FISH CREEK STATE PARK

Draft Management Plan

DECEMBER 2013

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Our Mission is...

To preserve and protect our state's heritage and the natural beauty of our public lands for the benefit of our families, communities, local economies and out-of-state visitors.

Our Objectives are...

To provide excellent land stewardship, public safety and service through recreation, innovation and education.

Our Goals are...

To provide an extraordinary experience for our visitors and to keep our state park system strong now and for generations to come.

Prepared by
Montana State Parks

A Division of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

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Fish Creek State Park Management Plan

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Acknowledgements

Montana State Parks would like to thank the following people for their thoughtful insight and contributions to the Fish Creek State Park Management Plan:

Members of the public, neighboring landowners and interested organizations who took time to attend scoping meetings, review the plan and provide constructive input regarding the future of the Fish Creek State Park.

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Executive Summary

Park Context

Fish Creek State Park is the largest state park in western Montana and the second largest in the Montana State Parks system at 5,603 acres. The Park presents a unique opportunity for Montana State Parks to create a regional destination in Mineral County. Diverse recreation opportunities in an array of park settings could support economic development in nearby communities while also showcasing the unique natural resources of the Fish Creek area. The Park's main attractions fare the convenient location along Interstate 90 and close proximity to the greater Missoula metro area citizens, the potential to provide for developed camping and a trail system, and the rustic setting and scenic vistas that connect to larger landscapes.

The Park has an extensive road system that could serve as the basis for a high-quality trail system for non-motorized and motorized recreation. Trails could connect visitors to the Park's recreational and natural resources as well as to expansive regional opportunities through safe and fun experiences. The Park also includes spectacular opportunities for wildlife viewing and nature observation, as well as supporting the continued use of historic activities like hunting, fishing, berry picking, and firewood cutting. Development of visitor amenities at Fish Creek State Park could enhance recreation on the Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area, along the Alberton Gorge, and on adjacent state trust lands and nearby National Forest System Lands.

Public Scoping

Public scoping early on in the planning process identified a number of public values that helped shaped the development of this management plan. Comments spoke of the desire for more camping opportunities, including a developed campground that could accommodate RVs, as well as rustic camping for tents and hike-in/bike-in backcountry sites. The public was also interested in seeing the Williams Peak Lookout restored for public overnight use. Mountain biking and motorized recreation user groups voiced their interest in a trails experience at the Park, and these groups expressed a strong desire to see trails built specifically for mountain biking and OHV use.

Comments also showed strong support for maintaining and enhancing the natural resources values of the Park, including protection of big game habitat, the riparian area along Fish Creek, and sensitivity to the wildlife migration corridor along the northwestern border of the Park. Mineral County Commissioners and County residents spoke of the need to enhance opportunities for economic development in conjunction with the Park's development, and stressed strong partnerships with local communities and businesses. A number of other concerns were also highlighted including public safety and enforcement, road management, forest management, weed control, and private property rights. A full discussion of feedback received is provided in the Public Scoping Summary, Appendix B.

The Fish Creek State Park Draft Management Plan proposes guidance and the desired outcomes over the next ten years for Fish Creek State Park. The priorities have been developed based on public scoping and comment, Fish Creek State Park staff input, Montana State Parks and FWP staff expertise, partner agency feedback, funding considerations, and resource availability.

Implementation

As a long-term management plan, objectives and action items would be implemented in phases based on priorities and opportunities for implementation. Fundamental needs for a new state park to meet Montana State Parks system standards would be pursed first to establish a strong State Parks presence and build an understanding of the Fish Creek State Park rules and regulations. These fundamental needs include:

- Pursue adequate staffing in response to anticipated growth and visitation
- Sign park boundary in appropriate places

- Install park entry signs and kiosks
- Post key regulations at appropriate locations
- Install fee collection devices in appropriate locations
- Pursue establishment of visitor point of contact
- Disseminate appropriate information on recreation opportunities
- Engage in educational and preventative enforcement of park regulations

Prior to implementation, certain development projects will be subject to an environmental assessment and additional public review as required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act. As the plan is implemented, communication and coordination will be a critical component between the FWP Parks Division and Fish and Wildlife Divisions, as well as with partnering agencies. Communication with neighboring land owners, both public and private, will be essential to ensure a quality recreation experience across boundaries, as well as to maintain private property rights and reduce impacts to private lands.

Plan Highlights

Public safety and enforcement: As development of the Park would increase visits to the area, public safety and enforcement would be a central focus for park management, and would be integrated into the daily park operations with a progressive approach to incident planning, response and management. Increasing park staff and law enforcement presence would help to positively influence visitor behavior and the perception of Montana State Parks by emphasizing education, outreach, proactive and preventative law enforcement techniques and approaches.

Developed campground: The Park has easy access from I-90 along the northern park boundary where development of a modern campground could be built, with facilities to support RV camping including electrical hook-ups, water, sewer and clean, attractive, modern shower/toilet buildings. The area currently does not have a campground that offers these amenities. A develop campground could draw people to stay longer and enjoy the area.

Williams Peak Lookout: The Williams Peak Lookout is a unique overnight rental opportunity that is not currently offered in the state parks system. Upgrading the Williams Peak Lookout could add to the array of overnight opportunities while also generating revenue for the Park. Trails to the Lookout would allow for a secluded experience with panoramic views of the surrounding landscape.

High-quality trail system: With close to 70 miles of roads and rolling topography, the Park's landscape is well-suited for a developed trail system for non-motorized and motorized activities, particularly mountain biking and off-highway vehicles. In addition, the Park could be connected to other trails and open roads on nearby public lands to offer a truly regional recreation experience.

Economic opportunities: Development of the Park could facilitate economic opportunities for businesses and nearby communities. Concessionaire contracts and commercial use permits provide opportunities for entrepreneurs to further diversify the recreation experience at the Park while also generate revenue for the Park and for private business. Activities at the Park could also spur business development opportunities in nearby communities for recreation rentals, food services, and other amenities that visitors' desire.

Rustic overnight rentals and backcountry camping: The large park acreage is an opportunity to develop other forms of camping, including a hut-to-hut system, cabins, yurts, and backcountry sites. These could provide a more rustic experience for recreationists who seek to explore deeper into the Park and enjoy a more secluded experience. These opportunities could be developed in conjunction with the proposed trail system.

Resource interpretation and education: The Park is a part of a larger landscape for wildlife that includes wildlife corridors, important habitat, and a blue ribbon trout fishery along Fish Creek. Interpretation of these natural resources values throughout the Park can provide a unique opportunity to connect visitors to the resource, foster a strong stewardship ethic, and encourage ethical recreation behavior through education and utilization of Leave No Trace values.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction **1**

2. Planning Process **3**
2.1 Scope of the Plan 3
2.2 Management Authorities 3
2.3 Relation to Other Plans, Policies, and Initiatives 4
2.4 Public Scoping 10

3. Park Vision and Values **12**

4. Park Background and Context **13**
4.1 State Park Acquisition 13
4.2 Operations and Management 16
4.3 Facilities and Roads 17
4.4 Visitation and Use 23
4.5 Wildlife, Fisheries and Aquatic Resources 27
4.6 Forest Resources and Management 30
4.7 Cultural Resources 32

5. Regional Recreation Opportunities **33**
5.1 Montana Recreation Participation and Trends 36
5.2 Other FWP Departmental Lands 40
5.3 Mineral County 41
5.4 Missoula County 43
5.5 Lolo National Forest 45
5.6 State School Trust Lands 48
5.7 Regional Opportunities for Mountain Biking and Motorized Recreation 49
5.8 Conclusion 51

6. Recreation Economy and Tourism **54**
6.1 Mineral County 54
6.2 Economic Opportunities 56
6.3 Economic Benefits of Trails 57
6.4 Health and Social Benefits of Trails 61
6.5 Montana's Recreation Economy 62
6.6 Economic Contributions of Wildlife-Associated Recreation 63

7. Management Concepts & Definitions **64**
7.1 Proposed Management Units 64
7.2 Trail Types and System Concepts 69

8. Management Direction **73**
8.1 Public Safety 74
8.2 Recreation Management 76
8.3 Facilities and Services 82
8.4 Park Operations 86
8.5 Tourism and Economic Opportunities 88
8.6 Natural and Cultural Resource Stewardship 90
8.7 Interpretation and Education 93

9. Development Concepts **94**
9.1 Park Infrastructure 95
9.2 Overnight and Day Use Facilities 96

10. Implementation **98**

11. Appendices **100**

Maps:

Map 1. Area Context 2
Map 2. Fish Creek State Park & Adjacent Land Ownership 15
Map 3. Road Status 20
Map 4. Road Grade 21
Map 5. Road Condition 22
Map 6. Current Recreational Uses 26
Map 7. Regional Recreation Opportunities 35
Map 8. Mineral County Land Ownership 42
Map 9. Proposed Management Areas 68

Figures:

Figure 1. Planning Timeline 11
Figure 2. Fish Creek State Park Monthly Visitation, 2013 23
Figure 3. Participation in Mountain Biking (Non-Paved), 2006 to 2012 37
Figure 4. OHV & Snowmobile Registration in Montana, 2000 to 2010 38
Figure 5. Land Ownership in Mineral County 41
Figure 6. Percent Participation of Recreational Activities in Lolo National Forest 46
Figure 7. Miles of Trails by Design Type in Lolo National Forest 46
Figure 8. Montana's Outdoor Recreation Economy 62
Figure 9. Three Factors in Trail Sustainability 72

Tables:

Table 1. Current Recreational Uses 24

Abbreviations:

BREDD	BitterRoot Economic Development District
CEDS	Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy
DNRC	Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation
EA	Environmental Assessment
FAS	Fishing Access Site
FHWAR	National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation
Fish Creek SP	Fish Creek State Park
FWP	Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
IMBA	International Mountain Biking Association
Lolo NF	National Forest
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
OHV	Off-Highway Vehicles
SCORP	Montana 2014-2018 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan
SHPO	State Historic Preservation Office
TNC	The Nature Conservancy
USFS	United State Forest Service
Fish Creek WMA	Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area

Photos of Fish Creek State Park by Maren Murphy, unless otherwise stated.

1. Introduction

Montana State Parks, a Division of Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP), manages Fish Creek State Park (hereafter Fish Creek SP or Park) for the people of Montana and visitors to this state. Acquired as a state park in 2010, Fish Creek SP is part of a statewide park system consisting of 54 state parks. Montana State Parks serves the interests of the public and protects the recreational, natural, and cultural resources of Montana. Over 2.0 million visitors used the park system in 2013.

Photo 1. View of Fish Creek from the Park.

