 comments, and Other has 8 comments.</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Alternative</th> <th>Total comments received</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Alt. A</td> <td>19</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Alt. B</td> <td>50</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Other</td> <td>8</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Alternative	Total comments received	Alt. A	19	Alt. B	50	Other	8
Alternative	Total comments received									
Alt. A	19									
Alt. B	50									
Other	8									
Alternative B (Preferred Alternative): Mandatory human waste pack-out using self-contained toilet systems with disposal at or near the Eden Bridge take-out.	50 (64.9%)									
Other Comments	8 (10.4%)									

Several commenters mentioned that they felt that making human waste pack-out obligatory was simply the best choice for the health of the river corridor, and that many, river users are familiar with such an expectation. However, there was a high degree of uncertainty and concern expressed about whether floaters will truly abide by waste pack-out measures. Such concerns were expressed by commenters who supported both Alternatives A and B. Commenters also raised questions about how FWP might enforce this requirement, stating that a phased approach during the transition into this new system, coupled with education and outreach will be highly necessary. Tribal representatives were generally in favor of moving away from digging pit latrines to help mitigate potential impact to cultural and heritage resources.

Of those in support of the preferred alternative, there were several who stated that they believe floaters will adapt over time, just as they did with food storage requirements. Others referenced the array of convenient pack-out options that now exist for floaters. Still others stated that perhaps a rental equipment operation and/or the offering of waste disposal services could promulgate business and entrepreneurial opportunities for the community of White Sulphur Springs.

Those commenters who did not support the preferred alternative expressed concerns about a few key issues: a concern that floaters won't comply with the new requirement; uncertainty regarding

how FWP would enforce the new regulation; questions as to how those traveling in kayaks or small watercraft would manage the weight and volume of a contained system; and, simply stating that FWP should identify better ways to manage the existing pit latrine system. Some of these commenters noted that such a change could curtail floaters from wanting to pursue a Smith River trip.

Questions and FWP Responses related to Human Waste Management

1. How and when would FWP phase in this requirement and how will it be enforced?

FWP will propose that the Parks and Recreation Board implement the human waste pack-out requirement beginning with the 2023 float season. All float groups including private, commercial and landowner would be required to fully comply. Rangers at Camp Baker would conduct compliance checks prior to each floater launch.

2. How would FWP educate the public and prospective floaters on this change?

FWP would carry out multiple education and outreach efforts by sharing detailed information on the Smith River website, and by developing an online instructional video regarding the approved, self-contained human waste pack-out system and proper waste disposal post-trip. Additionally, during the 2022 season FWP intends to post information at the Camp Baker put-in and river rangers will help to educate floaters on the upcoming changes.

3. Could FWP simply make the waste pack-out requirement for larger groups and not for smaller ones?

Continuing to provide pit latrines for smaller groups would fail to meet the desired conditions of a long-term stewardship approach to reduce impacts and disturbance to soil, vegetation and cultural resources; reduce potential contamination of ground and surface water; and reduce risk to public health.

4. Could FWP simply reduce the number of pit toilets, keeping some open along the corridor in key locations? If so, could FWP simply transition to using environmentally friendly chemicals, or composting toilets?

Continuing to provide some pit latrines within the corridor would fail to meet the desired conditions of a long-term stewardship approach to reduce impacts and disturbance to soil, vegetation and cultural resources; reduce potential contamination of ground and surface water; and reduce risk to public health. Moreover, composting toilets were considered by FWP but ruled out due to the complexity of the geography, proximity to the river, and the requirement for adequate exposure to sun/heat, which is very limited in most parts of the canyon. Further, the removal of composted waste could require a pack-out system via helicopter, raft, or livestock if DEQ on-site disposal requirements were not met.

5. What changes would FWP make at the boat camps? For instance, can the privacy fences remain intact? Is there a possibility of a mid-float disposal option rather than just a singular one at Eden Bridge?

If the pack-out requirement is enacted, FWP would remove all the pit toilet risers and bases. In boat camps that do not provide an adequate location(s) for privacy, FWP would continue to provide the wood-slab constructed privacy screening. One disposal facility for all human waste will be provided at, or near, the Eden Bridge take-out. For a variety of reasons, including the remoteness and difficult access into the river corridor, as well as additional cost, the idea of a mid-float disposal area has been ruled out at this point.

6. What kind of research is FWP undertaking to adjust to this change?

FWP has conducted extensive research into the methods of collection, waste management considerations for floaters during their trip, and waste management processes and protocols for take-out and disposal. This has included correspondence with product manufacturers and river recreation managers across the country who manage human waste pack-out systems. It should be noted that FWP plans to issue a project-specific Environmental Assessment (EA) considering the placement of a human waste disposal system at Eden Bridge. The public will have an opportunity to provide input on the EA.

