COONEY STATE PARK

FINAL MANAGEMENT PLAN

May 2012

Prepared by
Montana State Parks

A Division of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP)

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Executive Summary

Cooney State Park is a popular destination where outstanding water-based recreational opportunities abound and families, friends, and tourists come to camp, fish, boat, and relax. Located an hour southwest from Billings and near the communities of Roberts, Joliet, Boyd, and Red Lodge, the park is just over 300 acres and includes Cooney Reservoir. The reservoir serves as an important resource for irrigation in Carbon County, and the area is home to many year-round residents. In 2010, nonresident park visitors to the region spent over $8 million and helped create 84 jobs in tourism and tourism related industries. Visitors to Cooney State Park are vital contributors to the regional economy and help support the local communities and tourism industry.

The mission of the park is to provide easy and safe public access to water-related and land-based recreational activities by providing high quality and well-maintained facilities; friendly, responsive, and helpful service; resource management; and through collaborative partnerships. Cooney State Park receives approximately 150,000 visitors a year.

The purpose of the Cooney State Park Management Plan is to provide Montana State Parks, the staff, partners, and the public with a long-term plan to guide management of the park in a manner that is consistent with the mission and vision of the park, as well as with the parks system. This is the first management plan developed for Cooney State Park.

Planning Process

Public involvement and input is critical to the planning process to help identify issues, address challenges, and develop goals, objectives, and actions for the long-term management and sustainable operations of the park. Public scoping meetings were held in August 2010 in Billings and Roberts to identify public ideas and visions for the future. The draft plan was released in February 2012 for public review and comment for twenty-one (21) days, ending on March 2, 2012. Two open houses were scheduled to review the plan, answer questions, and solicit public feedback and comment. Information about the planning process and opportunities for public engagement were posted on the Montana State Parks website throughout the process. Additional information was gathered from the 2006 Survey of Cooney State Park Visitors.

Management Issues

Throughout the process, several management issues emerged based on public feedback, expert input, and analysis of the 2006 Visitor Survey. The following themes address the major issues, and provide guidance for implementation through a number of goals, objectives, and actions:

- Recreation Management
- Public Safety
- Facilities and Services
- Park Operations
- Natural Resources
- Cultural Resources

The park receives high levels of visitation during the summer, and park campgrounds are often full. Diversified camping opportunities will help meet the growing demand for park services and create new experiences for visitors. Concerns for overcrowding on the reservoir and public safety have been identified throughout as high priorities for recreation management. Montana State Parks will

continue to monitor conditions and adapt management as necessary through its public safety initiative and incident response program. Additional issues emerged around road maintenance and the need to address on-going wear and tear on roads around the park. Montana State Parks will continue to work with Carbon County to collaboratively address maintenance issues and develop and implement solutions. A strong integrated management presence is essential to creating a safe, user-friendly, and quality experience for all visitors.

Cooney State Parks is one of the most visited state parks in Montana. Modest improvements to camping opportunities and the development of modern amenities will continue to support family-oriented activities. The park is, however, underutilized during weekday and shoulder season use. Creative marketing solutions and interpretive and educational programming are identified as ways to create a sustainable stream of revenue and enhance visitor opportunities while supporting the regional tourism industry. Maintaining the park's natural resources with tree plantings and stronger programs on aquatic invasive species will also enhance park amenities and contribute to a more enjoyable experience for visitors, as well as help to support wildlife that call the park home. The reservoir was created for irrigation purposes in 1937, and further research into the cultural and historical resources will improve the understanding and public knowledge of the reservoir's role for irrigation and its contribution to the local economy.

Priority 1 Objectives

Priority objectives are identified as recommendations for guiding park management to improve services and continue the focus on customer satisfaction, based upon public input and comment, the 2006 Visitor Survey, staff knowledge, and the Parks Division priorities. The following are identified as top priorities for implementation.

Recreation Management

- Diversify camping opportunities through modest improvements.

Public Safety

- Actively promote and educate people about water and boating safety.
- Integrate public safety and law enforcement into daily park operations.
- Maintain a safe and user acceptable watercraft capacity on the reservoir.

Facilities and Services

- Improve road conditions throughout the park.

Park Operations

- Maintain camping reservation system.
- Maintain high level compliance with entrance and camping fees and public use regulations.

Natural Resources

- Plant more trees in the park in key use areas.
- Monitor and take action to keep Aquatic Invasive Species out of Cooney Reservoir.

1. Introduction

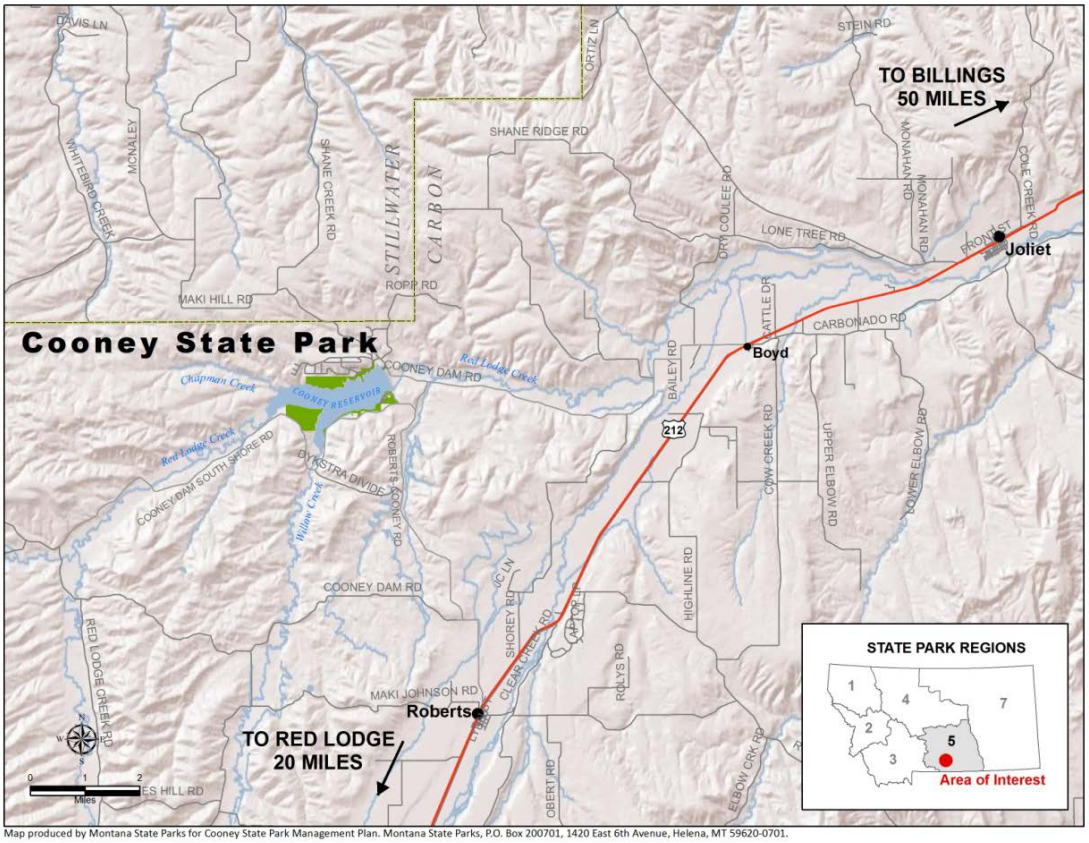
Montana State Parks manages Cooney State Park for the people of Montana and visitors to this state. Hereafter referred to as "Cooney," it is a place where outstanding water-based recreational opportunities abound and families, friends, and visitors come to camp, fish, boat, and relax.

Montana State Parks serves the interests of the public and protects the recreational, natural, and cultural resources of Montana. Established as a state park in 1969, Cooney is part of a statewide park system consisting of 54 state parks. Over two million visitors used the park system in 2010. Montana State Parks has drafted this plan to guide future management of Cooney, including all aspects of park operations and recreation management.

Nestled in the Beartooth foothills of south-central Montana, Cooney State Park has become one of the most visited water-based recreation areas in the state, with approximately 150,000 visitors annually. Part of the park's popularity can be attributed to its proximity to the Billings area, which is an hour drive northeast. The park is also located eight miles west of the community of Boyd and 20 miles north of Red Lodge. Other access is gained from a variety of county roads, including Shane Creek and Whitebird Roads from the west. See Map A for context map of Cooney.

The Cooney State Park Management Plan puts forward management goals and objectives based on public input, management experience, and division priorities. The plan will be implemented over the next ten years, dependant on funding and prioritization.

Map A. Cooney State Park Context Map



Map produced by Montana State Parks for Cooney State Park Management Plan. Montana State Parks, P.O. Box 200701, 1420 East 6th Avenue, Helena, MT 59620-0701.

2. Purpose of the Plan

Cooney State Park is currently managed according to the policies, guidelines, rules and regulations of Montana State Parks and the Cooney State Park Operations Manual. This plan provides guidance for all aspects of park operations, including public safety, recreation management, facilities and services, interpretation and education, and resource management.

The purpose of the Cooney State Park Management Plan is to provide a long-term plan to guide management of the park in a manner that is consistent with the mission of the Montana State Park system. This plan:

- Sets a long-term vision for the park;
- Establishes management goals, objectives, and actions for the park;
- Provides a basis for resource needs to support staffing, operations, maintenance, and capital improvements;
- Provides continuity and direction toward common goals for the next 10 years; and
- Prioritizes actions for implementation, depending on funding and staffing levels.

Image 1. Cooney Reservoir in the winter with Beartooth Mountains in the distance.

3. Planning Process and Timeline

Public involvement and input is critical to the planning process to help Montana State Parks identify issues, address challenges, and develop goals, objectives, and actions for the long-term management and sustainable operations of Cooney State Park. Public scoping meetings were held on August 18 and 19, 2010 in Billings and Roberts to identify public ideas and visions for the future. Notifications of these meetings were published in the Billings Gazette, and postcards were sent out directly to interested individuals, surrounding landowners, and interested agencies and organizations. Eighteen people attended the two meetings where they responded in small group format to three questions regarding their vision for the park, what is most important to them about the park, and any concerns they have regarding the park. Those who could not attend had the opportunity to submit comments via email and a web page specific to the Cooney planning process.

Additional input was gathered from the 2006 Survey of Cooney State Park Visitors (referenced as 2006 Visitor Survey from here forward); this data provides the most recent and complete survey of visitation at the park. Cooney was one of thirteen water-based parks that participated in the survey of park visitors and their experience. The questions related to visitor satisfaction with: facilities, customer service, cleanliness, resource use, activities, crowding, roads, services, noise, law enforcement, ADA opportunities, and educational/interpretive programs. The 2006 Visitor Survey is referenced throughout this document. See Appendix A for complete survey results.

The plan was released for public review and comment in February of 2012 for twenty-one (21) days. Two open houses were held again in Billings and Roberts during that period to review substantive objectives in the plan, answer questions, and solicit public feedback and comment. Twenty-one people attended the meetings, and 11 comments were provided. The public had the opportunity to comment in writing, by email, or through the agency web page set up for the planning process. See Figure 1 for the planning timeline and process.

Montana State Parks has solicited and received feedback and ideas from the public and associated management expertise to create a direction for Cooney State Park for the next ten or more years. Goals and objectives have been developed based on this feedback. The action items identified in this plan are based on those goals and objectives and will be carried out based on prioritization and available staffing and funding.

See Appendix B for complete information on public participation and reports.

Figure 1. Planning Timeline.

4. Mission and Vision

4.1 Montana State Parks

Mission
The mission of the Montana State Park system is to preserve, enhance and interpret a diverse representation of Montana's most outstanding natural, cultural, historic and recreational resources, for the personal, social, and economic benefit of present and future generations.

Vision
In the year 2020, the Montana State Park system will more accurately reflect the natural, cultural, historic, and recreational diversity of Montana, with a broader geographic and cultural representation than at present.

The future system will provide a greater diversity of park types, such as recreational waterways, rail-trails, and historical routes.

The system will also offer a broad range of facilities, experiences, and programs which meet an assortment of changing visitor needs and interests, including more educational and interpretive opportunities.

Staff will continue to improve resource protection, maintenance, programs, planning, monitoring, site design, visitor information, and overall professionalism, with enhanced connections and communication with other programs both inside and outside FWP.

The quality of the system will be more consistent and recognizable between units, and staff and financial resources will be sufficient to meet visitor needs.

From one end of the state to the other, visitor expectations will be routinely exceeded by the high quality of the experiences provided.

Overall, the state park system will be a more integral part of everyday existence in Montana; state parks will be affordable places where Montanans and their visitors from all walks of life feel comfortable and welcome.

4.2 Cooney State Park

Mission
The mission of Cooney State Park is to provide easy and safe public access to water- and land-based recreational activities by providing high quality and well-maintained facilities; friendly, responsive, and helpful service; resource management; and collaborative partnerships.

Vision
Over the next ten years, Cooney State Park will remain a high demand recreational destination for visitors to enjoy camping, fishing, boating, and other recreational activities.

<u>Service:</u> Customers will receive outstanding service contributing to enjoyable vacations and return visits. Park programs will be developed through staff efforts and Parks Division support, and staff pride in the park and serving visitors will be evident through these advances. Efforts will focus on maintaining and improving facilities to exceed customer expectations. Partnerships will be developed with individuals and groups integrally involved with park operations to cooperatively address safety, tourism and business development, irrigation, and neighborhood issues.