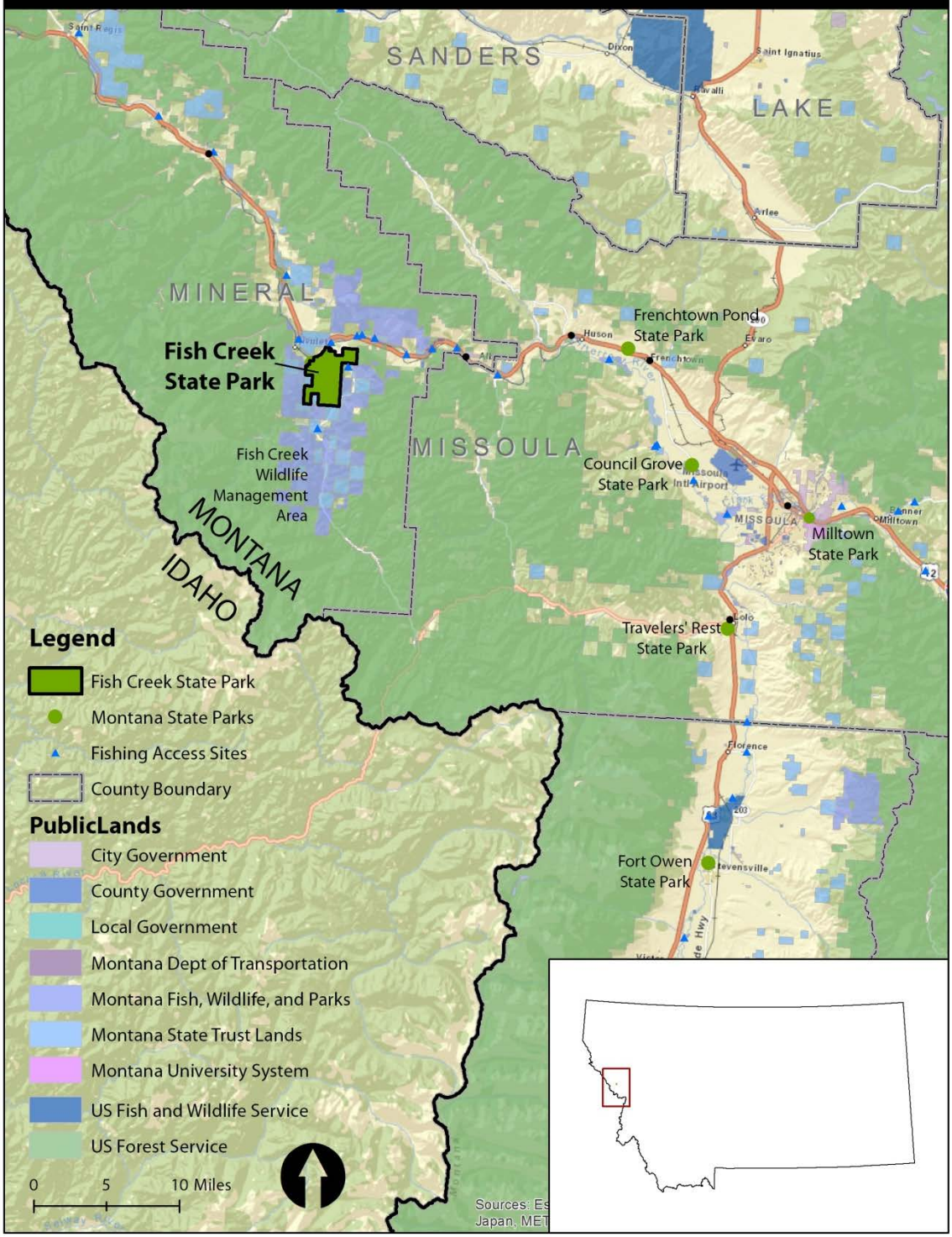
Fish Creek SP is a place where potential outstanding and diverse recreational opportunities abound, and where families, friends, and visitors will enjoy the scenic vistas from the Williams Peak lookout and enjoy recreational activities in a diverse array of park settings including hiking, camping, biking, hunting, fishing, and OHV riding.

Approximately 41 miles west of Missoula along Interstate 90 (I-90) in Mineral County, the Park is located south of the Clark Fork River in the Fish Creek drainage. It is the largest state park in western Montana at 5,603 acres, and the second largest in the Montana State Parks system. Formerly managed by private timber companies, the Park has a network of close to 70 miles of logging roads. This presents a unique opportunity to develop a diverse trail system that caters to both non-motorized and motorized recreation, particularly mountain biking and off-highway vehicles (OHV). In addition to trails, the Park has the potential to provide for a variety of camping opportunities, including developed camping, rustic camping, backcountry sites, cabins, yurts, and huts. Fish Creek State Park has tremendous potential to broaden the base of users to this area by providing a destination for travelers "to" Mineral County versus travelers driving "through" on I-90.

The Park borders the Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area (WMA) also managed by FWP, Lolo National Forest in the Ninemile Ranger District, Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) State Trust Lands, and private lands. The Park also provides a unique connection to the larger landscape of the northern Bitterroot Mountains and the Great Burn Proposed Wilderness. In close proximity to Fish Creek SP is the Alberton Gorge of the Clark Fork River, which is also managed by FWP and provides outstanding whitewater kayaking and rafting. **See Map 1 for area context of the park.**

The Fish Creek State Park Draft Management Plan puts forward management goals and objectives based on public input and review, management experience and expertise, and Parks Division priorities. The management plan will be implemented in phases over the next ten years, dependant on funding, staff resources and prioritization.

MAP 1. Area Context



2. Planning Process

2.1 Scope of the Plan

The Fish Creek State Park Draft Management Plan will provide guidance for all aspects of park operations, including recreation management, public safety, facilities and services, interpretation and education, and natural and cultural resource management.

The purpose of the 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 Parks' system. This plan:

- Sets a long-term vision for the park;
- Provides opportunities for public input;
- Establishes management goals, objectives, and actions for the park;
- Provides a basis for resource needs to guide park operations and capital improvements;
- Considers resource values that enhance recreational opportunities and support stewardship and conservation goals;
- Provides continuity and direction toward common goals for the next 10 years; and
- Prioritizes actions for implementation, depending on funding and staffing levels.

2.1.1 Outside the Scope of the Plan

This draft management plan sets the vision for Fish Creek SP for the next 10 years. This plan is not a master site plan for development of campgrounds, visitor facilities, trails, etc. Prior to implementation, development projects and improvements will be subject to an environmental assessment and additional public review as required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA).

The following are identified as outside the scope of this management plan:

- Management of river recreational use of the Clark Fork River through the Alberton Gorge
- Management of the Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area

2.2 Management Authorities

Fish Creek SP is currently managed according to the policies, guidelines, rules and regulations of Montana State Parks and FWP, the Fish Creek SP Operations Manual, and the Fish Creek State Park and Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area Preliminary Management Plan[1]. In developing the plan, the planning team considers various statutes, rules, and policies—together with the park's vision and specific issues and goals—that apply to the management of the Park.

[1] Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. 2009. Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area and Fish Creek State Park Draft Preliminary Management Plan. Appendix B of the Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area and Fish Creek State Park Proposed Land Acquisition Draft Environmental Assessment.

The most frequently referenced are listed below:

- State Parks Purposes and Development (23-1-101 through 23-1-110 MCA)
- State Park System Rules (ARM 12.8.102 through 12.8.106)
- Parks Public Use Regulations (ARM 12.8.201 through 12.8.213)
- State Parks Development (ARM 12.8.601 through 12.8.606)
- 2020 Vision Montana State Park System Plan (2004)
- Parks Division Biennial Fee Rule (2012)
- Montana 2014-2018 SCORP
- FWP Heritage Resource Management and Protection Policy (ARM 12.8.501)
- Rules for Use of Land and Waters (23-2-301 & 302, MCA)
- FWP Commercial Use Rules & Biennial Commercial Use Fee Rule (ARM 12.14.201 through 12.12.170)

2.3 Relation to Other Plans, Policies, and Initiatives

The following plans, policies, and initiatives are most relevant to the Fish Creek State Park planning process, and may influence recreation management and development within the Park, how the Park would be managed to coincide with adjacent land uses, and how users may enjoy Fish Creek SP.

2.3.1 Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area and Fish Creek State Park Draft Environmental Assessment and Preliminary Management Plan

In 2010, Fish Creek SP was acquired from The Nature Conservancy (TNC) as part of the larger Fish Creek acquisition, which encompassed a total of 41,000 acres. A total of 5,603 acres are designated as the State Park while the remaining was established as the WMA. FWP conducted an environmental assessment (EA) of the acquisition and solicited public review and comments. As part of the EA, FWP developed a draft preliminary management plan to guide the interim management of both the WMA and State Park until a final management plan could be developed. Additionally, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was established between the Fish & Wildlife Division and Parks Division for the management of the Fish Creek WMA and State Park.

The larger Fish Creek project represents a unique approach to providing for the public interest in the fish, wildlife and recreation resources of an entire watershed. It recognizes and builds upon the interconnection between public resources and the public's enjoyment of those resources. It not only acknowledges the public's place alongside fish and wildlife on the Fish Creek landscape, as it traditionally has been, but also applies recreation management alongside habitat management as a tool for the perpetual conservation and enjoyment of the fish and wildlife resources upon which such recreation currently depends. The Fish Creek acquisition has demonstrated one model for bringing together multiple funding sources and constituencies to achieve conservation and recreation access at a scale that cannot be accomplished parcel by parcel.

The Fish Creek WMA is dedicated to the protection and perpetuation of fish and wildlife resources first. The WMA constitutes the largest portion of the Fish Creek project area, which

corresponds with the large and connected landscapes needed to support wild, intact fish and wildlife populations. The WMA remains in its primitive condition to maximize wildlife use on the land, and to perpetuate the long tradition of hunting, fishing, and other recreation tied to undeveloped expanses. Recreation development on the WMA is minimal and the experience is one of challenge and self-reliance, and there are few if any amenities beyond a system of open and closed roads on existing roadbeds.

The vision outlined for Fish Creek State Park in the preliminary management plan is to provide the largest state park in western Montana with a diverse array of recreational opportunities. Infrastructure and amenities would be developed to accomplish state park goals, provide for site stewardship, protect natural and cultural resources, and support an enjoyable, safe, comfortable, and educational visitor experience. A developed state park footprint and developed facilities would appropriately accommodate recreationists and could minimize potential impacts to riparian and other sensitive sites within the WMA, as well as keep human-human and human-wildlife encounters on the WMA at low levels. Potential future opportunities identified in the preliminary management plan include attracting new users/user groups that provide potential economic benefit to Mineral County and could include trail systems, hut-to-hut hiking, biking and cross-country skiing, a fire lookout rental, equestrian campground, and expanded camping opportunities to meet increasing demand in the Alberton Gorge and Fish Creek areas.

Once approved, the Fish Creek State Park Management Plan will replace the draft preliminary plan and MOU as the guiding document for the management of Fish Creek State Park. Montana State Parks will continue to work with the FWP Fisheries and Wildlife Divisions and external constituencies as this management plan is implemented.

2.3.2 Lolo National Forest Plan 1986

The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) prepared the Lolo National Forest Plan in 1986[2]. The Forest Plan was developed in compliance with the National Forest Management Act of 1975; the regulations for National Forest Land and Resource Management Planning (36 CFR Part 219); and the National Environmental Policy Act of 1959 (NEPA), including the Record of Decision for the Environmental Impact Statement covering the Forest Plan.

Recreational activities on public lands surrounding Fish Creek SP include activities on National Forest System Lands. The Lolo National Forest provides a host of recreational opportunities that are compatible with those offered by the State Park. The Lolo Forest Plan provides management direction for the entire forest and guides all natural resource and recreation management activities and standards. It describes management practices, levels of resource production, and the availability and suitability of lands for resource and recreation management. Further, the Plan establishes management areas that represent specific criteria and constraints. These management areas are the basis for the types of developments that are allowed, authorized recreational uses, and the desired kinds of opportunities and experiences. Management of the Lolo National Forest may influence use of recreational activities authorized in the State Park

[2] U.S. Forest Service. 1986. Lolo National Forest Plan. http://www.fs.usda.gov/main/lolo/landmanagement/planning.

boundaries that could go beyond the boundary (e.g. OHV use on roads that cross multiple ownerships).