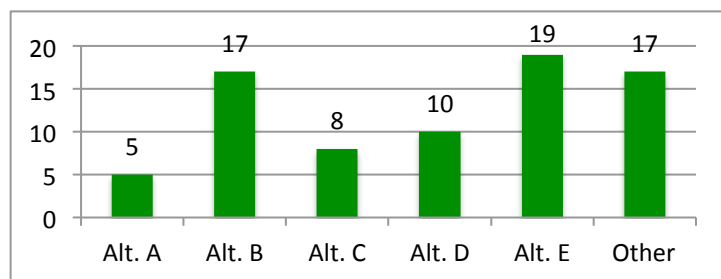
C. NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCE IMPACTS

There were **70** unique commenters that provided input on proposed changes to FWP's management of natural and cultural resource impacts. This represents **67.3%** of all commenters with six commenters voicing support for more than one alternative. Alternative E, the preferred alternative, was the most popular choice by a narrow margin. The alternative proposed to create a system of incentives to promote smaller group sizes throughout the season; close the river to floating for a given period of time during early spring season; and reallocate only a portion of cancelled permits during peak season.

Commenters were provided a set of additive choices for potential management changes ranging from less restrictive to more restrictive. The choices each had unique tradeoffs and focused on factors such as utilizing recreation ecology measures, reducing group sizes, reducing the number of daily group launches; considering closures during the early spring season, and holding back some cancelled permits during peak season.

In response, there were commenters who indicated a preference for more than one of the alternatives. There were also several commenters that voiced support for an alternative but with modifications, such as opting for Alternative E but keeping the cancellation system as is and not closing the river during the early season. Such perspectives were largely captured in the 'Other' category below.

Total comments received (n=76)



Alternatives	Total (% of all)
Alternative A (No Action): Continue to utilize recreation ecology measures with no additional management actions.	5 (6.6%)
Alternative B: Create a system of incentives for smaller group sizes.	17 (22.4%)
Alternative C: Reduce the maximum group size and/or the number of groups allowed to launch during early spring season (March/April).	8 (10.5%)
Alternative D: Reduce the maximum group size and/or the number of groups allowed to launch per day during the entire season.	10 (13.2%)
Alternative E (Preferred Alternative): Create a system of incentives to promote smaller group sizes throughout the season; close the river to floating for a given period of time during early spring season; reallocate only a portion of cancelled permits during peak season.	19 (25.0%)
Other Comments	17 (22.4%)

Most commenters generally acknowledged the need to address natural and cultural resource impacts and expressed support for FWP's focus on this important topic. However, responses across the spectrum of management approaches differed widely. This is a complex and multi-layered topic and presents important connectivity for considerations in examining the permit lottery system and floater opportunities as well. FWP staff members have undertaken careful analysis of this situation as a whole and have developed ideas for boat camps and landings on a case-by-case basis. This said, at the heart of the EA were questions regarding broad brushstrokes the agency might take, to both mitigate current impacts and anticipate future ones.

While there was more support for Alternative E, the preferred alternative, nearly 25.0% of all commenters voiced support for not doing away with early season floating in entirety. Some offered that the early float season can provide floaters with unique opportunities to enjoy the river and that those floaters who choose to go during this time tend to be well-seasoned, are knowledgeable about the river, and tend to exercise caution in helping to prevent negative impacts to the landscape. Nearly an equal number of commenters expressed concern with FWP doing away with its system of reallocating cancelled permits. Many suggested that this would unduly impact local residents who are apt to take advantage of such floating opportunities. Some suggested that such a provision, if implemented, should be modified so that cancelled permits would only be available to small groups. Others suggested that modifications to the cancellation system should only be exercised during peak float months of May and June.

There was also considerable feedback on recreation ecology measures that FWP might implement to combat resource impacts, with support for hardening sites, instituting a fire pan requirement, requiring firewood to be brought in, and installing fencing to keep cattle out of the boat camps as their presence was mentioned as having a unique and pervasive negative impact. Tribal representatives were generally in favor of any measures that FWP might implement to help preserve cultural and heritage resources.

Several commenters asked how changes in management approaches would be applied to commercial outfitters. This was also a question that was posed during the first of FWP's informational sessions on December 1. A small handful of commenters expressed concern about large groups, and in particular those associated with commercial outfitters. A few commenters suggested that FWP re-examine its commercial use regulations and policies. Several commenters

suggested that simply lowering the maximum group size for both private and commercial floats, and/or the number of daily launches could help to address resource impacts.

Questions and FWP Responses related to Natural and Cultural Resource Impacts

1. Instead of looking to minimize group sizes, could FWP consider decreasing the number of watercraft per group?

Minimizing group sizes is the simplest and most effective means to decrease the number of people, thus decreasing the foot traffic and helping to mitigate the extent of natural and cultural resource impacts. Decreasing the number of watercraft allowed per group could create a safety issue floaters attempt to fill their boat with too many passengers. Limiting the number of watercraft per group could also unfairly restrict group sizes for groups utilizing small and solo watercraft like canoes, kayaks, kick boats and pack rafts.