<u>Safety:</u> Public safety and visitor protection will be integrated into park operations providing consistency, education, and professional incident response and management that enhance the health and safety of park visitors and employees.

<u>Stewardship:</u> Monitoring, managing and protecting the natural and recreational resources will retain the park's aesthetics, inhibit terrestrial and aquatic invasive species, and prevent the degradation of natural and recreational resources. Land and water resources will be integrated and managed together as one whole system.

<u>Sustainability:</u> Cooney State Park will grow a sustainable stream of revenue resources, be managed to a high standard of operations, and will have adequate resources to deliver a quality experience for park visitors, including financial stability, appropriate staff levels, and well-maintained park grounds and facilities.

5. Park Background

Cooney State Park has changed greatly over the last 40 years since becoming a state park, from uncontrolled open space with dispersed camping, single lane boat ramps, and gravel parking, to developed campgrounds with a management presence and multiple improved amenities. The following discussion provides an overview of these features to provide reference to future visions.

5.1 Acquisition

The Public Works Administration and State Water Conservation Board built Cooney Dam in 1937 for irrigation purposes. The dam was named for Governor Frank Cooney. The Rock Creek Water Users Association currently manages the dam and water storage. In 1969, the Water Conservation Board—now the Water Projects Bureau of the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC)—leased the recreation management responsibilities to the State Parks Division of the Fish and Game Department—now called Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. The land managed for recreation purposes includes 15.73 acres owned in fee title and 290 acres leased from DNRC. This lease was renewed in 2006 for a 10-year period. See Map B for land management and ownership.

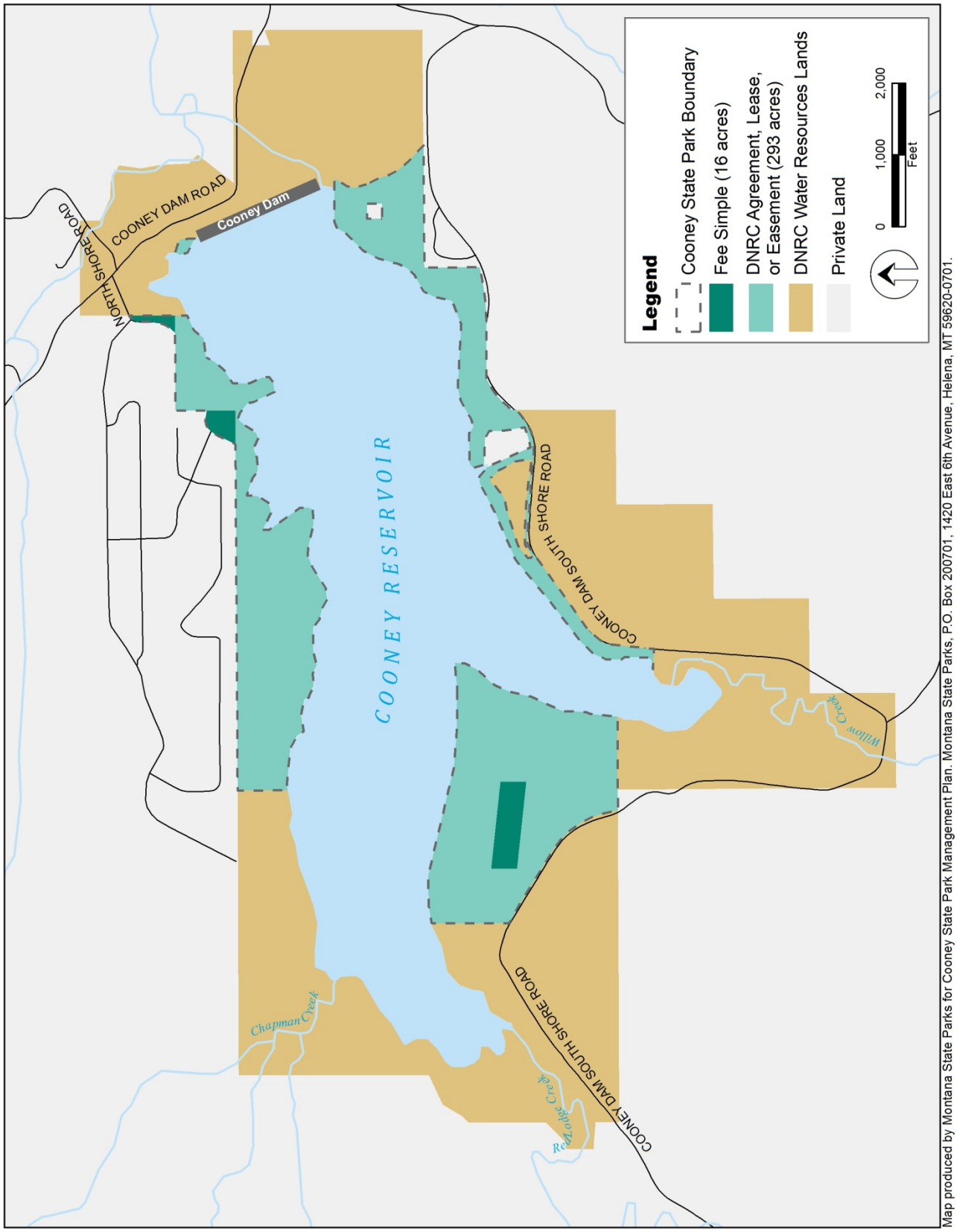
The original dam impounded 24,200 acre-feet of water over 778 surface acres on Red Lodge Creek. In 1971, a hydrographic survey showed that about a third of the reservoir had silted in, limiting the storage capacity to 18,000 acre-feet. In 1982, the dam was raised from 97 feet to 102 feet allowing an active storage capacity of 28,230 acre-feet on 1,078 surface acres. The spillway width was increased from 70 feet to 500 feet, and the dam is 2,369 feet long. The water levels fluctuate throughout the year and the reservoir hits full pool in the springtime from mountain runoff. As summer approaches the reservoir level drops as local farmers and ranchers draw water from the lake to irrigate their crops on approximately 20,000 acres of land, a use that has been occurring since the reservoir's establishment.

Image 2. Cooney Reservoir after construction of dam. State Water Conservation Board – State Engineers Office, July 1952.

Over time, local residents from the Billings area have utilized the flat water and surrounding shoreline for recreation. Cooney State Park was officially created in 1969 and has gone through many transformations. The reservoir has endured and improved in spite of continued heavy visitor use. Facility improvements and increased services have led to greater visitor satisfaction and a higher standard of operations at Cooney.

Lands surrounding the park are owned and managed by DNRC or private individuals. A few private in holdings exist within the park boundaries. Residents in subdivisions surrounding Cooney consider the park part of their home and use the park to fish, boat, and walk the trails. Park land is not contiguous around the reservoir, which can limit the ability to expand recreational facilities or programs for park visitors.

Map B. Cooney State Park Land Management and Adjacent Ownership.



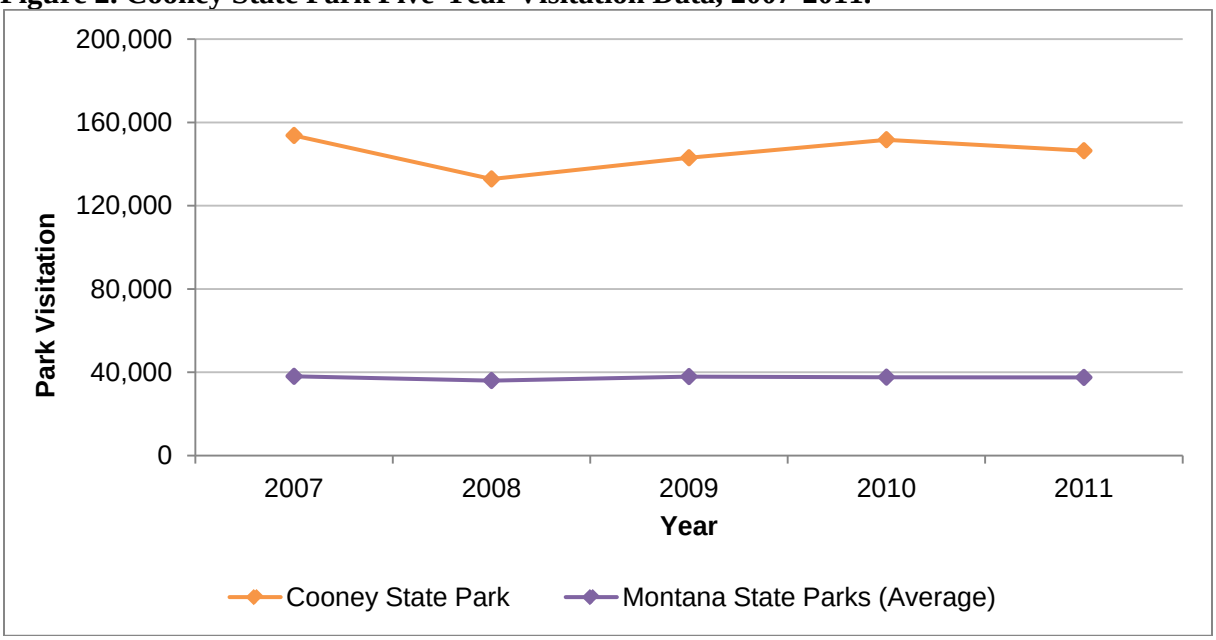
Map produced by Montana State Parks for Cooney State Park Management Plan. Montana State Parks, P.O. Box 200701, 1420 East 6th Avenue, Helena, MT 59620-0701.

5.2 Visitation and Use

5.2.1 Park Visitation

Cooney has consistently been one of the top visited state parks in Montana. Visitation estimates are measured with traffic counters located throughout the park. Cooney visitation over the past five years has been between 132,000 and 156,000 visitors annually. The five-year visitation trend shows a record visitation of 156,000 in 2007, a slight decrease in 2008, and holding steady between 143,000 and 151,000 visitors (Figure 2). Cooney State Park's visitation level is approximately four times higher than the average visitation for all other Montana State Park units.

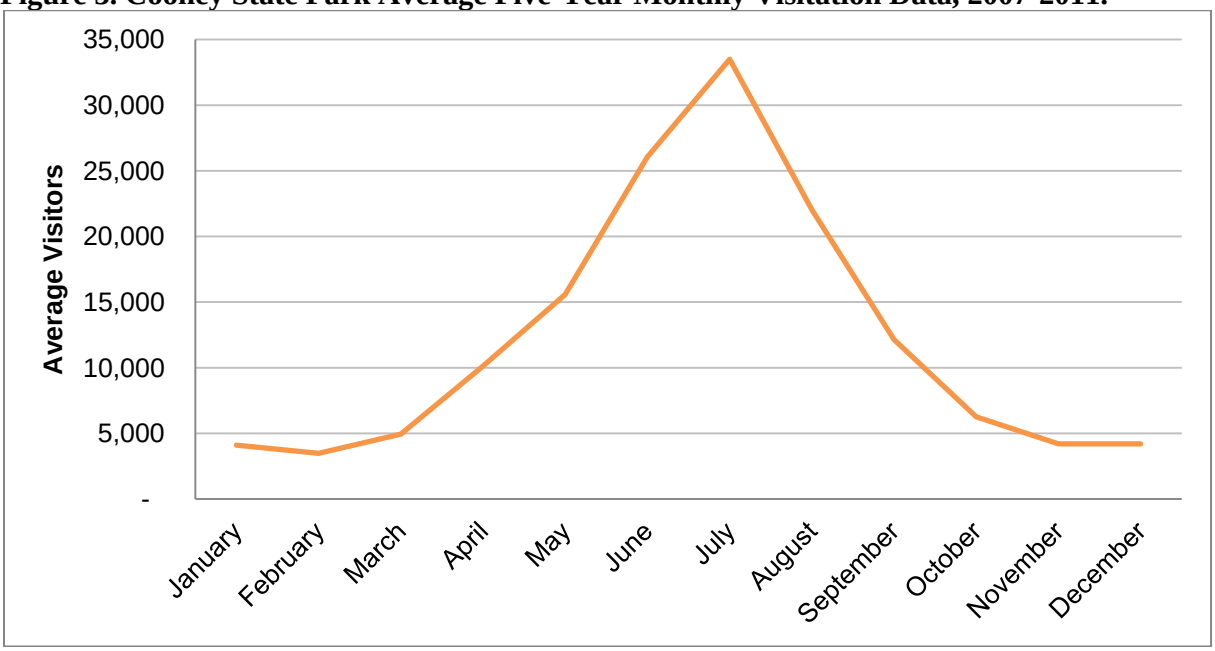
Figure 2. Cooney State Park Five-Year Visitation Data, 2007-2011.



Source: Montana State Parks.

While yearly visitation is consistently high, visitation to Cooney varies considerably by month and season (Figure 3). Cooney's popularity is primarily during the summer months between May and September when the average number of visitors can reach almost 35,000 people during July, about seven times higher than the lower months. Throughout the rest of year, Cooney receives considerably less visitors, particularly in the winter. There exists the opportunity to expand Cooney's visitation season to more year-round use, and promote shoulder season activities, like ice fishing, cross-country skiing, ice hockey, wildlife viewing, and more.