In the Forest Plan, eight overarching goals are established for forest-wide management direction. In addition to forestry and habitat goals, the following goal specifically addresses recreation for the Lolo NF: *Provide for a broad spectrum of dispersed recreation involving sufficient acreage to maintain a low user density compatible with public expectations.* The objectives further state that approximately 25% of the Forest will remain in a roadless condition, managed as designated Wilderness or for its roadless values.

The 1986 Forest Plan also provides direction for wildlife and habitat management for the recovery of threatened species on the Forest, including the grizzly bear, gray wolf, peregrine falcon, and bald eagle specifically[3]. Management is also designed to increase the Forest's nationally significant big-game populations, particularly elk. Overall, the Forest Plan provides for diverse wildlife habitat, natural conditions, high visual quality, and a rich variety of recreation experiences through low user density.

The plan provides an important context for Fish Creek State Park, and is critical to understanding the recreation opportunities and constraints on Forest Service land, as well as what Fish Creek State Park could provide to enhance opportunities that are not met elsewhere in the region.

2.3.3 DNRC State Forest Land Management Plan and Rules

The FWP acquisition of the TNC lands in the Fish Creek drainage is directly adjacent and sometimes intermixed with approximately 7,300 acres (more than 11 sections) of school trust land managed by DNRC. The bulk of this land primarily classified forest and are managed under the State Forest Land Management Plan and corresponding DNRC administrative rules. The land is managed for the Capitol Buildings trust, of which approximately 4% of the statewide land holdings of this trust are within the Fish Creek drainage.

The DNRC State Forest Land Management Plan[4], adopted in 1996, applies to the 662,000 acres of forested lands of the total 5.2 million acres of school trust lands administered by DNRC. The Trust Land Management Division of DNRC implements the State Forest Land Management Plan to provide field personnel with consistent policy, direction, and guidance for the management of state forested lands. The plan provides policies and guidelines for managing state-owned forest lands and contains the general philosophies and management standards that provide the framework for DNRC's project-level decisions. It does not address site-specific issues, make specific land use allocations or identify precise future output targets for individual resources.

The premise of the plan is that the best way to produce long-term income for the trust is to manage intensively for healthy and biologically diverse forests. The understanding is that a diverse forest is a stable forest that will produce the most reliable and highest long-term revenue

[3] Of the four species, only the grizzly bear is still categorized as threatened under the Federal Endangered Species Act; the other three have since been delisted. Bull trout and Canada lynx have since been added.
[4] Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation. 1996. State Forest Land Management Plan.

stream. Due to the checkerboard ownership within the acquisition area, it is important that FWP and DNRC work in a cooperative manner to be successful in meeting both agencies goals for this area.

2.3.4 Mineral County Growth Policy

The Mineral County Growth Policy was adopted in 2008[5]. The growth policy provides overall planning direction for growth and policy development for the county. The Mineral County growth policy provides an important context for Fish Creek State Park and Montana State Parks to better understand the opportunities and challenges that exist in the County, and the ways in which the park can help accomplish County goals and recommendations.

The Mineral County Growth Policy jurisdiction includes the incorporated areas of the towns of Alberton and Superior as well as the unincorporated communities of St. Regis, DeBorgia, Haugan and Saltese. These rural communities are governed by the Mineral County Commissioners. The policy serves as a planning guide for local officials and citizens throughout the planning period from its adoption in 2008 up to the year 2020. It is a long range statement of local public policy providing guidance for accommodating development within the county. The plan is designed to be used by local government officials as they make decisions which have direct or indirect land use implications. Further, it is designed to be used by officials of other government agencies (federal, state and adjacent local entities) as a framework for coordinating their land use planning efforts in and adjacent to the county.

The 2008 plan discusses the socioeconomics of the County, as well as land uses, public facilities, local services, transportation, and the natural environment. The plan includes an analysis of existing conditions, as well as provides goals, recommendations and policies for community and economic development, transportation, natural resources, and public facilities. The growth policy also discusses recreational facilities, opportunities and challenges, and recommendations for improvements in the County.

2.3.5 Mineral County Resource Use Plan

The Mineral County Resource Use Plan provides policies and guidance for management of Mineral County public lands and resource use issues, as adopted by the Mineral County Commissioners in 2004[6]. The plan seeks to maintain and revitalize the various multiple uses of state and federally managed lands through general planning guidelines and management actions. The plan is guided by the following principles:

- To revitalize and maintain the concept of multiple use on all lands in Mineral County.
- To maintain that the concept of multiple-use shall be an inclusive term, rather than an exclusive term setting one use against another.
- The protection of private property rights and private property interests, including investment back expectations.
- The protection of local historical custom and culture.

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[5] Mineral County Growth Policy. 2008. http://www.co.mineral.mt.us/Forms.aspx.

[6] Mineral County Resource Use Plan. 2004. http://www.co.mineral.mt.us/Forms%20and%20Documents/Final%20Resource%20Use%20Plan.pdf

- The protection of the traditional economic structures in the county that form the base for economic stability.
- The opening of new economic opportunities through reliance on free markets.
- The protection of the rights to the enjoyment of the natural resources of the county by all citizens.
- Commercial uses such as mining claims, grazing allotments, logging, fishing and floating guides, and outfitter sites shall be permitted but not to the detriment of public access and public use, unless the public access or use causes an inherent safety risk to the public or commercial use.

The resource use plan calls for strong coordination between county officials and federal and state agencies in planning, including plan development, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation to maintain and revitalize multiple use while also enhancing environmental quality. The plan provides an important context for desired conditions as stated by Mineral County Commissioners, and addresses a number of goals and objectives related to resource use, including recreation, access, and roads and transportation. The Resource Use Plan is important for understanding the values and policy positions of the Mineral County Commissioners, and will help inform the development and implementation phases of the State Park.

2.3.6 Mineral County Challenge

In 2009, the Mineral County Challenge was launched through a partnership between Mineral County, the Mineral County Extension Services, U.S. Forest Service, and Montana FWP to investigate how management of natural resources can best contribute to Mineral County's social and economic well-being[7]. The Mineral County Challenge sought to draw together communities and natural resource managers in a partnership to find practical economic opportunities that increase prosperity and maintain environmental quality. Partners came together over a series of workshops to answer the following questions:

- What are Mineral County's economic development opportunities?
- Which natural resource challenges, enhancements, or restoration potential are associated with those opportunities?
- What is Mineral County's market reach relative to those opportunities?
- What is the capacity of the county to develop the opportunities commercially?
- What steps do Mineral County communities need to take to realize those opportunities?
- What steps do resource managers need to take to facilitate those opportunities and promote environmental integrity?

The Mineral County Challenge discussions and recommendations provide a context for Montana State Parks to understand what economic opportunities are desired in Mineral County, and in what ways Fish Creek State Park can help support opportunities for economic development. The Challenge was a unique initiative in the County to address issues in an effective manner and develop strategies to promote the County's resources in a way that

[7] Mineral County Challenge. 2009. http://www.co.missoula.mt.us/rural/pdfs/BrochureMineralCountyChallengePhase_1.pdf.

encourages economic development while maintaining high quality natural resource habitat and recreational opportunities.

2.3.7 Mineral and Missoula Counties Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy

The Bitterroot Economic Development District's (BREDD) mission is to serve the tri-county region in western Montana – Mineral, Missoula and Ravalli counties – in regional strategic planning. In 2012, BREDD began developing a new five-year Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy[8] (CEDS) for Missoula and Mineral counties. The goal of the CEDS is to bring together the public and private sectors in the creation of an economic roadmap to diversify and strengthen regional economies.

The Mineral and Missoula Counties CEDS provides additional context to understand economic challenges and opportunities within these counties, and development of Fish Creek State Park can help achieve economic opportunity for the region. In March 2013, a draft CEDS was released for the counties that analyzes the regional economy and establishes regional goals and objectives for economic development.

2.3.8 Missoula County Parks and Trails Master Plan

The Missoula County Parks and Trails Master Plan[9] was approved in 2012 and renews the approach of the Missoula County Parks and Trails Program that was previously directed by the 1997 Missoula County Parks and Conservation Lands Plan. This plan includes an overview of the Missoula County trails system and identifies areas of needs for the program. Key recommendations of the master plan include protecting and maintaining the quality and integrity of current parks and trails as community assets; improving signage, access, and facilities; and developing new community and regional trails connections. The master plan supports the future of the Program through the continuation and expansion parks and trails in Missoula County, and is relevant to understanding the regional trails opportunities and gaps for the Fish Creek SP planning process.

2.3.9 Master Parks and Recreation Plan for the Greater Missoula Area

The Master Parks and Recreation Plan for the Greater Missoula Area, approved in 2004, is the guide for land uses as it relates to parks, trails, open spaces, conservation lands, the urban forest and recreation facilities and opportunities in the greater Missoula urban area. The plan includes an inventory of all parklands and open spaces, as well as identifies areas in need of additional parklands, open space, trails or trail connections, and recreation facilities, based on a standard level of service.

Overarching goals and associated policies were developed to guide future decisions related to development, access, and acquisition. Emphasis areas include:

- Facilities and lands of larger neighborhood and community-wide significance to better meet levels of service while keeping ongoing maintenance costs manageable.

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[8] BitterRoot Economic Development District (BREDD). 2013. Draft Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy for the BitterRoot Economic Development District, Inc. 2013-2018 Mineral and Missoula Counties. http://www.bredd.org/current-project/comprehensive-economic-development-strategy-ceds/.

[9] Missoula County. 2012. Parks and Trails Master Plan. Developed by the Missoula County Parks and Trails Program and Rural Initiatives Office.

- Protecting and enhancing the natural environment.
- Developing funding alternatives to meet the needs of a growing urban area.
- Appropriate, high-quality, varied and equitably distributed parks, recreation facilities and trails. Importance of collaboration, monitoring, and assessment of existing and new parks and services for success.

The Master Plan provides information on recreation opportunities in the Missoula area, as well as needs for a growing population and recreation user base.

2.3.10 Montana 2014-2018 SCORP

The Montana 2014-2018 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP), titled *Creating a Vibrant Future for Montana's Outdoor Recreation Heritage*, provides overarching guidance for recreation management across all public lands in Montana. It inventories the supply of public outdoor recreation facilities throughout the state, describes the recreation user preferences, identifies growing demands and trends in participation, and establishes priorities, goals, and recommendations for enhancing outdoor recreation over the next five years. The document contains relevant data on participation trends, preferences, demands, issues, and growing needs. It is a guiding document, not a regulatory document, but provides a coordinated vision for enhanced outdoor recreation service provision for Montana.

2.4 Public Scoping

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 Fish Creek SP. A series of public meetings were held during the acquisition of the WMA and State Park in 2010 in accordance with the environmental assessment. This plan continues the public process started in 2010 with the current management planning process.

The Fish Creek SP planning process began in 2012. At the beginning of the management planning process, a public scoping workshop to identify public ideas and visions for the future was held on September 19, 2012 in Superior, MT. Notification of the workshop was published in local newspapers in Missoula, Helena, and Mineral County, and postcards were sent out to surrounding landowners, interested individuals, agencies and organizations. Approximately 30 people attended the workshop where they provided input on four major themes: facilities, trails, recreational opportunities, and special uses. Additional discussions included the overall vision for the Park, values, and any concerns the attendees had regarding the Park. Those who could not attend had the opportunity to submit input via mail and email.

User groups were mainly absent from the initial public scoping meeting. In order to gauge the interest level of user groups and identify potential recreational opportunities, Montana State Parks conducted strategic outreach to groups and stakeholders through February 2013. An additional 21 written comments were received from individuals and organizations regarding the State Park. A public scoping report was produced in March 2013 summarizing the major themes identified through the public feedback.