2. How would FWP handle policies or regulations for private floaters versus those for commercial outfitters?

If FWP proposes to implement policies or regulations meant to restrict or reduce floating use, the department would evaluate measures that are fair and equitable for all user groups, both private and commercial.

3. Rather than taking a broad brushstroke approach in implementing recreation ecology measures, might FWP consider an evaluation of boat camps and landings on a case-by-case basis to then apply the most relevant solution or measure?

FWP plans to conduct an initial assessment of the conditions at boat camps and landings and develop a prioritized list of those needing urgent attention. Individual management prescriptions would then be developed for each boat camp and landing. These approaches may include goals, objectives, desired conditions along with a set of guiding indicators and standards. Once recreation ecology measures are completed within a boat camp and/or landing, monitoring would take place to ensure the standards and desired conditions are being met.

4. Could FWP add more boat camps to 'rest' those that exhibit the most degradation?

Topography is a key factor that limits developing additional boat camps in the remainder of the river canyon. In addition, there are limited opportunities to acquire new boat camps. Those that do exist are primarily on private property in the lower part of the river, between river miles 40 to 52. This could help alleviate the amount of use in this section of the river and allow measures such as "resting" but there would need to be property owners willing to lease or sell land to FWP.

5. What additional research will FWP conduct to guide natural and cultural resource protection efforts?

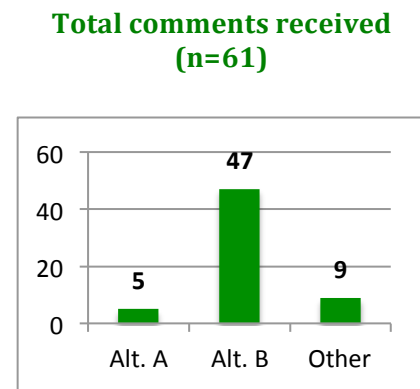
FWP will stay current on the latest recreation ecology research emanating from academia and professional consulting businesses. FWP and the USFS will conduct cultural surveys within existing boat camps and prior to development of any proposed new boat camps, to mitigate any

potential disturbance to cultural resources. Additionally, FWP will develop a long-term monitoring and evaluation program to ensure the prescribed standards and desired conditions are being met.

D. FLOATER OPPORTUNITIES:

There were **61** unique commenters that provided input on proposed changes to floater opportunities, which represents **59.6%** of all commenters. Alternative B, the preferred alternative, which was to explore the development of a system to increase floater opportunities for unsuccessful permit applicants and others who have not recently (or ever) floated the Smith River, was the most popular choice, supported by 77.0% of all commenters.

Alternatives	Total (% of all)
Alternative A (No Action): Maintain Current System	5 (8.2%)
Alternative B (Preferred Alternative): Explore the development of a system to increase floater opportunities for unsuccessful permit applicants and others who have not recently (or ever) floated the Smith River.	47 (77.0%)
Other Comments	9 (14.8%)



While the majority of commenters supported developing a system to increase floater opportunities, there was less agreement on the approaches for doing so. Nearly 35% of commenters suggested that FWP consider giving residents preference in the lottery, with some stating that the number of permits available to non-resident permit should be limited. Nearly 25% of commenters suggested that the permit lottery system should emulate FWP's bonus point system for allocating limited hunting permits, while nearly 10% of commenters suggested re-allocating canceled permits only to those who haven't floated recently or have been unsuccessful in drawing a permit. Views on keeping the cancellation system 'as is' were also voiced on the topic of natural and cultural resource management.

Several commenters also mentioned that increasing fees could help to reduce the number of people applying for a permit. A small portion stated that fees should be elevated for non-residents as a way to reduce the number of applications. Commenters also voiced support for incentivizing smaller group sizes and minimizing the number and size of commercial floats. A few commenters offered ideas for limiting applications either by age (only accepting applications from individuals over the age of 18) and/or by the number per household (one). Most of the commenters who supported maintaining the current system noted that keeping things simple was best, with a small number of them mentioning that people will always 'find ways around the system.'

Questions and FWP Responses related to Floater Opportunities

1. How and when would FWP develop a system to increase floater opportunities for those who haven't recently (or ever) floated the Smith River?

FWP does not have a defined timeline as to when a system would be available. The department is currently developing a new and improved licensing system called Explore-MT that should have the capacity to employ changes to the lottery system and other technological enhancements. The details of "how" the Explore-MT system will improve drawing opportunities will be developed once the system is completed and include additional opportunities for public involvement prior to decisions being made.

2. Why doesn't FWP give Montana residents preference in the lottery drawing, like it does with limited entry hunting permits?

Nearly 35% of "Floater Opportunity" commenters suggested that FWP consider offering a preference to resident applicants, with some stating that there should be a cap on the number non-resident permits issued. FWP staff members have heard this suggestion from resident floaters over the years. The department plans to evaluate the costs and benefits of implementing a resident preference and/or a cap on non-resident permits as well as the legality.