Figure 3. Cooney State Park Average Five-Year Monthly Visitation Data, 2007-2011.



Source: Montana State Parks.

5.2.2 Recreational Activities

In the 2006 Visitor Survey, Montana State Parks gathered baseline information from park users concerning recreational use at Cooney State Park (Table 1). The type of information collected included:

- Types of recreational activities participated in and equipment used
- Acceptability ratings concerning current park conditions as well as perceptions of change related to these conditions.
- Preferences for managerial related park conditions.
- Other miscellaneous background data (e.g., length of stay, party size, past experience using the park, residency, etc.).

The average number of trips per year was six visits, 95 percent of visitors surveyed came with family and/or friends, and 95 percent were Montana residents. The main activity visitors participated in was boating at 70 percent, followed by camping and fishing both at approximately 60 percent.

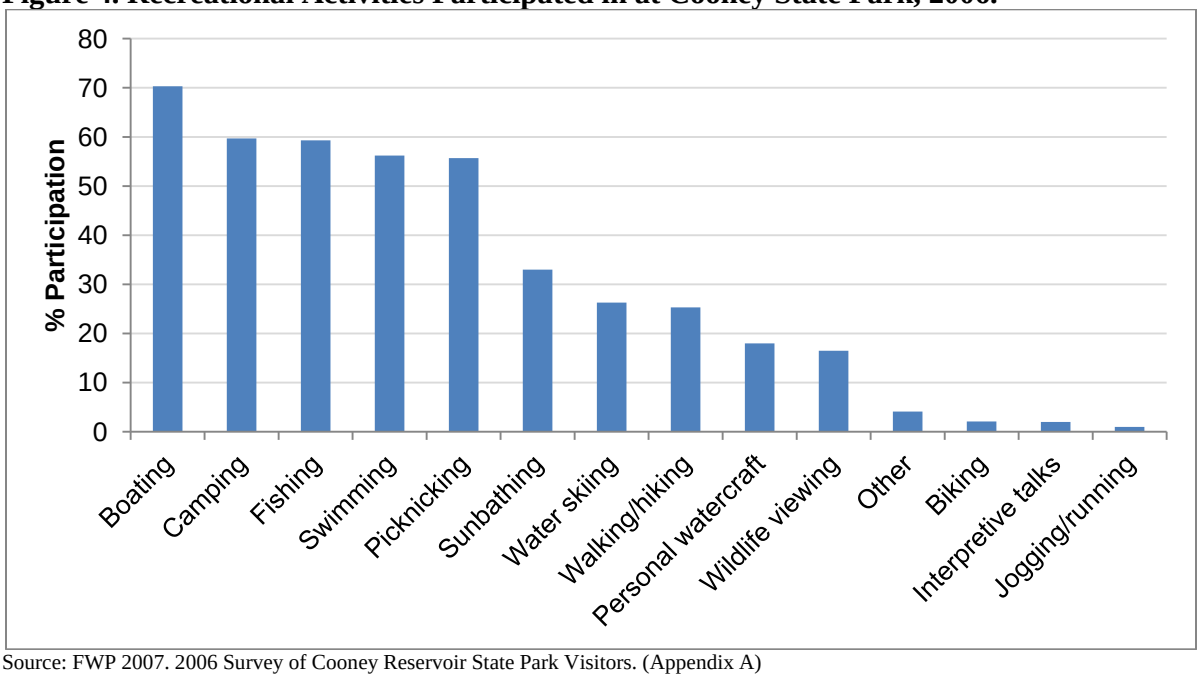
Table 1. 2006 Baseline Visitation Data for Cooney State Park.

Category	Statistic
Trips Per Year	6
Average age	45
% MT Residents	95%
Main Participation Activity	Boating: 70%
Second Participation Activity	Camping, Fishing: 60%

Source: FWP 2007. 2006 Survey of Cooney Reservoir State Park Visitors. (Appendix A)

The top five recreational activities that had the most participation were boating (70 percent), camping (59.7 percent), fishing (59.3 percent), swimming (56.2 percent), and picnicking (55.7 percent) (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Recreational Activities Participated in at Cooney State Park, 2006.



Source: FWP 2007. 2006 Survey of Cooney Reservoir State Park Visitors. (Appendix A)

5.2.3 Economy and Tourism

Cooney State Park is located in Region 5 within the Montana State Parks system. It is one of the most visited State Parks in Region 5. As such, it helps contribute to the regional economy and tourism industries. In 2010, Montana State Parks and the University of Montana's Bureau of Business and Economic Research published a study titled "Economic Impact Survey of Visitors to Montana State Parks." Statewide, resident and nonresident visitors to Montana State Parks spent over $289 million in 2010, and as a direct result of this spending, created over 1,100 jobs, $26 million in labor income, and $77 million in industry sales. In Region 5, nonresident visitors to Montana State Parks spent over $8 million, created over 84 jobs, $1.7 million in labor income, and $5.1 million in industry sales. Visitation to Montana State Parks and to Cooney State Park in Region 5 helps support regional economies as well as the local surrounding communities by providing not only a recreational resource, but a tourist destination for all.

5.3 Visitor Facilities

Cooney State Park has a variety of facilities, and has added and upgraded a number of them over the past few years. The park currently manages and maintains over 70 campsites, three boat ramps, a number of day use areas and vault latrines, a comfort station, and fish cleaning station. There are also a dozen electrical hook ups, a group camp area, and campsites set aside for visitors with disabilities. Fresh water spigots are available throughout the park, but not at individual camp sites. Facilities are typically full on weekends during the peak season. See Map C for park features and facilities.

Map C. Cooney State Park Features and Visitor Facilities.

5.4 Operations and Management

Key operational programs that make up the core of park management at Cooney State Park include public safety, facility and grounds maintenance, resource protection, user fees, and a camping reservation system. The continued popularity of this park, coupled with increased visitor demand, has made it necessary to add new facilities and adjust operational procedures to reflect the increasing visitation levels. Starting in 2010, a concessionaire was contracted on the North Shore for visitors to buy firewood, ice, hot dogs and burgers, and prepackaged convenience items.

Public safety and resource protection are the foundation for maintaining a peaceful and family friendly atmosphere where visitors can safely enjoy the outdoors. Management efforts have focused on increasing visitor satisfaction and minimizing user conflicts, social and resource impacts, and non-compliance with park regulations.

The high visitation at Cooney requires managing visitor numbers both on the water and in the campgrounds and day use areas. Overcrowding in campgrounds and day use areas leads to increased visitor conflicts for parking and space, increased litter, and vegetation damage around the campsites from soil compaction and trampling. Overcrowding on the water, by all types of users, creates public safety issues. On the reservoir, the number and spacing of watercraft is not directly controlled, but is restricted to the number of campsites in the park and by the number of parking spaces in both the boat launch parking lots and day use areas. The majority of boat users launch at the North Shore and Marshall Cove day use areas, while Red Lodge Campground receives less boat use. The concentration of boaters at the North Shore and Marshall Cove areas creates impacts for parking and the ability to launch boats in a timely, efficient, and safe manner.

The park owns and operates equipment to maintain most of the interior roads, haul gravel, clean boat ramps, and maintain vegetation throughout the park on its own. Park maintenance is a continual responsibility that must be accounted for in operations budgets and development projects.

5.4.1 Recreational Water Use

Cooney State Park hosts an average of 150,000 visitors annually. The majority of visitors use the water in some way during their visit: boating, swimming, personal watercraft, fishing, skiing, and ice fishing. The 2006 Visitor Survey indicated that 62 percent of visitors use a large motorboat, 21 percent use a personal watercraft, 19 percent use a smaller motorboat, and 17 percent use an inflatable craft, canoe, kayak, or other boat. Recreational water use is guided by certain statutes and rules. Permissible activities consider public safety, resource and property protection, and fair public recreational use of all waters adjacent to Cooney State Park. The items listed below identify several principal regulations.

Image 3. Boaters on Cooney Reservoir.

No Wake Speed: Cooney Reservoir is limited by statute to a controlled no wake speed in (a) all of Willow Creek Arm as buoyed, and (b) North Shore and Marshall Cove within 300 feet of dock or as buoyed. (12.11.1201 ARM)

Counter Clockwise Travel for Water Skiing: All watercraft on Cooney Reservoir pulling, taking off with and landing water skiers will travel in a general, consistent, counter clockwise direction. (12.11.1201 ARM)

Commercial Use Permits: Commercial activities in the park must first be authorized by a permit in accordance with the Commercial Use Administrative Rules. Commercial use is managed for several reasons: protecting resources, minimizing user conflicts, preserving the public ability to recreate, and public safety, among other reasons. (12.14.115 ARM)

Special Use Permits: All groups or events of more than 30 people (non-commercial activities) at state parks must secure a special use permit. The park manager may require a permit for smaller events depending on the resource or social implications or other determining factors. Fees and other guidelines are found in the Parks Biennial Fee Rule adopted by the FWP Commission.

The limited amount of surface water available to the public for recreational purposes has precluded specific special events, such as: watercraft contests, races, maneuvering through or around designated courses, speed events or water ski competitions.

Fishing Contests: Any individual, club, organization, or business wishing to sponsor a fishing contest on a body of water open to public fishing (Cooney Reservoir) must apply for a permit from FWP. Fees may be adjusted if the contest focuses on children under the age of thirteen, or when proceeds are donated. (12.7.802 ARM, Parks Biennial Fee Rule)

5.4.2 Public Safety and Law Enforcement

In the 2006 Visitor Survey, public safety and law enforcement were identified by visitors as areas needing improvement. Visitors were asked to rate conditions they experienced on their trip to the park as acceptable or unacceptable:

- 9.6 percent of park visitors found the availability of law enforcement staff in the park to be unacceptable or very unacceptable;
- 15.3 percent found the number of boaters on the lake to be unacceptable or very unacceptable;
- 26.4 percent found the number of personal watercraft users to be unacceptable or very unacceptable;
- 20.2 percent found the noise coming from personal watercraft to be unacceptable or very unacceptable;
- 32.5 percent found personal watercrafts being operated in an unsafe manner at an unacceptable or very unacceptable level;
- 29.9 percent of park visitors found the number of people violating parks rules and regulations to be unacceptable or very unacceptable; and
- 30 percent found the number of dogs off-leash in the park to be unacceptable or very unacceptable.

These results indicated to park managers that there was a significant public safety and law enforcement concern among many park visitors, particularly related to water activities and overcrowding.

The public safety and law enforcement program at Cooney began as a cooperative effort between park staff certified as ex-officio wardens, the Carbon County Sheriff's Department, and FWP Game Wardens. A public safety initiative was implemented in the summer of 2011 that included the establishment of a full time commissioned peace officer/Park Warden position stationed at Cooney. This year-round position plays a lead role in providing an enhanced public safety and law enforcement presence in the park while performing an array of other duties as well. This position provides professional emergency response capabilities and has the authority to enforce park rules and regulations.

5.4.3 Staff and Volunteer Resources

Well-trained, equipped, and dedicated staff is the key to quality park operations. All park staff assists with site maintenance and special projects, and help visitors with information, brochures, trouble-shooting problems, and other needs that may arise. Staffing levels at Cooney have increased over the last ten years, yet the high level of use, the dispersed layout of the park, the numerous and complex facilities, and high demand visitor services require additional increased staff time and presence.

Volunteers are vitally important to park operations, and are recruited each summer. Volunteers serve as campground hosts and day use volunteers, and help supplement all park operations. Typically, volunteer campground hosts live on-site for a pre-determined length of time. Hosts must provide their own RV or camper trailer and are provided parking pads that include electrical and sewer hookups. Host duties vary and are assigned according to individual abilities. The most valuable service campground hosts provide is their ability to personally greet the public and help them enjoy their stay in the park. The hosts' answer questions, inform visitors of park rules, hand out site-specific printed materials, and occasionally help park staff with light maintenance duties and office duties including the campsite reservation system. The volunteer program has been utilized for a number of years and continues to play an essential role in providing services to park visitors.

5.4.4 Park User Fees

Cooney State Park collects fees for non-resident day use and overnight camping. Park entry is free for visitors arriving in a vehicle with a current Montana motor vehicle registration, as residents have the option to pay a fee when licensing their vehicle. (ARM 23-1-105; Parks Biennial Fee Rule). Park fees are collected at several areas within the park that have an iron ranger or a pay station building. In 2011, Montana State Parks implemented a campsite reservation system to formalize campsite reservations into a managed system. The campsite fee applies to all overnight campers at the park.

5.5 Natural Resources

Cooney State Park is located in a semi-arid zone in the foothills north of the Beartooth Mountains. The granular, silt surface is highly vulnerable to wind activities and other surface disturbances. The surface soil grades to a prismatic silty clay loam subsoil that is hard when dry. A hardpan lime horizon is present and may be encountered only a few inches below the ground surface. This results

in heavy surface run off and little moisture retention during periods of precipitation. The base materials in the region are generally sandstone and calciferous shale.

5.5.1 Flora

Maintaining and preserving natural features, such as grass covers, trees, and shrubs is very difficult in this area due to low precipitation and eroding soil types. Couple the physical setting of Cooney State Park with heavy visitor use, and it is evident that special attention must be given to creating and maintaining landscape features.