The major themes identified during public scoping include:

- Recreational Opportunities
  - Camping
  - Trails – mountain biking, horseback riding, hiking, winter use, motorized recreation
  - Hunting and trapping
  - Special uses – firewood gathering, berry-picking
- Conservation Priorities
- Economic Impact/Benefit of the State Park
- Road Management
- Weed Control
- Impacts to Public Utilities
- Law Enforcement
- Search & Rescue
- Operations & Maintenance

Overall, the comments received for the development of Fish Creek SP management plan were quite general, and many comments were in opposition of each other (i.e. support versus oppose). Still, the scoping process and the feedback received helped guide the development of the management plan by identifying and engaging stakeholders and user groups; highlighting community values around the Park; identifying controversial issues that must be addressed throughout the planning process; and identifying gaps in recreation provision on adjacent public lands that could be provided at Fish Creek SP. See ***Appendix B*** for the complete public scoping summary.

With feedback, ideas, and comments received from the public, the planning team and associated management expertise developed a long-term direction for Fish Creek SP based on goals, objectives, and action items ***(****Figure 1****).*** Prior to implementation, development projects and improvements will be subject to an environmental assessment and additional public review as required by MEPA.

Figure 1. Planning Timeline.

3. Park Vision and Values

Fish Creek State Park is a cherished state park with incredible scenic vistas and recreational treasures for visitors of all ages and abilities. The park provides a unique experience within the Montana State Parks system offering a diversity of activities and important natural resource values. Furthermore, the park is recognized as a regional destination that helps enhance the quality of life and economic vitality of the surrounding community. Diverse camping is provided in an array of park settings, and non-motorized and motorized trails connect visitors to the park's recreational and natural resources as well as regional opportunities through safe and fun experiences.

The fundamental values of the Montana State Parks system are service, safety, stewardship and sustainability, which communicate the special character of the place and what it will portray in the future.

Service: Visitors will receive outstanding service contributing to enjoyable visits. Park facilities and programs will be developed through staff efforts and Parks Division support. Staff pride in the park and in serving visitors will be evident through these advances. Efforts will focus on developing infrastructure and amenities to enhance the visitor experience, provide for site stewardship, protect cultural and natural resources, and support an enjoyable, safe, comfortable, and educational experience that exceeds visitor expectations. Partnerships will be developed with local agencies, organizations, individuals, and user groups integrally involved with park operations to cooperatively address safety and emergency response services, facility development and maintenance, tourism and economic development, and neighboring landowner relations.

Safety: Public safety and visitor protection will be integrated into daily park operations providing consistency, proactive education, and professional incident response and management that enhance the health and safety of park visitors and employees. Park staff will work cooperatively and actively with County public safety officials to address and resolve safety risks and issues.

Stewardship: Park staff will proactively monitor, manage and protect the natural, cultural and recreational resources to enhance the park's aesthetic values, prevent terrestrial and aquatic invasive species, and support natural processes for a healthy and balanced landscape. Maintaining and enhancing the natural features of the park for wildlife habitat and migration corridors will be considered as improvements and development occur.

Sustainability: Fish Creek SP will grow a sustainable stream of revenue resources that economically benefit the park, while also enhances the local community economic opportunities through tourism. The Park will support viable public/private partnerships, concessions, and other methods to provide services to visitors while also encouraging private investment and state and local cooperation. The Park will 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.

4. Park Background and Context

The larger area that includes Fish Creek SP was previously managed for commercial timber production. Large scale fire events have also shaped the landscape over the past century, including most recently in 2003 and 2005. The area is part of the northern Bitterroot Mountains, and is adjacent to the Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area managed by Montana FWP, DNRC state trust lands, and Lolo National Forest. Much of the area south and west of the Park is managed by the USFS for its roadless and potential wilderness values, including the Great Burn Proposed Wilderness managed by the U.S. Forest Service, the location of the 1910 Great Burn fire that burned three million acres in western Montana, northern Idaho, and northeastern Washington.

Photo 2. Burned timber on Rainey Creek in Lolo National Forest, Montana following 1910 fires. Source: The Forest History Society.

The Park is also bordered by natural features including the Clark Fork River to the north, and includes a number of important drainages and creeks, including Fish Creek and its tributaries. Fish Creek SP is managed out of the FWP regional office in Missoula. The following discussion provides an overview of current conditions and use of the Park.

4.1 State Park Acquisition

Fish Creek SP was acquired in 2010 from The Nature Conservancy in conjunction with the larger Fish Creek acquisition that included the Fish Creek WMA. Previously in 2008, The Nature Conservancy and the Trust for Public Land purchased 310,000 acres from Plum Creek Timber as part of the Montana Legacy Project in which Plum Creek divested much of its timberland for conservation, public use and access. The conservation groups then arranged to sell most of the property to state or federal land managers. FWP acquired 41,000 acres of the Fish Creek drainage with the goal of establishing a wildlife management area to protect important fish and wildlife

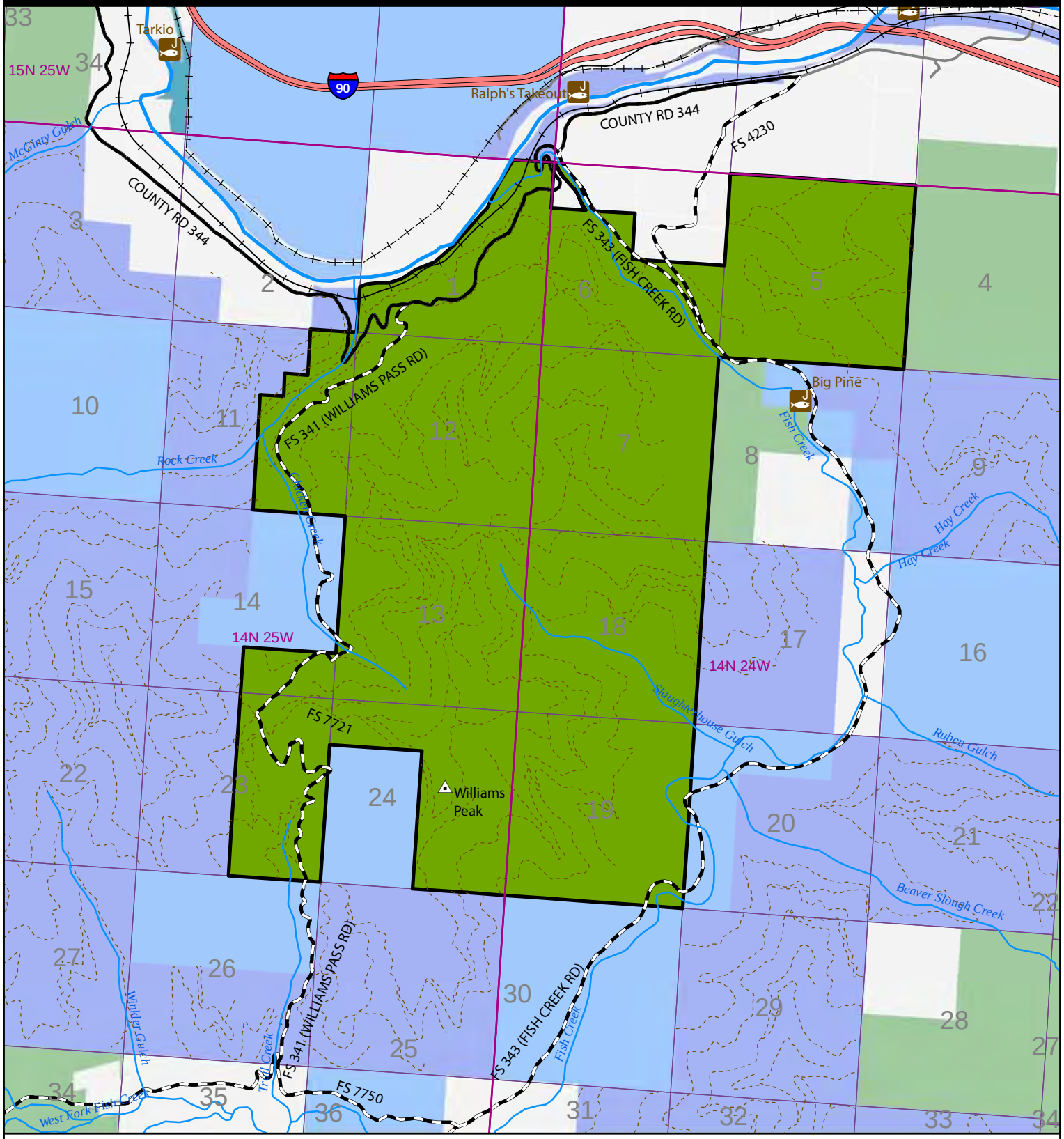
habitat, and a state park to provide a unique opportunity for public access and diverse recreation in the lower Fish Creek drainage and around Williams Peak.

A total of 5,603 acres are designated as Fish Creek SP, which is located in Mineral County. The park was acquired with Access Montana funding, a program that was established in 2007 for land acquisitions for state parks and fishing access sites. The WMA was acquired with Habitat Montana funding (including Pittman-Robertson Program funding), a program established to protect and enhance wildlife habitat across the state using hunting license revenue. This distinction is important as it differentiates the purpose of the State Park from the WMA. The primary purpose of the acquisition and establishment of the state park is to perpetuate and enhance recreation opportunities to the Fish Creek area, and help minimize impacts to riparian and other sensitive sites in the WMA by encouraging activities and development on state park land, which relates back to the environmental assessment.

The land was previously held in private holdings, and designating the land as a State Park provides a unique opportunity to manage the land for public use and the enjoyment of Montana residents and visitors. As a result of transferring private land to public land, FWP is required to make payments to counties equivalent to real property taxes on all of the land it owns, except for bird farms, hatcheries and state parks acquired before 2009. In 2012/Fiscal Year 2013, FWP paid $58,103.28 in taxes to Mineral County.

Lands surrounding the park are owned and managed by FWP, DNRC, USFS, and private individuals. **See Map 2 for park boundary and adjacent land ownership.**

MAP 2. Fish Creek State Park & Adjacent Land Ownership



Fish Creek State Park

Fish Creek Wildlife Mgmt Area

Montana State Trust Lands (DNRC)

US Forest Service

Private Landowner

County Road

Public Road

Logging Road

Montana Rail Link

Old Milwaukee Railroad

Fishing Access Sites

0 0.5 Miles

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4.2 Operations and Management

4.2.1 Current Park Operations Overview

Fish Creek SP is open all year long to the public, with no established park use seasons or park hours. At current staffing levels, the majority of field operations occur during the peak use season of Memorial Day through Labor Day. Field presence is currently very limited during the fall, winter and spring seasons.

The Park includes 5,603 acres of undeveloped land, much of which is accessible through designated USFS roads and a network of approximately 70 miles of remnant timber harvest roads. Limited staffing and the absence of a base of operations represent a challenge to regional staff for current operations and management.

Key operational priorities for current park management at Fish Creek SP include collecting visitation and visitor use activity data for future park management and facility development considerations as well as addressing public safety and resource protection. Facility management and maintenance are not yet a priority, given the absence of facility developments at this park.

4.2.2 Staff and Volunteer Resources

Well-trained, equipped and dedicated staff is the key to quality park operations. Current staff dedicated to Fish Creek SP includes two partial positions: a Park Manager (full-time employee) and a Park Ranger (seasonal employee). These two positions handle the day-to-day operations of the park including public safety and resource protection and share their time and responsibilities with other assigned state parks.

Current staff also includes two partial positions that are shared with the entire Region 2 Parks program, including a Park Maintenance Foreman (full-time) and a Park Maintenance Worker (full-time). Both plan and perform skilled maintenance and repairs including tasks requiring use of heavy equipment (for example road maintenance and repairs), and share their time with all other park sites in the region. In addition, Fish Creek SP receives a limited amount of local game warden time from the Region 2 Enforcement Division for enforcement efforts at the Park.

Currently, there is no volunteer staff working at the park. This is primarily due to the current absence of developed park facilities.

4.2.3 Visitor Use Monitoring

Monitoring public use occurs on a weekly basis throughout the park season. A Park Ranger typically patrols the park on a weekend day to visit with the public and check for hazards/safety, vandalism, evidence of use, status of roads, maintenance/repair needs, and to check the status of the William's Peak Fire Lookout Tower.

4.2.4 Maintenance

The current absence of developed facilities limits current facility maintenance needs. Efforts have been initiated to stabilize the Williams Peak Lookout and to sign or manage the open/closed road system.

Beginning in 2013, a number of minor road maintenance activities started at Fish Creek SP. The road to Williams Peak Fire Lookout was cleared of rock and minor grading was performed. Other on-going road maintenance activities include clearing overhead, leaning and fallen timber and large rocks off road surfaces open to vehicle use.

Park "high use" areas, access points and boundaries along public access roads have been signed for key park regulations and subsequent agency closures/notices (fire restrictions, etc.). Signs are maintained at these sites throughout the spring/summer and fall seasons (a total of 20 sites).

4.2.5 Noxious Weed Management

Management of noxious weeds at Fish Creek SP is an ongoing task, and of considerable scope due to the acreage amount and remote location of the park. Chemical weed control has been performed on a large percentage of the roads within the park over the past four years of FWP management, and on a mileage-rotation basis. Montana State Parks has two years of multiple releases of *Cyphocleonus achates*, the root-mining weevil which feeds on Spotted knapweed. Both of these control methods will be continued into the future. Currently, the Park is working under a weed management plan that was included with the preliminary management plan for the Fish Creek properties.

4.2.6 Commercial Use

Currently, one commercial recreational guiding business has been issued a Commercial Use Permit to conduct business in the park. In addition, a commercial road-use permit is pending for a timber project on DNRC land adjacent to the park. Other commercial use permit applications shall be considered on a case by case basis.

4.2.7 Public Safety and Law Enforcement

Park patrols are conducted on a routine basis during the peak use season. Priorities include identifying and addressing public safety issues and educating park visitors about park rules and regulations. Rule compliance priorities include waste disposal and sanitation, campfires, fire restrictions, off road vehicle use, and enforcing restricted entry to the fire lookout.

4.3 Facilities and Roads

4.3.1 Visitor Facilities

Fish Creek State Park is currently undeveloped and does not have visitor facilities. At the top of Williams Peak is a former fire lookout that stands 60 feet above the peak. A structural assessment was completed in 2010 by Beaudette Consulting Engineers and the lookout was found to be in reasonably good shape, but improvements are necessary to make it structurally sound for public use.

Since 2010, Park staff have performed numerous stabilization projects at the William's Peak Lookout including: clearing/reducing fire fuels around base of tower; jackleg fencing around base of tower with interpretive and safety warning signage; removing trees around tower stabilization wires/anchors; tower use-restriction and safety signing; repairing physical locking apparatus on tower entrance (restricting access); repairing vandalism; preservative coating of

wood tower structure (ongoing); repair/replace tower structural timbers (ongoing). Future stabilization plans include re-roofing and painting of tower cab.

4.3.2 Park Roads

As a legacy of the former logging activity on the park landscape, approximately 70 miles of roads exist within the park boundaries. The roads provide a unique opportunity to develop a trail system using the current road structure as a foundation. Since the roads were originally established for logging purposes, the conditions of the roads vary greatly and are not necessarily appropriate for recreation as is. Stabilization, route planning, trail connections, and other work would be needed to transition roads to a trail system. Roads identified as thru-roads and access roads necessary to support park operations and to assist with land management would be maintained.

Montana State Parks currently maintains the status of the system of "open and closed" roads on park land, per the preliminary management plan adopted by FWP following the Fish Creek lands acquisition. Plum Creek originally designated the current system. For the "closed" road portion, Park staff maintains road closures by locked gates, rock barriers, and "kelly humps," most with associated signing. The Parks Division would continue to evaluate these closures and the road system, which would involve assessing the types of allowable uses.

For the "open" roads portion, staff checks roads for safety status, monitor use and report resource damage. The "open" road system in the park has not been marked or signed; only the "closed" road system is delineated as such. There is much redundancy in the "open" roads system, as roads were developed by Plum Creek to assist with traversing the steep terrain and to support logging. Keeping the current large system of "open" roads is challenging, in regards to weed control obligations, road maintenance and safety, and operational budgets.

A road inventory was conducted during the summer of 2012 with the assistance of an intern from University of Montana to determine the current conditions of roads, and the potential status for improvement and trail development. The following discussion details the results of the road inventory, particularly the road status, grade, and condition.

Road Status: Approximately 35 miles of roads are currently designated as "open," and 35 miles are designated as "closed." The system of "open roads" is generally located in the north end of the park and includes the majority of roads in northeast section #5 (T13N, R24W, sec. 5). The majority of "closed" roads have gates, and others are impassable due to rocks, logs, vegetation growth, or have other barriers making it inaccessible. The Williams Pass Road (FS 341) and Fish Creek Road (FS 343) are designated as open. The road to Williams Peak (FS 7721) is currently closed and gated. Access to the Williams Peak Lookout would be evaluated on this road, including seasonal access and allowable uses. **See Map 3 for road status.**

Road Grade, Terrain, and Width: The current road system was established for logging purposes. As such, a majority of the roads currently have steep grades that are customary of logging roads. About half of the roads have a grade between 0 and 5% and another third of the roads are between 6 and 15%. The remaining roads have grades over 15%. The majority of terrain is mountainous, which allows for steeper grades, and other terrain types include bench

and foothill. Williams Pass Road (FS 341) ranges between 0 and 15% grade, and averages about 14 feet wide. Fish Creek Road (FS 343) is between 0 and 5% grade and is 21 feet wide. FS 7721 to Williams Peak is mountainous and gravel, very steep with grades ranging from 16 to 30%, and an average width of 13 feet. **See Map 4 for road grade.**

Road Condition and Obstacles: The vast majority of park roads (about 80%) are unimproved gravel roads. The rest of the roads are dirt and/or overgrown with vegetation. About 10% of the roads are already in two-track condition. During the inventory, the intern assigned a general three-tier rating based on the grade, terrain, condition, and any obvious obstacles for each road segment (good, fair, poor). Good suggests the road is generally passable and accessible under current conditions, while poor suggests that the road is not suitable for recreational use or would need improvements in order to accommodate recreational travel. Based on the intern's analysis, about half the roads are in fair or good condition, while half are in poor condition. Williams Pass Road (FS 341) has a general rating of fair, while Fish Creek Road (FS 343) is in good condition. FS 7721 is generally fair, with steeper segments closer to the peak rated as poor**. See Map 5 for road condition.**

4.3.3 Public Roads

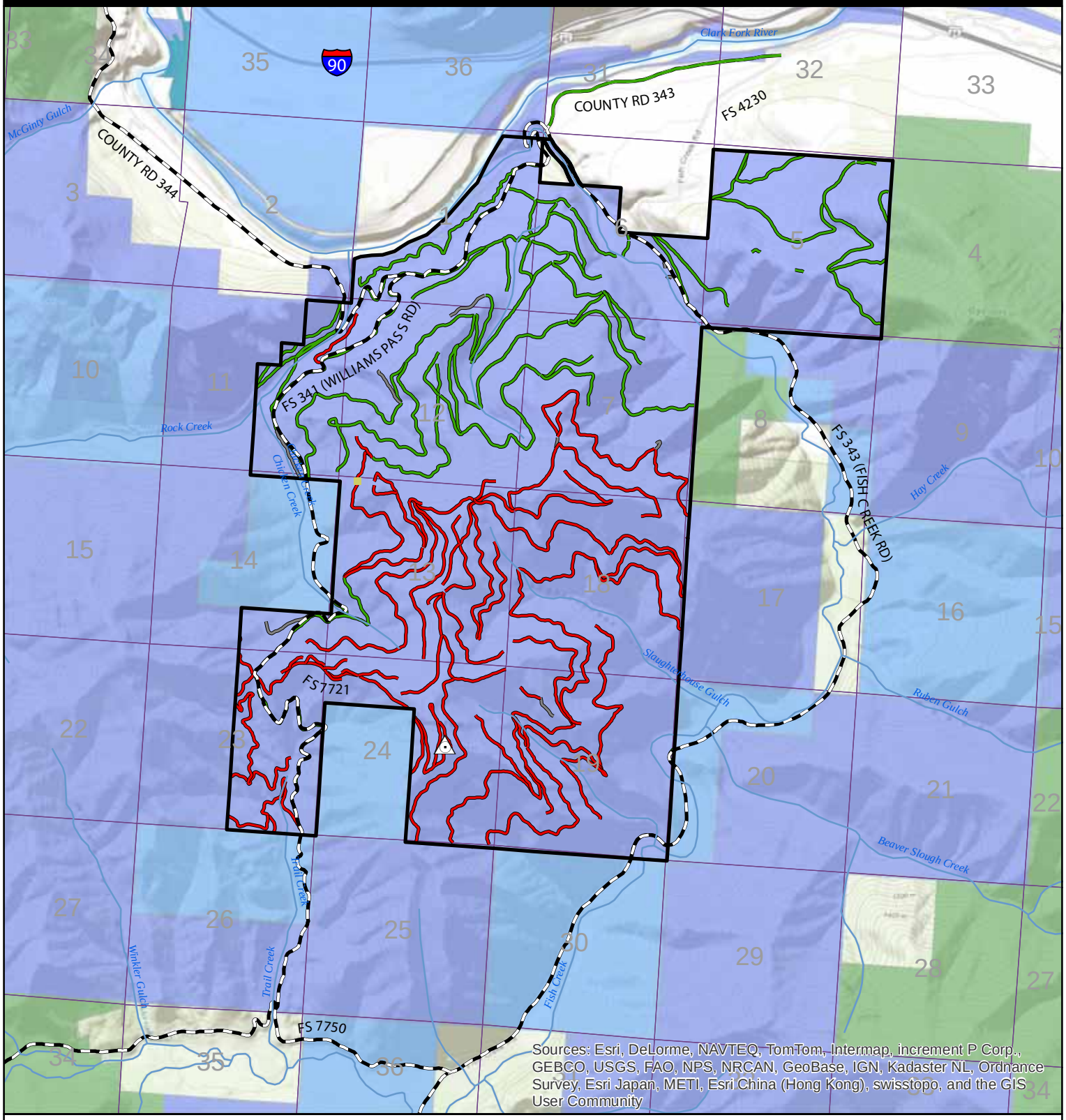
A number of public through-roads surround the park that are used as thoroughfares for local residents, and recreation access to Fish Creek, the Great Burn Proposed Wilderness, Lolo Pass, and other opportunities.

The park is mainly accessed from Interstate 90 at Exit 66 along County Road 343. Fish Creek Road (FS 343) travels south along the eastern boundary of the park, and wraps around to the southwest where it intersects with Williams Pass Road (FS 341). FS 343 is 10.5 miles in length from I-90 to the intersection of FS 341. There are about two miles of road within park boundaries, mostly in the northeastern section of the park.