Major native grass species present at Cooney consist of blue grama, bluebunch wheatgrass, sideoats grama, western wheatgrass, and little bluestem. Other grass species are present in the Cooney area, however their presence makes up only about 2% of total ground forage. Introduced species consist mainly of blends containing Kentucky bluegrass, red fescue, and perennial ryegrass. These ground covers are found near site features such as host pads, comfort stations and fish cleaning facilities. The sandy loam soil found at Cooney State Park is ideal for maintaining grass cover if moisture is present.

The most notable indigenous tree is the plains cottonwood. Since the reservoir was constructed in 1937, cottonwoods have spread from the creek tributaries to around the entire shoreline of Cooney (except for the face of the dam). The narrowleaf cottonwood is also present in moderate numbers. These two species make up approximately 99% of the native tree population. A limited number of Ponderosa pine are also present. The shrubs around Cooney include chokecherry, juniper, prairie rose, buffaloberry, varieties of sagebrush, and sandbar willow.

Tree and shrub replacement and enhancement include native species as well as introduced species. Although cottonwood was the predominate species present at Cooney for a number of years, its physical characteristics do not make it an ideal tree to be located near campsites or day use areas due to the potential for falling trees and limbs. Various species of ash are planted because they can handle the dry conditions and soil types present at Cooney, are not as sensitive to wind, and at maturity, reach only about one-third the height of the cottonwood. Fringe areas near the campgrounds, the natural areas, are defined by planting a combination of Ponderosa pine and spruce trees (Colorado blue and Black Hills). These trees will create a windbreak for campsites while providing habitat for wildlife. Other varieties of trees are planted to offer diversity.

Maintenance
Impacts to vegetative cover associated with construction or development projects are re-seeded with a mixture of native grass species.

Native species found within heavy traffic areas are maintained through routine mowing, watering, and chemical fertilization of campsites. Campgrounds and day use areas are mowed on a regular basis to keep these areas hardened and park-like. Natural areas, which are beyond the perimeter of public use areas, do not require frequent maintenance and are typically mowed once in the spring to define boundaries of campgrounds and day use areas; a second mowing is occasionally needed to define area boundaries and to aid in fire prevention. With the park’s limited watering capabilities and as part of a commitment to resource conservation, it is necessary to conserve water whenever possible. Irrigation only occurs in developed camping areas and landscaping trees and shrubs.

The current tree maintenance schedule includes occasional removal of dead or hazardous trees adjacent to public use areas and pruning of healthy trees. Those trees that do not pose eminent danger to the public are allowed to remain standing. There are a number of wildlife and bird species that utilize the dead trees at Cooney.

Disease and Weed Control
Weed control at Cooney State Park is cooperative effort between Montana State Parks and the Carbon County Weed District through an herbicide spraying schedule. Spraying times are communicated to the public via a press release and signs erected notifying visitors to the park when and where spraying takes place. In 2006, Carbon County started using GPS to map weed infestations at the park and monitor the effects of herbicide use on weeds at the park, which are available at the Regional HQ in Billings. Only one lawn disease has historically shown up at Cooney State Park. Fairy ring (many mushroom forming fungi) is a disease that negatively affects grass growth and is often found within the park. The most frequent control measure present in the park is the picking of the fairy ring mushrooms by park visitors.

Off-season Rest
Park managers use several techniques to protect soil and vegetation in and around campgrounds. These include proper location and design of roads and trails, proper placement of facilities, channeling pedestrians and vehicles onto hardened trails, roads, and parking area.

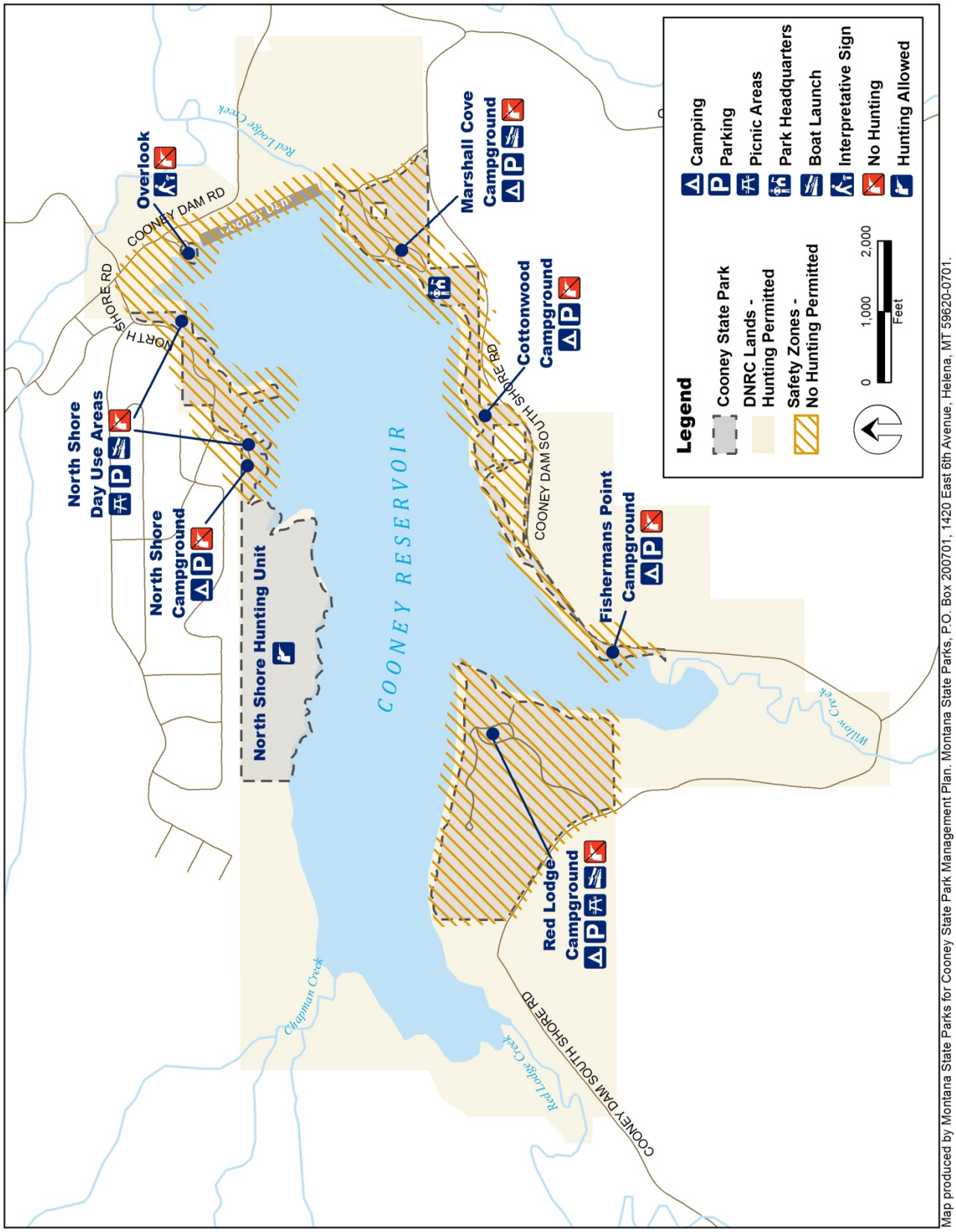
Ground covers and soil are damaged by concentrated and heavy visitor use. Some campsites are occupied continually throughout the camping season. Although fertilizing, reseeding, and irrigation can sometimes help rehabilitate campsites, it is almost impossible to perform these tasks during the core season. The sites rehabilitate themselves during the off-season when use at Cooney subsides towards the end of August and the sites recover with the spring rains in April and May. Park staff has also begun to plant grasses more conducive to heavy use to withstand the trampling effects associated with high visitation levels.

5.5.2 Fauna

Wildlife
Cooney State Park is home to a diverse array of wildlife. Whitetail deer can be found around the green fields near the reservoir shore; mule deer make their home in the prairie hills surrounding the reservoir. Antelope migrate through the park at different times of the year. The park is also an excellent area for birding; over 100 different species of birds have been documented over the years, including various waterfowl, song birds, and raptors. Sandhill cranes are often spotted in the hay field at the south end of the park during spring, summer, and fall. Bald eagles migrating through fish during the early part of winter before the ice forms, and again in late winter/early spring as the ice breaks up.

Hunting: Cooney State Park receives a small population of hunters each hunting season. Hunting is allowed as a limited use within park boundaries during hunting season, and is allowed on adjacent DNRC lands per DNRC regulations. Safety zones where no hunting is permitted within the park boundary are established in all campsites, high use areas, day use areas, administrative facilities, park roads, and recreation sites including boat launches and picnic sites. Hunting within the park boundary is permitted in the North Shore Hunting Unit adjacent to DNRC land. See Map D for hunting and safety zones in Cooney.

Map D. Cooney State Park Hunting & Safety Zones



Map produced by Montana State Parks for Cooney State Park Management Plan. Montana State Parks, P.O. Box 200701, 1420 East 6th Avenue, Helena, MT 59620-0701.

Fish
The Cooney Reservoir fishery is managed by the FWP Fisheries Bureau. Every year the reservoir is stocked with rainbow trout and/or Yellowstone cutthroat trout. Cooney also provides habitat for: black crappie, brown trout, burbot (ling), lake chub, longnose sucker, mountain whitefish, white sucker, and yellow perch.

Fishing: The Fisheries Bureau conducts a random sample survey of resident and nonresident licensed anglers every two years to estimate angling use in Montana (Montana Fish Wildlife & Parks 2009). In the 2009 survey, angler satisfaction for Cooney received a poor to fair rating, with a slightly higher rating for resident anglers during the winter season. In addition to crowding, the number of fish caught, size of fish, and species of fish are all factors that play heavily into angler satisfaction. For angler crowding, Cooney received a sparse to moderately sparse rating overall with the average number of people seen between 10 and 30 people. For the summer season, the rating went up to moderately sparse and moderately crowded and the average number of people seen was more than 30 people. Overall, Cooney is sparsely crowded, which provides a good chance for solitude for anglers, with fewer people seen during the winter season.

In 2009, Cooney had over 29,000 angling days (one person fishing any part of the day), of which 95 percent was resident use. This put Cooney at 28th in the state for angling pressure, and 2nd in Region 5 after the Bighorn River sites. With its proximity to Billings, its status as a state park and the relative ease to get to the park, Cooney receives high angler pressure.

5.6 Cultural Resources

Records about the prehistoric and historic use of the Cooney area are scattered. The prairies and streams at the base of the majestic Absaroka-Beartooth Mountains provided a variety of roots and berries used by early Native Americans. The Cooney area was included in the Crow Indian Reservation until 1877 when small sections around Red Lodge were withdrawn to permit development of extensive coal deposits. The Bozeman Trail passed nearby, connecting pioneers to the Montana gold and homesteading prospects in the 1870's. In 1879, the Rocky Fork Branch of the Northern Pacific Railway from Laurel to Red Lodge was completed, speeding the mining expansion. Farmers and stockmen slowly began production, until 1892 when Washington D.C. opened the entire section to settlement, including the Cooney area.

Five cultural resource surveys have been conducted for project specific work within Cooney State Park. Two surveys resulted in the discoveries of archaeological and historic sites (Davis 1978; Domino and Rennie 2002) whereas three of the surveys produced no cultural materials (Husted 1990; Passmann 1999, 2000). In 1978, Montana State University conducted the first survey of the park and identified eight archaeological sites. The sites consisted of chipped stone tools and flakes, rock cairns and tipi ring features (Davis 1978).

The reservoir was completed in 1937 to control flooding and provide irrigation to area farms, and is still the primary mission for this water resource. In 2002, the DNRC documented the historic Cooney Dam, spillway and gatehouse which were constructed in 1935-1936 for $470,121. The historic dam was determined to be eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A for its association with early water conservation efforts and with President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal Administration (Domino and Rennie 2002).

6. Management Issues: Goals, Objectives, and Proposed Actions

During the planning process, the public and Montana State Parks identified numerous management issues facing Cooney State Park, including recreation management, public safety, law enforcement, facilities, maintenance, interpretation and education, human and financial resources, park operations, park promotion, and natural and cultural resources. The issues are organized under the following management themes:

- **Recreation Management**
- **Public Safety**
- **Facilities and Services**
- **Interpretation and Education**
- **Park Operations**
- **Natural Resources**
- **Cultural Resources**

Each issue is incorporated into the below sections, and includes a brief discussion of the issue(s) and one or more goals with accompanying objectives and actions. To highlight common themes throughout the plan, actions may appear under multiple objectives where appropriate to support different goals and objectives.

Monitoring Success
Resources and experiences are bound to change over time. As managers of a public resource, Montana State Parks and Cooney park managers need to manage the impacts to resources to ensure we meet the goals and visitor expectations identified in this plan. The challenging aspect of park management is deciding when social or resource conditions warrant applying different or more restrictive management actions. Park managers will monitor changing conditions and may implement management actions to achieve desired conditions or address undesirable conditions.