FS 341 travels south along the western boundary of the park before intersecting with FS 343. FS 341 is 5.9 miles in length, with about four miles of the road within park boundaries. In the northwestern section of the park, Cyr-Iron Mountain Road (FS 344) travels 2.5 miles through the Park before exiting near Rock Creek and continuing west towards the rural community of Quartz.

Certain public roads are managed under agreements between DNRC, USFS, FWP and/or Mineral County.

MAP 3. Road Status



Legend

- Fish Creek State Park
- Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks
- Montana State Trust Lands
- US Forest Service
- Public Road

Current Road Status

- Open Road
- Closed Road
- Not Classified

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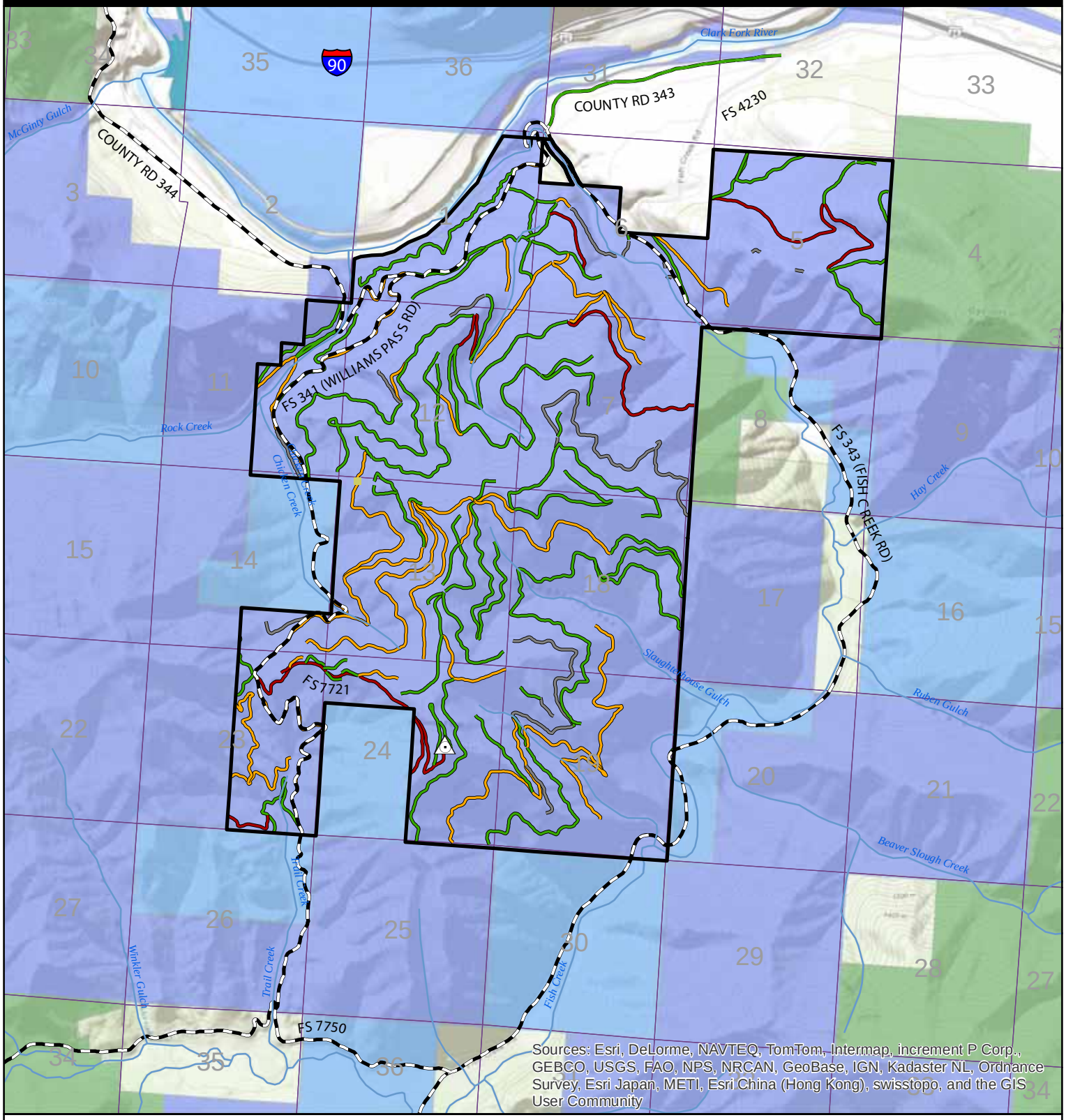
MAP 4. Road Grade



Legend

- Fish Creek State Park
- Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks
- Montana State Trust Lands
- US Forest Service
- Public Road

Road Grade (%)

- 0-5
- 6-15
- 16-30
- Not Classified

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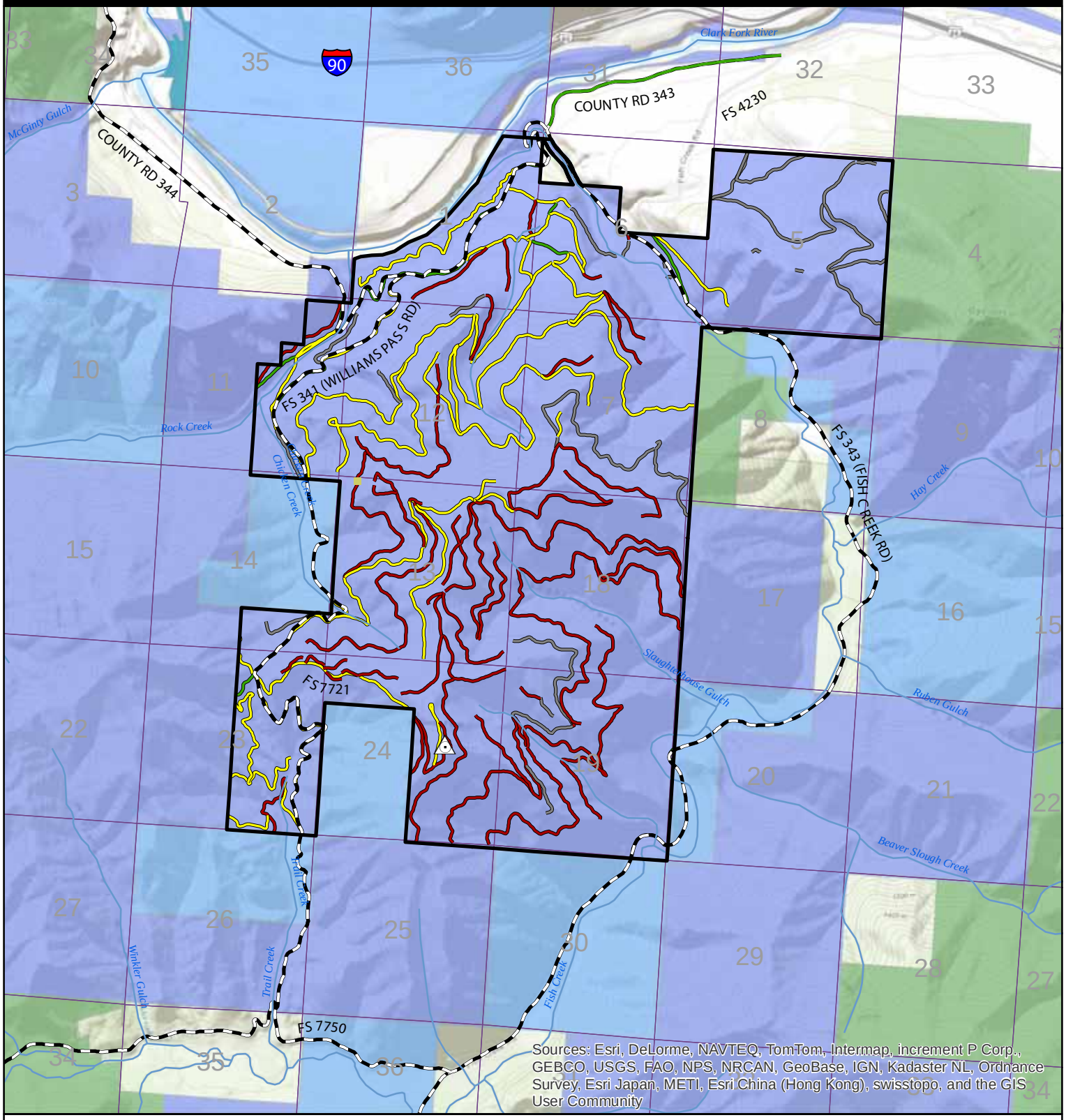
MAP 5. Road Condition



Legend

- Fish Creek State Park
- Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks
- Montana State Trust Lands
- US Forest Service
- Public Road

Road Condition

- Good
- Fair
- Poor
- Not Classified

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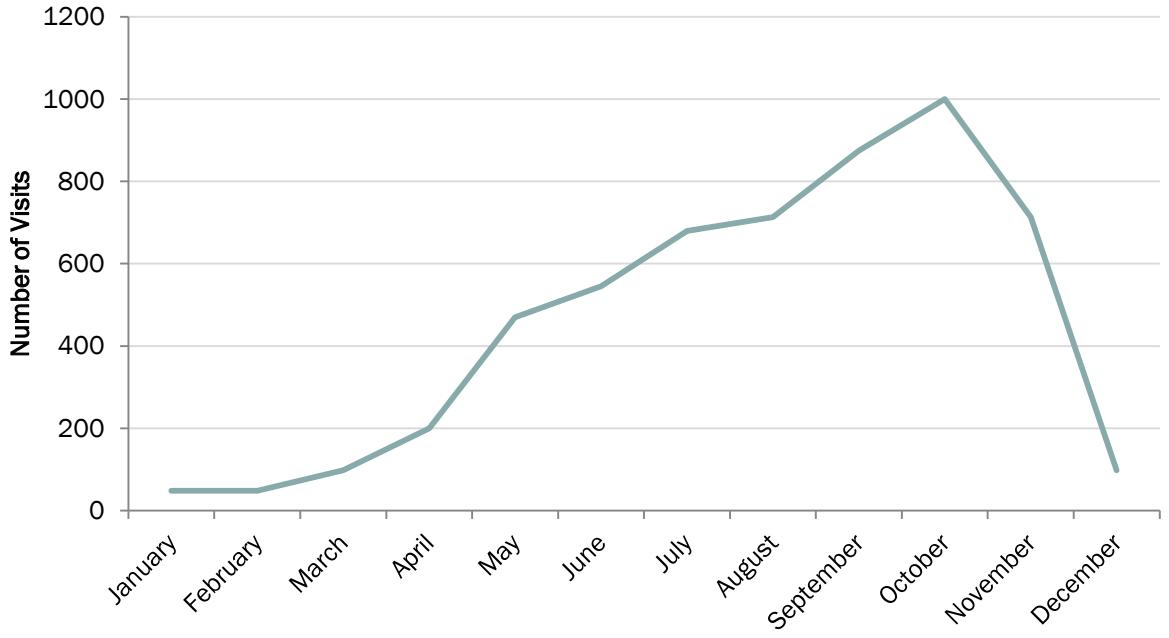
4.4 Visitation and Use

4.4.1 Park Visitation

Montana State Parks started tracking visitation at Fish Creek SP in 2012. Visitation is currently estimated based on historic use levels and staff monitoring. Accurate visitation counts are not available for previous years, although the land has seen steady local use for several decades.

During the summer season in 2013 (May through September), Fish Creek SP had over 3,200 visits, more than half of the total annual visitation (*Figure 2*). Visitation generally begins to increase in April and continues steadily through the summer. Levels peak in September and October, most likely related to the hunting season, before dropping down to less than 100 visitors in the winter months. For the year, the Park had 5,485 visits, of which currently 94% is estimated to be resident use and 99% day use.

Figure 2. Fish Creek State Park Monthly Visitation, 2013.



Source: Montana State Parks.

Without a vehicle counter or sampling metrics to collect visitation, visitation at Fish Creek SP is conjecture, extrapolated from a number of sources including estimated visitor numbers from Big Pine and Forks Fishing Access Sites, Fish Creek angler use estimates (lower Fish Creek), estimates of hunting use numbers and estimates of Forest Service road use on the periphery of the Park. In 2012, FWP ran a hunting check station at Fish Creek and over a five-week period more than 1,500 hunters stopped at the check station.

4.4.2 Park Recreational Activities

While lacking recreational developments on park properties, the Park currently hosts a number of recreational uses on park land such as hiking, OHV and recreational driving, hunting, camping and picnicking (*Table 1*). Fish Creek SP also facilitates a number of recreational uses on adjacent public lands by providing access to fishing, hunting and camping focusing on the high

value resources provided in the lower Fish Creek drainage. The majority of park visitors to Fish Creek SP and the surrounding public lands are engaged in the following activities, according to estimated levels of use: fishing, hunting, motorized road use, non-motorized trail/road use, cross-country skiing and snowshoeing, camping and picnicking, and wildlife viewing and photography.

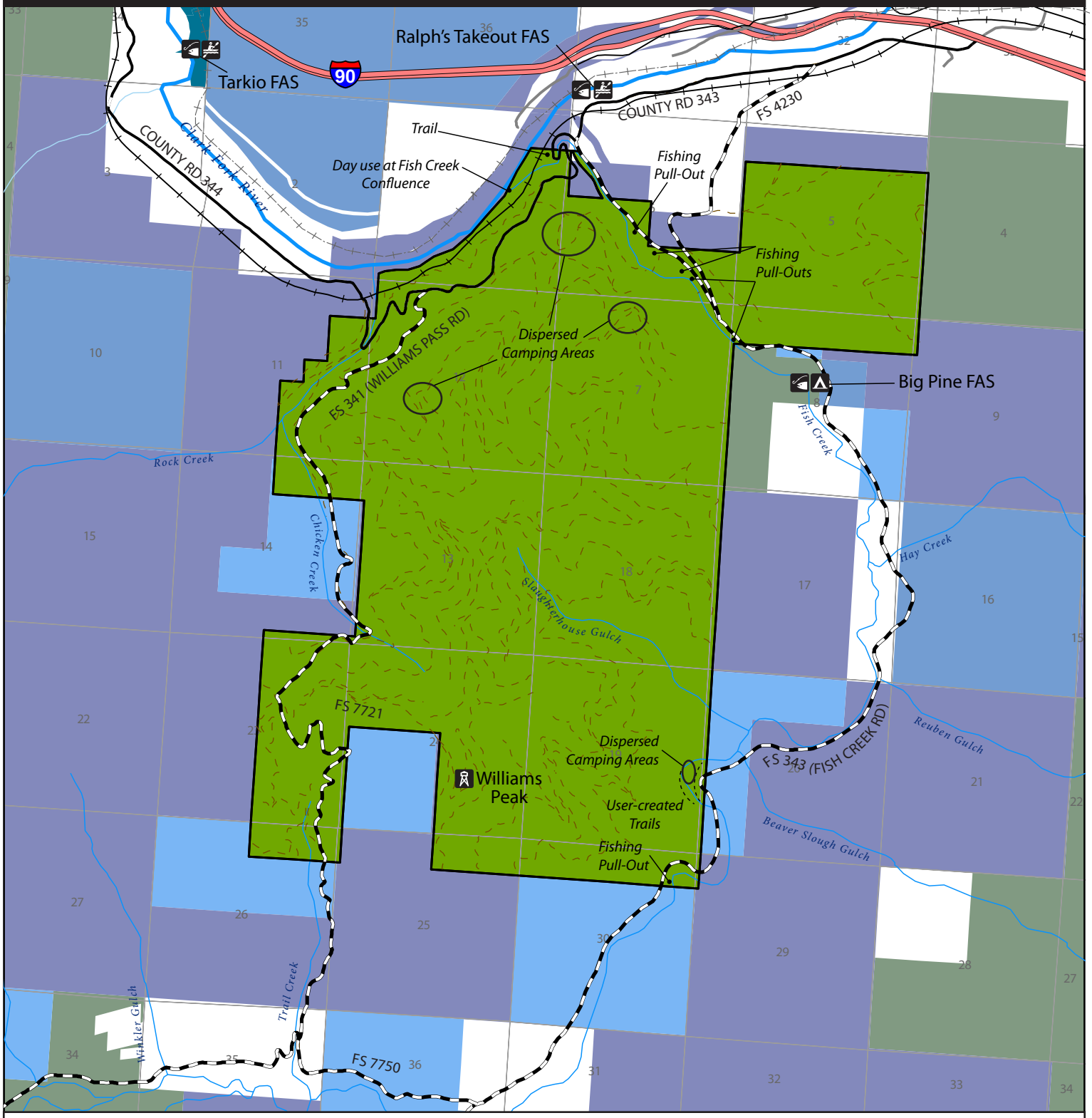
The most common public, consumptive resource uses found within the state park include firewood cutting and wild berry picking, which may also be done in conjunction with the aforementioned recreational uses listed. Commercial uses currently found on Fish Creek include guided tours and trips, and a current application for a park road use for timber harvest adjacent to the park. **See Map 6 for current uses.**

Table 1. Current Recreational Uses

Current Use	Description
Fishing	There are many fishing opportunities in the lower Fish Creek drainage on and adjacent to the park focusing on Fish Creek and the Clark Fork River. For Fish Creek, multiple access points exist along USFS Primary 343, both on state park and other public lands (FAS, DNRC, USFS). For the park, the more prominent, user-created access points (three sites) off NF Road 343 provide parking and in some instances camping areas (two sites) with visitor-created fire rings. There is also access to the lower reaches of Fish Creek on the west side of the creek from the park, by hiking downgrade on a remnant logging road (T13N, R24W, Sec. 6). In addition, there is a parking area and associated user created trail that parallels the extreme lower reaches of Fish Creek to its confluence with the Clark Fork River. For the Clark Fork River, access is primarily through the user created trail to the confluence of Fish Creek.
Hunting	The Fish Creek drainage offers hunting opportunities for many big and small game animals, including the lower drainage in the Park. It is a popular destination for elk and deer hunting in deer/elk districts 202 and 203. There are also upland game bird hunting opportunities within the Park. There is a high density and broad distribution of black bears, mountain lions, and wolves in the Fish Creek area, including in the Park.
Motorized Use	Motorized use at Fish Creek State Park currently includes recreation driving, OHV, and snowmobiling. Many of the roads within the "open" roads system have been used for OHV recreation and in conjunction with peripheral Mineral County and Forest Service roads. There is a minor amount of evidence of off-road use by motorized visitors (probably due to steep off-road topography), and little evidence of visitors going around gates/barriers to access closed roads. The open roads around the park are used for recreational driving as well. Most of this is done on the Mineral County and USFS roads around the exterior of the park or to get to view points within the park by traveling on the open roads system. Although snow conditions are inconsistent and vary widely throughout the park, snowmobiling is evident on the upper elevations and shaded north facing aspects and other areas of the park.
Non-Motorized Use	Non-motorized uses include hiking, mountain biking, equestrian, cross-country skiing, and snow shoeing. Hiking and trail running are currently done on both the open and closed roads within the park. Locals from nearby community of Rivulet have indicated they often hike the road system for exercise and relaxation. Evidence of a small amount mountain biking is present as well as equestrian use. Although snow conditions are inconsistent and vary widely throughout the park, snow shoeing and cross-country skiing are currently practiced on the upper elevations and shaded north facing aspects and other areas of the park.

Camping	Currently, there are no developed camping facilities or designated camp areas in Fish Creek State Park. The only designated/developed camping near the park is at Big Pine FAS, which is managed by FWP, with a total of five campsites. Farther south there is also Forks FAS with another five campsites available. There are also several DNRC user-created campsites along Fish Creek just outside the park boundary. Within the park there are several user created camp sites, mostly along Fish Creek as detailed in the Fishing section above. There is also evidence of some ad-hoc campsites found in the uplands of the park along various roads. These have been either dispersed by park staff if they were only a rock fire ring, or marked on the GPS if they were more extensive.
Picnicking	There are no designated picnic areas currently within the park, but there are opportunities for picnicking at undeveloped spots along the "open" roads system, and along Fish and Rock Creeks. There is a designated picnic area just outside the park at Big Pine FAS.
Wildlife Viewing and Photography	As previously mentioned the park boundaries are home to an array of wildlife. Hikers, drivers and other users have the opportunity to view all these species any time of year. The park offers great opportunities for photography of both scenery and wildlife. Fish Creek, Rock Creek and Trail Creek all offer outstanding photography opportunities
Firewood Cutting and Gathering	The park has historically been used for firewood cutting. This occurs mostly along the open roads where access is easy.
Berry Picking	The park has many plant species that users may consume. Huckleberries, thimbleberries and strawberries are the main species observed during the inventory. Users pick both for personal consumption as well as commercial use.
Commercial Uses	The park currently has one commercial business providing day-use and overnight Guided Tours/Trips authorized under a Commercial Use Permit.

MAP 6. Current Recreational Uses



Fish Creek State Park
Fish Creek Wildlife Mgmt Area
Montana State Trust Lands (DNRC)
Lolo National Forest

Public Road
Logging Road
Montana Rail Link
Abandoned Railroad ROW

Campground
Fishing Access Site
Lookout
Whitewater Rafting

Note: This map is not an official designation of recreation sites. Many of these uses are informal and user-created. Some areas receive minor use, and others receive heavier use related to seasonal activities. Very few facilities exist to support current uses. Evaluation of current activities and locations will occur as the park is developed.

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0 0.5 Miles

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4.5 Wildlife, Fisheries and Aquatic Resources

4.5.1 Wildlife Resources

The landscapes within Fish Creek State Park and the surrounding area have incredibly high wildlife resource values. The Park supports a high diversity of habitats spanning a wide range of elevations. Important wildlife resource values include:

- Critical winter range and other seasonal habitats for big game;
- Linkage zone for bears and forest carnivores;
- Important habitat for Montana Species of Concern (SOC)[10] and other sensitive species;
- High species diversity; and
- Exceptional hunting and wildlife viewing opportunities.

Based upon habitat characteristics and wildlife surveys conducted in the Park, an estimated 167 vertebrate wildlife species (47 mammals, 113 birds, 3 amphibians, and 4 reptiles) are known or suspected to occur in the Park. Of those, 24 terrestrial vertebrate Species of Concern (SOC) and 5 potential SOC (PSOC) have been verified or are potentially found within the Park. In addition, several plant and invertebrate SOC and PSOC are found in the Fish Creek area.