6.1 Recreation Management

Discussion

A majority of visitors to Cooney State Park like to play in, on, or around the water. The most popular campsites and picnic areas are adjacent to the reservoir shore. The reservoir contains a viable, regionally known fishery popular with both bank and boat anglers. Motor boats are used at the park for skiing, fishing, or wandering, and personal watercrafts (i.e. Jet Skis) are popular. Anglers use park facilities and amenities provided to other visitors as well, while the FWP Fisheries Bureau manages the fishery. Many people simply enjoy swimming or playing in the water. Visitors also enjoy watching and photographing a variety of wildlife and bird species harbored in the cottonwoods and willows of the riparian zones.

In the 2006 Visitor Survey, visitors expressed concern over the number of boats on the water, the number of personal watercrafts as well as the number being operated in an unsafe manner, and the limited presence of law enforcement in the park. This was also a concern heard during public scoping in 2010. Improvements have been made in the area of law enforcement presence, but overcrowding is still an issue that will be addressed with this plan and the long-term management of the park. Monitoring of water usage and documenting of boating accidents and incidents will be a priority.

Park campgrounds are full for the majority of weekends during the summer; however there are many sites empty during the week and in the shoulder season from fall to spring. For some visitors, week nights are the preferred time to visit to avoid the crowds or accommodate travel plans. Increasing revenue and filling campsites throughout the week and during shoulder seasons is a constant struggle at the park. With imaginative thinking and team work with other regional businesses, Cooney has the ability to attract visitors during the week nights, shoulder and off-season periods. Park management and staff can also improve management and public support through regular contact with neighbors and local agencies and entities.

Establishing a more contiguous park land base would enhance the feasibility of developing additional recreational opportunities and resources at Cooney, including but not limited to a trail system around the reservoir and/or or boat-in campsites.

Multiple land ownership adjacent to Cooney contributes to visitor confusion regarding allowable recreational uses. Managing visitor use and access, responding to incidents, and controlling weeds are examples of management responsibilities that are complicated by multiple land ownerships and jurisdictions.

6.1.1 Goal: Cooney State Park is maintained as a high quality recreational destination for local residents and non-resident visitors.

Objective A: Diversify camping opportunities through modest improvements.

Actions

- Develop properly-designed individual and group campsites for variety of camping units including tents, trailers, and RVs.
- Explore opportunities for primitive camping, as supported.

- Determine locations for and develop boat-in campsites along the shoreline.
- Increase number of conventional campsites while maintaining quality of experience.

Objective B: Continue to promote Cooney State Park as a family-oriented destination.

Actions

- Investigate the requirements to add unsupervised designated swimming areas around the shoreline and close to camping areas.
- Determine best location for developing new family-friendly playground(s). Work with Parks Division landscape architects, engineers, and partners to develop plans and find funding to purchase and install playground equipment, considering capital improvements, grants, donations, or other sources.

6.1.2 Goal: Visitors experience easy non-motorized access to and around the reservoir, and connections to the major park use areas.

Objective A: Build and maintain a trail around the reservoir to expand land-based non-motorized opportunities.

Actions

- Identify landownership around reservoir and begin conversations with DNRC and private landowners to develop partnerships.
- Determine feasible trail route(s) and design; consult with Recreation Bureau for methods and routing expertise.
- Create map delineating proposed trails to build and prioritize.
- Apply for trails grant funding, solicit donations, and other sources to fund trail construction and associated costs such as signs or benches.
- Continue working with Montana Conversation Corps and volunteers to build and maintain trails.

6.1.3 Goal: Provide opportunities for fishing and hunting.

Objective A: Support year-round angling opportunities and maintain related facilities.

Actions

- Work with Fisheries and Information Divisions within FWP to communicate information pertinent to angling, such as stocking dates and species, populations, sizes, regulations, monitoring data, techniques.
- Maintain boat ramps, docks and fish cleaning stations that benefit anglers.
- Consider other services or concessions that may support angler use outside of the peak recreational visitor season.

Objective B: Support the Fisheries Bureau with efforts to monitor and stock the fishery.

Actions

- Park staff will assist fisheries staff with logistics, equipment and labor as much as feasible without diminishing public service, while fisheries crews are managing reservoir fisheries or conducting educational events.

Objective C: Allow limited hunting in the park.

Actions

- Allow hunting on park lands that are 300 feet away from all campsites, day use areas, administrative facilities, park roads, and recreation sites including boat launches and picnic areas.
- Coordinate with DNRC and neighboring landowners to encourage ethical hunting behavior on lands adjacent to the park. Continue to provide access to DNRC lands from the park.

6.1.4 Goal: Increase user groups and diversify park programming to expand visitation.

Objective A: Provide and promote safe opportunities during weekday and shoulder seasons.

Actions

- Target new audiences when marketing shoulder season (fall-spring) camping opportunities and associated activities and special events, including birding, stargazing, ice fishing, ice skating, ice hockey, and cross-country skiing.
- Promote the park as a gateway camping destination for area activities outside park boundaries, like upland game bird and waterfowl hunting. Collaborate with Wildlife Bureau access coordinators and Enforcement Bureau to distribute information about hunting opportunities on nearby Block Management Areas.
- Engage new partners and user groups to help develop programming and build communication throughout the region.

Objective B: Develop marketing techniques to increase weekday and shoulder season use.

Actions

- Promote the year-round camping availability and benefits of the camping reservation system to current park users and the public.
- Work with Montana State Parks Marketing & Communications Coordinator to promote weekday and shoulder season use; consider offering specials through the reservation system.
- Advertise and market park opportunities with regional media, including winter use opportunities.
- Partner with regional businesses, agencies, and neighboring states to target audiences and to offer tourism options or packages.

6.1.5 Goal: Provide consistent resource and recreation management of lands adjacent to Cooney State Park.

Objective A: Reduce visitor confusion and management conflicts associated with adjacent lands.

Actions

- Establish consistent public use rules and regulations on State Park and DNRC Water Resources lands.
- Clarify recreational opportunities and recreation management on DNRC lands outside of the park boundary.
- Discuss with DNRC the alternatives that might allow Water Resources lands to be managed as part of Cooney State Park, including lease agreement, conservation easement, or memorandum of understanding.
- Coordinate with Rock Creek Water Users Association on resource management strategies.
- Ensure that park boundary is properly posted and/or fenced.

Objective B: Consolidate Park Lands.

Actions

- Monitor changes in land ownership and investigate potential land acquisition opportunities to provide continuous public land ownership around reservoir.
- Identify and pursue acquisition of strategically located inholding properties by willing seller as funding allows.

6.2 Public Safety

Discussion

Montana State Parks highest priority is to provide a healthy, safe, peaceful, and family-friendly environment that fosters positive experiences and high levels of visitor satisfaction. As identified in the 2006 Visitor Survey and during public scoping, an improved public safety presence is essential to serve as a strong deterrent to overcrowding and user conflicts, unsafe behavior, and criminal activity in Cooney State Park.

The 2006 Visitor Survey identified a number of concerns related to boat congestion and misdirection, inappropriate boater, water skier, and personal watercraft behavior and other activities on the reservoir that lead to unsafe conditions and generate user conflicts on the water. Non-compliance with park rules and regulations related to camping fees, quiet hours, disorderly conduct, and control of pets have historically represented common park rule violations that adversely affect visitor's enjoyment of the park.

It is the intent of Montana State Parks to improve the integration of public safety and law enforcement into daily park operations as a means of providing greater public service, visitor protection, and resource stewardship. Monitoring watercraft use on Cooney Reservoir is essential to developing a baseline for current conditions and determining desired future conditions that are

aligned with the park's mission and vision and are comfortable for visitors, and this will be a high management priority for implementation.

6.2.1 Goal: Protect the health and safety of park visitors.

Objective A: Actively address public health and safety risk factors.

Actions

- Actively identify, document, and mitigate public safety risks and hazards.
- Ensure that clean and potable drinking water is provided for park visitors.
- Provide effective and proactive information and education regarding boating and water safety.
- Evaluate the effectiveness and make necessary improvements to park signs, printed materials, and website information related to public safety, park rules and regulations.
- Consistently monitor water-related incidents, and actively work to limit future incidents.

Objective B: Actively promote public safety education about water and boating safety and ethics.

Actions

- Ensure that the park manager coordinates oversight of boating and public safety on the reservoir and in the park with the Carbon County Sheriff.
- Utilize park staff and volunteers to engage visitors in boating and water safety education and ethics through field contacts.
- Make available information related to motorized boating and personal watercraft safety and ethics at boat ramps.

Objective C: Integrate public safety and law enforcement into daily park operations.

Actions

- Provide a commissioned peace officer with authority to enforce state park laws and to carry firearms, to coordinate enforcement actions, and take a lead role with park specific violations.
- Provide a commissioned peace officer to serve as highly visible, uniformed front-line employee with the ability to positively influence visitor behavior and perception of Montana State Parks by emphasizing education, outreach, community policing and preventative law enforcement approaches.
- Schedule and conduct regular boating and water safety patrols on the reservoir and at the boat launches.
- Ensure that the park patrol boat is properly outfitted and maintained in a constant state of readiness to respond to water and boating related incidents.
- Work to improve public understanding, respect, of park rules and regulations and expectations with regard to compliance and desired visitor behavior.
- Improve visitor compliance with regulations related to entrance and camping fees, pet control and pet waste removal, and boating/water safety through visitor education and an appropriate level of law enforcement to gain future compliance.

Objective D: Provide professional incident response.

Actions

- Integrate public safety and incident response training, preparation, and readiness into overall park operations and staff training.
- Ensure all park staff maintain a basic level of First Aid and CPR certification and that the commissioned peace officer maintains an advanced level of first aid certification and be well-trained in providing emergency incident response and management.
- Communicate openly with park users regarding rules and regulations, and focus on education efforts up-front to reduce incidents.
- Coordinate cooperative emergency responses and incident management with park staff, Carbon County Sheriff, FWP Enforcement Bureau, other law enforcement agencies, and local emergency medical and search and rescue service providers.

Objective E: Determine user-tolerated capacity for personal watercraft and motorboat use on the reservoir, while maintaining conditions as safe as reasonably possible.

Actions

- Consult literature, professionals, academic experts, user groups and others to understand current management, safety measures, primary issues and options at high use water recreation sites. Research best management practices for boating at water-based sites of similar size and use.
- Determine if a visitor survey should be conducted to establish public satisfaction and tolerance for volumes and types of watercraft use on the reservoir.
- Research best methods to implement means of monitoring number and type of watercraft and users on the reservoir.
- Examine trends on the number of incidents and injuries on the reservoir and compare with total visitation and reservoir use and size.
- Propose additional action if the above information suggests current practices are socially unacceptable and/or continue to pose a high risk to park visitors. Proposed actions may include, but not limited to: additional visitor education, facility design changes, and limiting reservoir use or access. A purposeful public process for involvement will be utilized if the proposed action offers extensive changes to current use patterns.

6.3 Facilities and Services

Discussion

Cooney campground facilities have improved dramatically over the last twenty years. Still, visitors commonly request more amenities, such as: RV sewage dump station, group use areas, paved roads, concessions services, additional showers, electrical and water hookups, boat docks and ramps. The visitor survey results from 2006 illustrate these desires (Table 2). The following table illustrates Cooney State Park visitor opinions when surveyed in 2006. These results were considered among many other factors when developing the Goals and Objectives for Facilities and Services.

Table 2. Ten Most Important Services/Facilities to Visitors.

How important is it to you that this park offer (or improve) the following facilities or services in the future?	
Facility/service	**Important or very important combined**
Group picnic shelters (or more group picnic shelters)	51%
More group camping sites	50%
Paving of roads (or more paved roads)	49%
Concessions for ice, firewood, etc. (or more concessions)	48%
Shower facilities (or more showers facilities)	47%
Water hookups at some campsites	46%
More accessibility for persons with disabilities	46%
Electrical hookups at some campsites	45%
More tent camping sites	43%
Boat docks (or more boat docks)	42%

Source: FWP 2007. 2006 Survey of Cooney Reservoir State Park Visitors. Note: Visitors, N=198

Though certain amenities appear to be in higher demand, a variety of factors will determine project feasibility. Construction is expensive and subsequent annual operations and maintenance must be considered. Occasionally, funding opportunities, Division priorities, or other factors may arise to make a project feasible ahead of a higher priority. Partners, including volunteers, affect the success of initiating any project to operate, find building and operating funds, as well as demonstrate community support.

Road maintenance challenges were brought to the attention of the State Parks staff during the scoping meetings and the draft comment period. Public comment addressed the volume and type of traffic that are creating expensive, long-term maintenance problems along the roads leading to the park. Montana State Parks will explore options to address road maintenance issues on park and county roads, and will continue to work collaboratively with Carbon County to implement treatments and develop solutions.

Since 2006, a number of improvements have been made to address visitor demand in services and facilities including: improved parking area; additional campsites; playground; electrical hookups at some campsites; Marshall Cove boat ramp extension; paving of North Shore parking area; development of group use area; and concessionaire vendor. Park services' play a large role in a visitor's experience. Interactions with staff should provide a level of comfort and security, as well as courtesy and service to the visitor. Park facilities, kiosks and informational signs and other information can help form accurate expectations for visitors to have an enjoyable visit.

6.3.1 Goal: Enhance and expand visitor facilities.

Objective A: Upgrade campgrounds with modern amenities and improved facilities.

Actions

- Install more electrical hook-ups for RVs and trailers.

- Renovate and upgrade the comfort station at Marshall Cove Campground.
- Install a new comfort station at Red Lodge Campground.
- Work with design and engineering staff to determine location, size, construction costs, annual operation costs, and feasibility. Determine funding options, considering budgets, fundraising efforts and grants. Prioritize low impact and low cost options when available and feasible.

Objective B: Formally evaluate boat and RV storage and overnight mooring facilities.

Actions

- Work with design and engineering staff to determine construction costs, annual operation costs, location, and feasibility. Determine funding options, considering budgets, fundraising efforts and grants.

Objective C: Improve volunteer camp host facilities.

Actions

- Improve volunteer host pad facilities at each park unit to improve comfort while volunteering at the park. Administrative facilities also may be used by staff, hosts, enforcement support, fisheries crew, interpretive specialists, volunteer work crews, etc.

Objective D: Improve road conditions throughout the park.

Actions

- Prioritize high traffic areas in the park needing most attention due to dust, wear, deteriorating road conditions; consider involving neighbors in this process.
- Determine best action to improve park road surfaces, considering cost, feasibility and durability.
- Consider collaborative methods with Carbon County to address road maintenance needs on county roads.
- Educate visitors about road maintenance costs, and driving techniques to reduce impacts.
- Work with the County to ensure that appropriate speed limits and road advisories and regulations are properly signed.

Objective E: Provide sewage dump station at the park.

Actions

- Work with design and engineering staff to determine construction costs, annual operation costs, location, and feasibility.
- Determine funding options, considering budgets, fundraising efforts and grants.

6.3.2 Goal: Improve access to water for all visitors.

Objective A: Improve low-water boat access.

Actions

- Work with design and engineering staff to lengthen one boat ramp, allowing for a solid surface with safer motor boat access during low water; consider various affordable construction options. Determine funding options including fundraising efforts and grants.

Objective B: Improve accessibility for bank and boat anglers with disabilities.

Actions

- Explore options, costs, partners and feasible locations to improve bank fishing opportunities; consider hard surface paths, piers, docks.
- Explore and work to implement options to improve and ease boat access for people with disabilities.

Objective C: Determine other areas to improve visitor access to water.

Actions

- Investigate the requirements to add unsupervised designated swimming areas around the shoreline and close to camping areas.

6.3.3 Goal: Visitors, adjacent landowners, and local agencies and organizations have access to up-to-date and timely park information.

Objective A: Maintain current information for public reference.

Actions

- Provide an updated park brochure with map, rules and regulations, fees, reservation details, emergency and park contact information; print and distribute to public.
- Distribute rack cards to local venues, Chambers of Commerce, tourism facilities.
- Maintain an effective and accurate web presence.
- Update park fee schedules, informational and regulation signs, and kiosks as needed.
- Improve directional signage to the park locally and along major transportation routes including Highway 212, Interstate 90, and along the Montana-Wyoming border.

Objective B: Develop and maintain open dialogue and partnerships with neighbors and stakeholders to understand and collaboratively address issues and ideas.

Actions

- Outline a communication strategy to regularly coordinate with local DNRC Water Resources Division to discuss area land and water management.
- Attend the annual Rock Creek Water Users Association meeting to openly discuss goals, projects, and activities of both the park and the association.
- Continue to promote visitor compliance with all park fees.

- Continue to promote cooperative public safety and law enforcement and facility partnerships, particularly with Carbon County.
- Communicate openly and often with adjacent landowners.
- Send a postcard/annual letter/newsletter with contact info and upcoming activities, projects, and current staff to interested stakeholders.
- Host an annual spring meeting to offer more details about upcoming activities and address questions and concerns as they arise.

6.4 Interpretation and Education

Discussion

The average visitor to Cooney State Park returns five or more times to the park each year and has been visiting the park for over 16 years, according to the 2006 Visitor Survey. Although interpretation was identified as a low priority among visitors in the 2006 survey, changing times and a growth in initiatives like 'children in nature' have increased the interest in interpretation and education. Interpretive programs have been periodically presented by staff during the summer season and on busy weekends, and visitor turn-out has been high. Visitors now seem to desire adding value to trips through education and entertainment.

In addition to interpretive programs, Montana State Parks is continually interested in improving safety through education. A variety of programs can address safety and educational topics relevant to the Cooney experience, like boating ethics and water safety. Volunteers are essential partners in developing and delivering programs along with park staff and management.

6.4.1 Goal: Visitors are engaged and connected to the park's natural, recreational, and historical resources.

Objective A: Develop and present interpretive and summer weekend campfire talks and interpretive programming.

Actions

- Market and promote Cooney State Park as a resource for outdoor learning, interpretive activities, and day use programs with local schools.
- Utilize student interns and/or the State Park AmeriCorps program to develop interpretive programs.
- Contact local volunteers, subject experts, and agencies to develop and present programs, such as: an astronomers club, Audubon Society, fishing clubs, teachers, wildlife biologist, Carbon County Historical Society, DNRC, Rock Creek Water Users Association, and other presenters.
- Explore options to recruit volunteers to coordinate and present summer interpretive programs. Set up yearly summer schedule in late winter/early spring.
- Work with the Interpretive Services Specialist and partners to determine best methods to interpret information for visitors, considering feature location, access, public use and funding, and protection and preservation of resources. Consider topics like: bird watching,

stargazing, cultural resources and past uses, landscape features, aquatic invasive species, and irrigation/water use and dam history.
- Develop summer weekend programs with partners, volunteers, and camp hosts. Consider topics like: fishing, outdoor cooking, family games, etc.

Objective B: Develop interpretation and education programming focused on water and boating safety and ethics.

Actions

- Utilize park staff and volunteers to engage visitors through field contacts and summer interpretive programs.
- Develop and present a boating and water safety and ethics program in local schools, preferably in spring. Target one grade consistently each year.

Objective C: Present angler and aquatic education programs.

Actions

- Coordinate certain annual workshops or clinics for youth, families, and the community focused on aquatic education, such as bank fishing, boat fishing, ice fishing, aquatic insects, and water quality.
- Pursue assistance from local groups or individuals, such as fishing clubs, angling enthusiasts, FWP Fisheries Bureau and Angler Education Specialist, Montana State University or county extension agent, 4H Clubs, and outdoor sports retail store staff.

6.5 Park Operations

Discussion

There are many operational demands when managing a park with 72 campsites spread over 300 acres and multiple facilities scattered throughout. Cooney State Park is one of many in a "family" of parks across Montana; thus the allowance to operate Cooney must be balanced with needs at other parks. Park Managers work hard to use allocated budgets effectively and in a way meaningful to the visitors. Safe and well maintained grounds and facilities are critical to visitors' experiences. This requires fully functioning equipment and the staff to operate it. Staff must be adequately trained and motivated. Park staff continually strives to deliver high quality service to visitors.

6.5.1 Goal: Ensure staff and volunteer resources and funding are appropriate to meet park operational needs.

Objective A: Grow and expand volunteer program.

Actions

- Expand volunteer recruiting efforts, using the web, volunteer-based organizations, clubs and civic organizations with interests that match activities at the park.

- Increase the number of campground hosts to include one at each of the following units: Red Lodge, Marshall Cove, North Shore, and Cooney Headquarters.
- Look for opportunities for volunteers to coordinate and present interpretive efforts and programs.
- Consider opportunities for volunteers to aid with office work, data entry or other clerical duties to relieve staff.
- Identify potential on-the-ground projects suitable for volunteers, like specific clubs to assist with trail campsite maintenance, foot bridges, accessibility projects, boat-in camp development.

Objective B: Create additional revenue sources at the park.

Actions

- Expand marketing efforts to attract campers during mid-week of peak season, shoulder seasons and winter.
- Increase number of electrical hookups in the campgrounds.
- Explore feasibility of expanding camping facilities or adding rental cabins, tipis or yurts.

Objective C: Provide concessionaire services at the park.

Actions

- Continue working to provide concessionaire services that are consistent and dependable.
- Work with partners to determine and provide high demand items yet limit competition with local providers. Consider firewood, ice, fishing bait, equipment rentals, etc.
- Evaluate expanded concession needs and opportunities.

Objective D: Maintain the park grounds to meet state park standards and the Cooney Operations Plan that reflect a professionally managed recreation area.

Actions

- Maintain efficient staff schedules and current fleet of vehicles and equipment to complete routine maintenance and collaborate on bigger projects as needed.
- Effectively use a combination of on-site and regional maintenance staff resources and expertise.
- Regularly review need for capital improvements and major maintenance projects, considering regional and statewide priorities.

Objective E: Ensure equipment is available to complete major maintenance projects at a reasonable cost and time.

Actions

- Evaluate cost effectiveness and feasibility of maintaining and repairing heavy equipment, rather than purchasing new equipment, leasing equipment and/or services to complete aspects of park maintenance typically completed by park staff and equipment.

6.5.2 Goal: Actively market opportunities and the park in an effort to raise revenue and exceed visitor expectations.

Objective A: Maintain camping reservation system.

Actions

- Continue to provide the statewide camping reservation program.
- Work to understand intricacies of program and efficiently serve visitors.
- Work with the Marketing & Communications and Reservation Program Specialists to market reservation system and use at Cooney State Park throughout the Billings region.
- Reduce the number of visitors trying to "save" sites without a reservation by educating the public about the reservation system during personal interaction, brochures and compliance contacts, and other means.

Objective B: Maintain high level compliance with entrance and camping fees and public use regulations.

Actions

- Continue fee compliance checks daily and maintain current fee signs.
- Take appropriate enforcement action with visitors who fail to pay fees.

Objective C: Develop marketing techniques to brand Cooney State Park.

Actions

- Promote Cooney State Park as a state park, in addition to the reservoir's important role for irrigation.
- Work with the Marketing & Communications Coordinator to advertise and market year-round park opportunities with regional media.
- Partner with regional businesses and the tourism industry to increase knowledge and awareness of the state park.

6.6 Natural Resources

Discussion

The area around Cooney State Park has been altered by dam construction and renovation, and facility development. Though this is not a pristine area, there are areas of native prairie communities and high quality riparian zones. Montana State Parks would like to maintain these natural aspects, particularly avoiding the introduction of new exotic species and the spread of noxious weeds.

Water levels are controlled by the Rock Creek Water Users Association for irrigation purposes, which has played an important role in the region's economy and livelihood since 1937. Fluctuating water levels depending on weather patterns and irrigation seasons can influence recreation opportunities and fish habitat. The park is interested in actively managing park land activities to help maintain good water quality and reducing the impacts of water changes to recreation.

In the public scoping process, trees and natural areas were identified as a high priority for the future of Cooney State Park. A lack of trees in the park means little to no shade, which can be hard for park visitors during hot summer months. Additionally, erosion of the shoreline and land around camping areas can be a result of unstable soil conditions from lack of trees.

6.6.1 Goal: Maintain and expand areas of trees, native prairie, riparian areas, and high water quality.

Objective A: Plant more shade trees in the park in key use areas.

Actions

- Continue to plant new trees with appropriate and diverse species every year in each of the campgrounds; ensure adequate irrigation to establish vegetation.
- Work with local extension agent and others to locate tree sources, funding, donations, and volunteer labor.

Objective B: Actively and aggressively manage terrestrial weeds at Cooney State Park.

Actions

- Work with Carbon County Weed District to continue weed monitoring, spraying, and other management actions if needed to control weeds.

Objective C: Monitor and take action to keep Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) out of Cooney Reservoir.

Actions

- Educate visitors about Aquatic Invasive Species and preventative measures through programs.
- Post signs at boat ramps on how to combat aquatic nuisances
- Provide informative brochures available at key locations in park
- Incorporate AIS into seasonal interpretive program(s).
- Monitor shoreline and water for invasive species, including partnering with Carbon County Weed District for Eurasian water milfoil and the Fisheries Bureau for zebra mussels, etc.
- Work with Fisheries Bureau and others to assess the feasibility for a boat wash station.

6.7 Cultural Resources

Discussion

Montana state law (MCA 22-3-424) requires state agencies to develop rules for identifying and preserving significant heritage properties. In response to this requirement, FWP developed ARM rules 12.8.501 to 12.8.510 to ensure that effects to cultural resources are considered during project planning and in advance of ground disturbing activities.

Since most survey work at the park was completed between 10-30 years ago, additional survey work is needed to determine whether previously located sites still exist and whether new sites have been exposed by wind and water action.

6.7.1 Goal: Document and preserve prehistoric and historic resources.

Objective A: Complete a cultural resource survey of lands encompassed by the park and monitor previously identified sites to determine their condition and integrity.

Actions

- Work with the Heritage Resource Program Specialist to develop a strategy for conducting additional cultural resource survey work within the park.
- Develop a site monitoring program; use trained volunteer site stewards as feasible.
- Consider candidates who can help complete research and compile information; consider County Historic Preservation Office resources, graduate students or qualified site stewards.
- Work with local Indian tribes, museums and heritage resource specialists as appropriate in locating additional prehistoric and historic sites.
- Coordinate with DNRC Water Resources to collect historic reservoir and irrigation system development information.
- Compile all heritage information into one report, with a version available for public use that excludes sensitive information (e.g. site locations).

7. Implementation and Priorities

This plan proposes guidance and the desired outcomes over the next ten years. The following objectives represent the desired management priorities. The priorities have been developed based on public scoping and comment, Cooney State Park staff input, Montana State Parks and FWP staff expertise, partner agency feedback, the 2006 Visitor Survey, funding, and expected development.

It is common practice for plans and associated projects to be completed in phases based on priorities for implementation. High priority objectives are important for maintaining parks operations, enhancing visitor safety and satisfaction, and delivering a quality experience. Note that the following objectives are all a priority, and are not prioritized in order of appearance, e.g. recreation management is not a higher priority than public safety.

Monitoring visitor conflicts and usage levels at the park is also a continual priority for recreation management. All objectives and associated actions are contingent upon availability of funding and staff resources. Objectives, including those not listed here, may occur as opportunities and needs arise to maintain a high quality visitor experience. Future research, public comment, or an environmental assessment for specific development projects may also influence priorities and outcomes.

Management priorities at the park should be reviewed and updated every two years depending on available staff resources and funding. Timelines to accomplish objectives or specific actions should be determined in work plans or performance agreements, allowing staff and supervisors to evaluate Division priorities, resources, opportunities and overall feasibility.

Priority 1 Objectives

Recreation Management

- Diversify camping opportunities through modest improvements.

Public Safety

- Actively promote and educate people about water and boating safety.
- Integrate public safety and law enforcement into daily park operations.
- Maintain a safe and user acceptable watercraft capacity on the reservoir.

Facilities and Services

- Improve road conditions throughout the park.

Park Operations

- Maintain camping reservation system.
- Maintain high level compliance with entrance and camping fees and public use regulations.

Natural Resources

- Plant more trees in the park in key use areas.
- Monitor and take action to keep Aquatic Invasive Species out of Cooney Reservoir.

Priority 2 Objectives

Recreation Management

- Build and maintain a trail around the reservoir to expand land-based non-motorized opportunities.

Facilities and Services

- Develop modern amenities at the park campgrounds.

Park Operations

- Create additional revenue sources at Cooney State Park.

Interpretation and Education

- Develop and present interpretive and summer weekend campfire talks and interpretive programming.

Cultural Resources

- Compile all heritage information into one report, with an abridged version available for public use.

8. Conclusion

Visitation to Montana State Parks has been increasing since 2002 to approximately 2.0 million visitors a years, including a 78% increase in resident visitation. This is an indicator that people love to recreate in Montana and particularly at Montana State Parks. Cooney State Park receives approximately 150,000 visitors annually, and we anticipate that number to remain steady or increase in coming years as the quality of experience improves.

Cooney is a wonderful regional destination for families and groups, as well as out-of-state visitors. Recreational boaters typically enjoy good water levels and water quality in addition to spectacular views of the Beartooth Mountains and a variety of birds and wildlife. In 2010, nonresident park visitors to the region spent over $8 million and helped create 84 jobs in tourism and tourism related industries. Visitors to Cooney State Park are vital contributors to the regional economy and help support the local communities and tourism industry.

Campgrounds at the park will continue to be improved with modern amenities including latrines, restrooms with showers, and electrical hookups. Fishing is popular and anglers enjoy good success catching walleye, trout and burbot. The public demand for basic camping and picnicking amenities is also expected to increase.

Developing and maintaining park amenities draws visitors which in turn brings revenue to the park. Enhancing the fiscal health and sustainability of Cooney State Park will be essential over the next ten years. Targeted marketing and expanding use into weekdays and shoulder seasons will spread and increase visitation. The reservation program helps visitors plan specific night and group activities in advance. Educating the public to the benefits of this program and the associated fee rules will take adequate staff and persistence. Montana State Parks anticipates this effort will pay off over time by providing better visitor services and increasing revenue.

Visitor services start with providing a safe experience. The Park Warden position will provide the ability to implement a comprehensive public safety program that is fully integrated into park operations. Water and boating safety and education, fee compliance, and monitoring and incident response are all paramount to safe and efficient park operations and recreation management. Activities on the reservoir and boater capacity will be evaluated more comprehensively. Public safety and an integrated law enforcement presence are important to the enjoyment of visitors, and will continue to be as visitation increases.

The Cooney State Park Management Plan will guide park management over the next ten years, resulting in improved visitor services and park amenities aiming to exceed visitor expectations, increase visitation, and create a sustainable stream of revenue. ■

9. Appendices

A. 2006 Survey of Cooney State Park Visitors
B. Public Participation
C. References

A. 2006 Survey of Cooney State Park Visitors

Results from the 2006 Survey of Cooney State Park Visitors
Water-Based Montana State Parks Study (2006-07)

(N = 198 respondents in total) = 50% response rate to the survey

Percent of respondents by time period:

May 26-29	7.8%		July 17-20	2.2%
May 30 – June 1	4.5%		July 21-23	10.1%
June 2-4	5.0%		July 24-27	5.0%
June 5-8	3.4%		July 28-30	3.9%
June 9-11	8.9%		July 31 – Aug. 3	3.9%
June 12-15	5.0%		Aug. 4-6	1.1%
June 16-18	3.9%		Aug. 7-10	0.0%
June 19-22	4.5%		Aug. 11-13	0.0%
June 23-25	9.5%		Aug. 14-17	0.0%
June 26-29	6.1%		Aug. 18-20	0.0%
June 30 – July 4	3.4%		Aug. 21-24	0.6%
July 5-6	0.0%		Aug. 25-27	1.7%
July 7-9	1.1%		Aug. 28-31	0.0%
July 10-13	1.7%		Sept. 1-4	5.6%
July 14-16	1.1%			

Survey Questions and Results:

1. **What type of group were you with on the trip to Cooney State Park when you were recently contacted onsite in the park and agreed to participate in this survey? (check only one)**

   [4.6%] Alone
   [94.9%] Family and/or friends
   [0.5%] Organized group or club
   [0.0%] Other

2. **Was this your first trip to this park?** [85.8%] NO [14.2%] YES

3. **Including yourself, how many people were in your group on this trip to the park?**
   Mean = 6.6
   Median = 6.0 (number of people)

4. **Did you camp overnight in the park on this trip? (check only one)**

   [40.3%] NO…..If no, how many hours did you spend in the park?
   Mean = 6.4
   Median = 6.0

[59.7%] YES….If yes, this next question has two parts:

a. How many nights did you camp in the park?
   Mean = 2.4
   Median = 2.0
b. How did you camp? (check all that apply)
   [38.8%] Tent…how many tents?
      Mean = 1.4
      Median = 1.0
   [7.8%] Auto-camper or pick-up truck camper
   [51.7%] Trailer…fully setup length
   [25.9%] Motor home…fully setup length:
   [2.6%] Other

5. Did you or any other members of your group do any boating at the park on this trip? (check only one)

[29.7%] NO…..Go to question 7
[70.3%] YES….If yes, check all that apply and indicate the number of watercraft used:

[62.0%] Large motorboat (16 ft. or longer)	Mean=1.1	Med=1.0
[19.0%] Smaller motorboat (less than 16 ft)	Mean=1.1	Med=1.0
[21.2%] Personal watercraft (e.g., jet ski)	Mean=1.8	Med=2.0
[2.2%] Canoe or kayak	Mean=1.3	Med=1.0
[12.4%] Inflatable pontoon or float tube	Mean=1.5	Med=1.0
[2.2%] Other	Mean=1.0	Med=1.0

6. When boating at the park on this trip, did you see (or suspect) any people operating a boat under the influence of alcohol or drugs? (check only one)

[91.0%] NO
[9.0%] YES….If yes, this next question has two parts:

a. How many boats did you see (or suspect) were being operated by a person under the influence of alcohol or drugs?
   Mean = 2.3 Median = 2.0 (number of boats)
b. At any one time, did you feel your personal safety or the safety of other boaters was threatened because of the actions of these people? (check only one)
   [50.0%] NO
   [50.0%] YES

7. What recreational ACTIVITIES did you participate in while in the park on this trip? (check all that apply)

[55.7%] Picnicking
[59.7%] Camping
[70.3%] Boating
[18.0%] Personal watercraft (e.g., jet skiing)
[59.3%] Fishing
[26.3%] Water skiing
[33.0%] Sunbathing
[1.0%] Jogging/running
[2.1%] Biking
[16.5%] Wildlife viewing

[25.3%] Walking for pleasure or hiking
[56.2%] Swimming
[2.1%] Interpretive talks
[4.1%] Other

8. What activity (from question 7 above) was your PRIMARY activity on this trip to the park? (check only one)

[8.5%] Picnicking
[33.3%] Camping
[15.8%] Boating
[7.9%] Personal watercraft (e.g., jet skiing)
[23.6%] Fishing
[1.8%] Walking for pleasure or hiking
[2.7%] Swimming
[4.2%] Water skiing
[1.2%] Sunbathing
[0.0%] Jogging/running
[0.0%] Biking
[0.0%] Wildlife viewing
[0.0%] Interpretive talks
[1.2%] Other

9. In your opinion, how acceptable or unacceptable were the following conditions on this trip to the park? Circle only ONE number for each condition below or check the "I don't know/not applicable" box if you don't know or if a particular condition does NOT apply to you.

ON THIS TRIP TO THE PARK, how unacceptable or acceptable was:	Very unacceptable	Unacceptable	Neither acceptable or unacceptable	Acceptable	Very acceptable
The quality of service provided by park staff	1.7%	2.3%	4.6%	50.9%	40.6%
The availability of park staff to answer questions and talk with	2.4%	2.4%	17.1%	45.1%	32.9%
The professionalism of park staff	1.7%	1.2%	8.1%	43.6%	45.3%
The friendliness of park staff	1.2%	1.2%	6.9%	38.2%	52.6%
The availability of law enforcement staff in the park	4.8%	4.8%	24.8%	39.2%	26.4%
The professionalism of law enforcement staff in the park	1.9%	4.8%	23.1%	42.3%	27.9%
The feeling of safety and security in the park	1.1%	2.7%	7.0%	55.1%	34.2%
The type of facilities provided at the park	0.5%	2.6%	9.8%	56.5%	30.6%
The quality of facilities provided at the park	1.0%	2.6%	11.5%	53.6%	31.3%
The cleanliness and overall upkeep of park facilities	3.1%	1.6%	4.7%	51.0%	39.6%

ON THIS TRIP TO THE PARK, **how unacceptable or acceptable was:**	Very unacceptable	Unacceptable	Neither acceptable or unacceptable	Acceptable	Very acceptable
The cleanliness and overall upkeep of restrooms	3.3%	2.2%	6.0%	46.7%	41.8%
The cleanliness and overall upkeep of showers	3.0%	1.5%	15.2%	34.8%	45.5%
The condition of picnic tables	1.8%	1.8%	6.5%	56.5%	33.3%
The condition of campfire rings	1.4%	3.4%	10.9%	52.4%	32.0%
Road conditions in the park	2.1%	6.3%	12.1%	61.6%	17.9%
The amount of dust kicked up by vehicles using park roads	1.6%	18.4%	24.7%	50.0%	5.3%
The number of information signs in the park	2.1%	4.8%	7.9%	40.4%	14.8%
The ease of reading (legibility) of information signs in the park	1.6%	3.7%	5.9%	64.7%	24.1%
The quality of information signs in the park	2.1%	3.7%	5.9%	66.5%	21.8%
The amount of information about what there is to see and do in the park	1.9%	7.6%	21.5%	53.8%	15.2%
The amount of information about what types of facilities are available in the park	1.9%	6.2%	23.6%	52.8%	15.5%
The cost of overnight camping fees in the park	7.3%	13.9%	24.2%	46.7%	7.9%
The number of people camping overnight in the park	0.6%	5.8%	20.6%	62.6%	10.3%
The amount of noise coming from gas powered electric generators in the park	0.6%	4.5%	16.2%	65.6%	13.0%
The number of people at day-use areas in the park	0.6%	2.5%	14.2%	69.1%	13.6%
The amount of human-caused impacts to natural resources at the park (e.g., water, soil, vegetation)	1.2%	7.6%	18.0%	64.0%	9.3%
Overall, the number of boaters at the park	4.2%	11.1%	15.3%	60.0%	9.5%
The number of motor boaters (excluding personal watercraft)	3.7%	13.2%	9.5%	64.2%	9.5%
The number of personal watercraft users (e.g., jet skiers)	9.5%	16.9%	15.3%	49.7%	8.5%
The number of **non-motorized** boaters (e.g., canoeists, kayakers, sail boaters, etc.)	1.8%	1.2%	11.2%	66.5%	19.4%
The number of water skiers	2.2%	7.2%	14.4%	63.3%	12.8%
The amount of noise coming from motorized watercraft (excluding personal watercraft)	2.6%	8.4%	13.2%	63.2%	12.6%
The amount of noise coming from personal watercraft (e.g., jet skis)	4.8%	15.4%	14.4%	57.4%	8.0%
The amount of time spent waiting to load or unload watercraft at boat ramp facilities	2.1%	5.6%	14.6%	55.6%	22.2%
The condition of boat ramps	1.3%	2.7%	8.0%	58.7%	29.3%
The condition of boat docks	1.3%	3.4%	10.7%	56.4%	28.2%
The number of people fishing from a boat	0.6%	0.0%	13.4%	68.2%	17.8%
The number of people bank or wade fishing	0.6%	0.0%	10.1%	70.2%	19.0%

ON THIS TRIP TO THE PARK, **how unacceptable or acceptable was:**	Very unacceptable	Unacceptable	Neither acceptable or unacceptable	Acceptable	Very acceptable
Each of the remaining topics below make reference to practices that are definitely unacceptable. However, when responding to these topics, think only in terms of whether or not the NUMBER or AMOUNT is acceptable or unacceptable:					
The number of people operating motorized watercraft (excluding personal watercraft) in an unsafe manner	8.4%	12.6%	15.0%	46.7%	17.4%
The number of people operating personal watercraft (e.g., jet skis) in an unsafe manner	11.8%	20.7%	21.3%	33.7%	12.4%
The number of people violating park rules and regulations	7.9%	22.0%	15.9%	41.5%	12.8%
The number of people being too noisy during park quiet hours (10 pm – 8 am)	5.9%	8.8%	20.6%	41.9%	22.8%
The number of dogs off-leash in the park	11.9%	18.1%	9.4%	46.3%	14.4%
The amount of litter in the park	8.0%	6.4%	12.3%	52.4%	20.9%

10. On a scale from 1 (poor) to 9 (excellent), how would you rate your overall experience on this trip to the park? (circle the number that best describes your experience)

[0.5%]	[0.5%]	[1.5%]	[4.1%]	[7.1%]	[12.2%]	[36.5%]	[22.3%]	[15.2%]
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
(Poor)								(Excellent)

11. Overall, how do you think the quality of your experience at this park has changed over the last FIVE years? (check only one)

[1.3%] The quality of the experience has become <u>much worse</u>
[13.5%] The quality of the experience has become <u>worse</u>
[25.0%] The quality of the experience has NOT changed in five years
[44.2%] The quality of the experience has become <u>better</u>
[16.0%] The quality of the experience has become <u>much better</u>

12. How important is it to <u>you</u> that this park offer (or improve) the following facilities or services in the future? Circle only ONE number for each facility/service below.

<u>Facility/service</u>	Very unimportant	Unimportant	Neither important or unimportant	Important	Very important
More tent camping sites	5.5%	16.9%	34.4%	30.6%	12.6%
More group camping sites	3.2%	16.8%	30.3%	35.1%	14.6%

Facility/service	Very unimportant	Unimportant	Neither important or unimportant	Important	Very important
More large trailer camping sites	5.9%	21.1%	36.8%	28.1%	8.1%
A reservation system for some (not all) campsites in each campground	16.6%	17.1%	32.1%	21.9%	12.3%
Group picnic shelters (or more group picnic shelters)	4.3%	12.4%	31.9%	38.4%	13.0%
Camping cabins/yurts	17.7%	26.3%	37.6%	12.9%	5.4%
Electrical hookups at some campsites	11.1%	13.7%	30.0%	26.8%	18.4%
Water hookups at some campsites	9.6%	12.8%	31.4%	26.6%	19.7%
Sewer hookups at some campsites	12.3%	16.0%	39.0%	16.6%	16.0%
Paving of roads (or more paved roads)	6.3%	16.1%	29.2%	34.4%	14.1%
Paving of RV pads (or more paved RV pads)	12.2%	22.8%	44.4%	13.2%	7.4%
Shower facilities (or more showers facilities)	4.2%	14.7%	34.6%	34.0%	12.6%
Flush toilets (or more flush toilets)	7.9%	18.9%	37.4%	25.8%	10.0%
Boat ramps (or more boat ramps)	4.2%	15.1%	41.7%	27.6%	11.5%
Boat docks (or more boat docks)	4.2%	13.5%	40.1%	30.2%	12.0%
Boat rentals	17.9%	31.1%	33.2%	15.8%	2.1%
Interpretive talks (or more interpretive talks)	14.4%	25.1%	49.2%	9.1%	2.1%
Playgrounds (or more playgrounds)	12.4%	17.5%	32.5%	30.9%	6.7%
Sporting facilities (e.g., horseshoe pits, volleyball areas, etc.)	8.8%	17.5%	34.0%	32.5%	7.2%
More accessibility for persons with disabilities	5.7%	8.9%	39.6%	35.9%	9.9%
Concessions for ice, firewood, etc. (or more concessions)	8.9%	15.2%	28.3%	37.7%	9.9%

13. In total, about how many YEARS have you been visiting this state park?

Mean = 16.6 Median = 15.0 (years)

14. About how many TRIPS PER YEAR do you typically take to this park?

Mean = 6.4 Median = 4.0 (trips per year)

15. Excluding this state park, are there any other places where you typically go to recreate? (check only one)

[21.9%] NO
[78.1%] YES….If yes, where else do you typically go to recreate?

Top 5: Tongue River Reservoir, Yellowtail Dam, Canyon Ferry, Bighorn River, and Red Lodge

16. Where do you typically get MOST of your information about Montana's state parks? (check only one)

[16.3%] Newspaper
[0.0%] Magazine
[2.5%] Television or radio
[8.1%] Calling a Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) office by telephone
[31.3%] Visiting a Montana state park
[3.1%] Visiting a FWP office in person
[15.0%] FWP website (on the Internet)
[0.0%] Other websites on the Internet
[1.3%] *Montana Outdoors* magazine
[6.3%] Tourist information brochures and/or pamphlets
[1.9%] Tourist information books
[0.6%] Local chamber of commerce
[0.0%] Montana Department of Commerce
[13.8%] Other….(primarily friends/family and word of mouth)

17. **What is your age?** Mean = 45.6 Median = 46.0 (years)

18. Are you? (check only one)

[41.1%] Female
[58.9%] Male

19. Are you a current resident of Montana? (check only one)

[4.6%] NO
[95.4%] YES….If yes, how many **years** have you lived in Montana?
Mean = 32.8
Median = 32.5

Top Five Open-Ended Responses of Those Who Said "YES" to Question 15:
Excluding this state park, where else do you typically go to recreate? (number of responses in parenthesis)

Tongue River Reservoir	(54)
Yellowtail Dam	(22)
Canyon Ferry	(16)
Bighorn	(16)
Red Lodge	(15)

B. Public Participation

1. 2010 Public Scoping Meetings
August 18, 2010: FWP Region 5 Headquarters, Billings, MT, 6:30 – 9pm
August 19, 2010: Roberts Fire Hall, Roberts, MT 6:30 – 9pm

18 people attended and responded in small group formats to three questions. Attendees were asked to identify five ideas most important personally. The following is a ranking of the responses to the questions, with the number of votes in parentheses. Note that one person could vote for an idea more than once.

What is your vision for Cooney State Park?
R5 Headquarters

1. More trees (6)
2. More designated swimming areas (4)
3. Accessibility to everyone (2)
4. Double boat ramp at Red Lodge Campground (2)
5. Handicap parking (2)
6. Equality in park fees (2)
7. Take out day use (1)
8. Sandy beaches on South Shore (1)
9. Continued private road use on North Shore (1)

Roberts

1. Continued and improved fishing (3)
2. Public trail along North Shore with picnic tables, tent camping, bicycles, and non-motorized use (2)
3. Dump station (2)
4. Playground on North Shore (2)
5. More fish habitat (2)
6. Additional boat ramp on North Shore (2)
7. Continue to stock fish (1)
8. Potable water station (1)
9. Preserve natural resources (1)

What is most important to you about Cooney State Park?
R5 Headquarters

1. Wildlife viewing and scenery (4)
2. Fishing (3)
3. Major maintenance improvements (2)
4. More day use picnic areas/shelters (2)
5. Better access to information like important phone numbers (1)
6. Life jacket loan program (1)

Roberts

1. Good communication with neighbors and water users (3)
2. Continue concessions (2)
3. More trees (2)

4. Electrical hook-ups (2)
5. Law enforcement presence on lake (1)

What are your concerns about Cooney State Park?
R5 Headquarters
1. Litter (6)
2. Law enforcement on the lake (5)
3. Crowding on lake, boat docks, and day use areas (4)
4. Camping reservation problems (1)
5. Regulation of boat dock (1)
    a. Need enforcement and education, volunteers, required safety courses

Roberts
1. Maintaining reservoir for irrigation (4)
2. Dam wear and tear (4)
3. Personal watercraft and boat crowding in Red Lodge arm (4)
    a. Impacts fisherman, bird life, wildlife, spawning areas, and sandbars
4. Public education on reservoir role for irrigation and local economy (3)
5. Overcrowding on water (2)
6. Weed control (1)
7. Shower mats (1)
8. Unsafe boat ramp use (1)
9. Bad roads on South Shore (1)

2. Draft Management Plan Public Comments Report March 2012

In February 2012, Montana State Parks held two open houses—one in Billings, and one in Roberts—to gather public comments on the Cooney State Park Draft Management Plan. A total of 21 people attended, with 13 people at the Billings meeting, and 8 people at the Roberts meeting including two Carbon County Commissioners and a District Representative. Montana State Parks received 11 comments during the 21-day public comment period from February 10 to March 2. All comments were from individuals, and one comment was submitted from a Carbon County Commissioner.

A number of themes emerged from the public comments, as well as suggestions for improvement of the park experience. Following is a discussion of the comments grouped by major themes.

Public Safety
Eight comments mentioned public safety as a primary concern at Cooney State Park regarding overcrowding, the need for a law enforcement presence, and hunting conflicts. Overcrowding was consistently mentioned as a problem both on the water and within the campgrounds. Many people feel the park is at its capacity, and are cautious to support projects that would increase the use at the park. Still, a few comments voiced support for expanding opportunities in the right locations that might offset the crowds in other areas of the park. The problem of overcrowding spreads multiple themes and is discussed in further detail below.

The desire to see a strong law enforcement presence was also mentioned, and people support the park's public safety initiative that began in 2011 with the hiring of the full-time law Park Warden. Additionally, one comment expressed concern for potential user conflicts between increasing year-round visitation and hunting. According to the comment, which was provided by a neighboring landowner, hunting is already a public safety issue with shooting from the road and vehicles, and trespassing onto private land.

Camping

Seven comments discussed camping, including expanded opportunities, the camping reservation system, and the desire to see modern amenities. People generally favored expanded camping opportunities, particularly boat-in campsites at Red Lodge Campground. Boat-in camping is very popular, and people felt more sites could help reduce overcrowding in the campgrounds and enhance the visitor experience.

Two comments addressed the campsite reservation system specifically. One person expressed dissatisfaction with reservation system when campers are a no-show, which leaves the campsite vacant when others could use it. Conversely, one person felt the reservation system has helped improve the camping experience. Finally, one person expressed concern that the park was actually losing camping opportunities as a result of increased day-use and the reservation system [tying up camping spots].

Two comments expressed the desire to see more modern amenities, including more electrical hookups and landline phones at the campgrounds and day use sites.

One person expressed an interest in volunteer days to improve campsites by involving the park users in upkeep of the park. One person suggested offering discount camping rates Monday-Thursday to encourage more weekday use during the summer.

Boating

Boating was another major theme with five comments addressing boating, including boating safety and expanded opportunities. Four comments addressed boating safety specifically, and many more alluded to it in regards to overcrowding. Several comments expressed support for better enforcement of boating safety, more boater education that touched on boating ethics and etiquette, and enforcement of the correct boating direction, particularly related to personal watercrafts and boats towing water skiers and inner tubes. One comment suggested a horse power limit of 25 HP for motors or promoting the use of electric motors.

Several comments also expressed support for additional boat-in campsites, while a few also thought that widening the boat ramp would help alleviate some of the congestion, particularly if more campsites are added in the future to the Red Lodge Campground.

Road Maintenance

Road maintenance was a dominant conversation at both the Billings and Roberts meetings. Four comments were submitted regarding roads, including one from a Carbon County Commissioner. The roads leading to the park are gravel roads maintained by the County. Several people felt the burden of maintaining the roads should not be carried solely by the County, but instead provided as a cost share between the County and Montana State Parks, as maintaining the roads is costly for the Carbon County taxpayers. The Carbon County Commissioner suggested budgeting $7500 to $8000 a year for dust control.

Many people felt that the volume and kind of traffic on the roads is creating expensive long-term maintenance problems, particularly along the Lake Shore Road and the section of the Red Lodge Creek Road from Lake Shore Road to Red Lodge Campground. Three people did not want to see the roads paved, as it could create other problems related to speeding and concerns of ice during the winter, and would rather see annual dust control. One person suggested paving the South Shore Road. Several people expressed concern that increasing use at the park would exacerbate the problem, while one person expressed support for developing park facilities if road problems are resolved.

Trail
Three comments highlighted support for a walking/biking trail. Two people provided suggestions for the trail development and activities along the way, including foot bridges and geocaching.

Fishing
Two comments highlighted fishing as one of the main park attractions, although both alluded to the poor quality and quantity of fish in the reservoir. They support continued stocking of fish, and one person suggested specific kinds of fish to improve the fishing quality and quantity.

Natural Resources
Two comments addressed natural resources at the park, including the diversity of tree species and the growing problem of noxious weeds. One person supports diversifying tree species, but suggests using Sichuan Elms instead of ash trees, which are currently being devastated by the invasive emerald ash borer (insect) on the eastern United States. One comment addressed the problem of knapweed spreading from adjacent DNRC lands onto private land.

C. References

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