The Fish Creek drainage is a very high-priority forest carnivore linkage zone for species such as grizzly bear[11], Canada lynx[12], and wolverine[13], with a portion of the linkage zone located in the Fish Creek State Park[14,15]. As one of the highest wildlife priorities for protection in the Fish Creek drainage, the most intact portion of the linkage zone is included within Fish Creek WMA, but the most critical component is on the Park at the confluence of Rock Creek and the Clark Fork River. This portion of Fish Creek SP is the gateway for wildlife accessing the most intact portion of the linkage area, from the South Fork of Nemote and Martel Mountain on the north side of I-90, crossing the highway and the Clark Fork River just east of Tarkio over to Rock Creek and Rivulet on the south side of the river. This linkage zone provides broad-scale landscape connectivity for forest carnivores from the Mission and Rattlesnake Wilderness areas, through the Ninemile Divide to the Selway-Bitterroot Mountains and Wilderness.

Fish Creek SP also provides significant winter range and other seasonal habitats for elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer and moose, and supports diverse populations of large carnivores, furbearers and upland game birds, including black bear, mountain lion, wolf, mountain grouse and wild turkey. The intact, productive riparian corridors of Fish Creek and its tributaries have exceptional habitat for white-tailed deer and moose, while the drier upland slopes provide forage and browse for mule deer and elk. Riparian and wetland habitats along Fish Creek, the

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[10] A native animal breeding in Montana that is considered to be "at risk" due to declining population trends, threats to its habitats, and/or restricted distribution. The purpose of Montana's SOC listing is to highlight species in decline and encourage conservation efforts to reverse population declines and prevent the need for future listing as Threatened or Endangered Species under the Federal Endangered Species Act. Further information: http://fwp.mt.gov/fishAndWildlife/species/speciesOfConcern/.

[11] Classified as Threatened under the Federal Endangered Species Act (ESA). A "threatened species" is one that is likely to become endangered in the foreseeable future throughout all or a significant portion of its range.

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] Federally Proposed for Threatened classification under ESA.

[14] Servheen et al. 2003

[15] American Wildlands 2009

Clark Fork River, Rock Creek, Chicken Creek and other small drainages in the Park also support a rich diversity and density of birds, small mammals and reptiles, including breeding sites and travel corridors. A small pond along Fish Creek Road provides an important aquatic habitat that is fairly rare in Fish Creek. This site is used for foraging by a variety of birds and bats, and is a potential breeding site for Columbia spotted frogs.

The Park also supports several areas of burned forest that were not salvage-logged. Burned forest provides very important habitat for a variety of wildlife species, when the dead trees are left standing. There are active bald eagle, osprey and peregrine falcon territories on the Clark Fork River in or adjacent to the Park. Rocky outcrops provide nesting and roosting habitat for birds of prey and several species of bats, reptiles, songbirds, and mammals. Talus slopes also provide roosting habitat for reptiles and several species of bats.

Fall hunting seasons start in September, and the Fish Creek area is popular with upland game bird hunting, archery deer/elk, and archery (followed by rifle) wolf and black bear hunting. Actions such as designating management units, implementing distance buffers and seasonal restrictions, and thoughtful facility placement and resource management would help protect these important wildlife resource values for current and future park visitors to enjoy for years to come.

4.5.2 Fisheries Resources

Fish Creek is the largest tributary basin within the middle Clark Fork River drainage. It is a wild and productive watershed with unusually high fisheries and aquatic value. Fish Creek supports some of the best remaining native fish populations in the area, provides a major source of salmonid recruitment for the Clark Fork River, and offers an excellent trout fishery throughout most of its reaches. Most tributaries within the watershed offer high quality spawning and rearing habitat for trout.

Photo 3. Fish Creek near the confluence with Clark Fork River.

Intact tributary habitat, excellent water quality, consistent instream flows and good connectivity among stream and river reaches have made Fish Creek a stronghold for migratory (fluvial) bull trout (Threatened) and westslope cutthroat trout (SOC) in western Montana. Fish Creek currently supports more fluvial bull trout redds than all other middle Clark Fork tributaries combined, and the drainage contains numerous (>20) westslope cutthroat trout populations, many of which are genetically non-introgressed, or does not have human interference. Other fish species present include mountain whitefish and sculpins (*Cottus* spp.), as well as introduced brook trout, brown trout and rainbow trout.

Fish Creek State Park is located along the lower main stem of Fish Creek and encompasses approximately two miles of stream corridor and the stream mouth. This lower main-stem reach provides public access for anglers and makes up the migratory corridor that connects the upper watershed with the Clark Fork River. Lower reaches (including the mouth) also offer an invaluable thermal refuge for Clark Fork River fish during the summer, as water temperatures are typically 8-12 degrees Fahrenheit cooler in Fish Creek.

The main stem and primary forks also provide a destination trout fishery that now supports >4,000 days of angler pressure annually (FWP Statewide Angler Surveys, 2011-2012). Angling is currently one of the dominant recreational uses associated with the Park and surrounding area during the summer months (mid-May through September). Angler pressure is focused in a relatively small area of the main stem from the "forks" confluence downstream approximately six miles to the mouth. This reach includes the approximate two miles of stream corridor that lie within the Park, as well as portions just upstream that lie directly adjacent to the Park and WMA. Since acquisition of the Fish Creek SP and WMA in 2010, angling pressure has more than doubled. Rapid increases in angler use and high conservation values have prompted more restrictive fishing regulations (e.g., artificial lures only, and catch-and-release only for most trout) in recent years to help protect native trout populations and the quality of the fishery.

Aquatic Restoration in Fish Creek

Because of its high aquatic value and native fish populations, the Fish Creek drainage has been a focus area for fisheries enhancement and watershed restoration for the past decade. Public agencies and private conservation groups have partnered to improve connectivity among stream and river reaches, and restore riparian areas, and most recently, to mitigate impacts of intensive forest-road construction and timber management. Cumulatively, these efforts have significantly improved the probability of long-term sustainability for fish and other aquatic populations.

Ensuring aquatic connectivity between stream and river reaches has been a priority in the Fish Creek drainage. The upper watershed contains >50 miles of roadless and intact stream habitat that provides outstanding spawning and rearing environments for trout and other species. In many instances, movement among these habitats was limited by undersized or poorly installed road crossings. In 1999-2003, FWP and Lolo National Forest personnel catalogued and prioritized locations that were limiting fish migration and movement. Many of these problems were located on parcels in the State Park and WMA acquisitions, but nearly all have been corrected over the past five years.

The Lolo National Forest and other land managers have also been working to enhance overall watershed health by improving forest road conditions. Many miles of non-essential forest roads have been stored and reclaimed in the past decade. This work includes removal of undersized culverts and crossings that represent sources of sediment and long-term failure risk. Recent fires in Fish Creek have expedited much of this watershed restoration work, including major projects in Deer Creek, Bear Creek, and other tributaries adjacent to the Park.

The most recent major restoration effort in Fish Creek was initiated and led by The Nature Conservancy (TNC) when it purchased the remaining parcels owned by Plum Creek Timber

Company. In 2008 and 2009, TNC and Trout Unlimited collaboratively worked to improve watershed conditions on TNC lands (now managed by FWP). This work included correction of several of the priority fish passage barriers previously identified, storage of >20 miles of closed forest roads (including removal of numerous culverts), large-scale weed spraying and replanting of native vegetation. This work continued at a much larger scale within the project area in 2010 (led by Trout Unlimited), with a focus on fire rehabilitation and restoration of key tributary watersheds such as Surveyor Creek, Thompson Creek, Deer Creek and Bear Creek.

4.6 Forest Resources and Management

The lands comprising Fish Creek SP have a long history of commercial timber management conducted by a series of industrial forest products corporations, Anaconda Forest Products, Champion International and last, Plum Creek. While their focus was on intensive yet sustainable timber production, this draft management plan is focused on recreation, general forest and wildlife health in concert with potential for appropriate timber management.

4.6.1 Vegetative Cover

Plant community distribution at Fish Creek SP is dependent on elevation, aspect, moisture regimes, and fire history. Elevation throughout the park varies from approximately 3,150 feet along the main stem of Fish Creek to approximately 5,400 feet at Williams Peak. The vegetation patterns and habitat types within the park were shaped by large-scale fire events in 1910, 1917, 2003 and 2005, as well as subsequent, intensive logging. A large portion of the southeastern section of the Park burned in the 2003 and 2005 fires. In these locations, re-vegetation of timber has been limited, but shrubs, forbs, and grasses are re-establishing the landscape. In areas outside of the 2003 and 2005 fires, commercial logging left a mosaic pattern of timber regeneration that is visible today. There are examples of what appeared to be un-stocked clearcuts, and small diameter shelterwoods. Natural regeneration ranges from non-existent to excessive using Ponderosa Pine, Douglas Fir or Western Larch, depending on site aspect and elevation.

Photo 4. View of clearcuts from Williams Peak Lookout.

Due to the multitude of slope aspects and elevation, the Park spans the Daubenmire timber type/elevation model. The majority of the park land is dominated by Douglas fir, ponderosa pine, western larch, and mixed conifer forest types. Lowland grassland and shrubs are found as well, including bluebunch wheatgrass, ninebark, and snowberry. Within the drainages,

western red cedar habitat types occupy warm and moist sites that have not been exposed and compromised by extensive timber harvest.

The presence of invasive weed species pervades along both active and abandoned roadways, and other sites of high use. Exotic weed species include spotted knapweed, St. Johnswort, sulphur cinquefoil, and cheatgrass. Since acquiring the Park, Montana State Parks has been actively implementing large-scale weed spraying to reduce and control the spread of invasive and exotic plants, continuing what was started by TNC in 2008.

4.6.2 Timber Harvest/Management & Thinning Options

Field investigations conducted by a private contractor in 2013 indicated no obvious timber stands requiring harvest at this time and no significant forest health issues[16]. There are likely small "patches" of commercial timber that could be accessed and harvested, but with no apparent pressing necessity at this time.

It is anticipated that future forest seedling thinning could be significant, but site specific areas have yet to be determined. The east and southeast aspects in the Slaughterhouse Gulch drainage appear not to have successfully regenerated. These areas then could be candidates for some spot planting efforts. The concept of "isolated planting patches" could result in a decade or so of adequate cover for which improved wildlife habitat could be anticipated.

Forestry typically uses the term "Basal Area" in measuring or targeting stocking density. It is a measure of square footage of trees, as measured at breast height (dbh) per acre *on flat ground*. Simply put, there are only so many trees capable of growing per acre due to competition for available sunlight and water. Maintaining a moderate Basal Area would likely best for this park to balance recreation, forest health and hazard fuels. Pre-commercial thinning will constitute a persistent management cost over time until commercial utilization size is reached. From a wildland fire management perspective, Montana State parks would strive to avoid "closed canopy" timber stands, as they add substantially to the risk of a ground wildfire jumping into the crowns and then "blowing up."

A specific forest management plan for the Park is necessary to address desired timber stocking from a recreational and forest health perspective and to recognize that over the next several decades the Park will be required to deal with a rapidly growing replacement stand with a need for stand density management, by both pre-commercial and ultimately, commercial thinning of stands.

[16] Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. 2013. Forest and Vegetative Review of Fish Creek State Park. Developed on behalf of the Parks Division by Timberland Forestry Services, LLC. Hamilton, Montana.

4.6.3 Williams Peak Lookout Considerations

Williams Peak Lookout provides an outstanding opportunity for a future public lookout rental facility, pending structural renovations to make the facility safe for public use. In preparation for public use, Montana State parks recommends heavy thinning or actual removal of the maturing trees to the Lookout's western face below the access road for up to a chain (66 ft). The timber is certainly impacting the immediate "viewshed" downslope and also poses a radiant fire risk to the tower structure that could be substantially be mitigated by this action.

Another unique forest resource in close proximity to the Park is the Big Pine, the largest Ponderosa pine tree standing in Montana at over 350 years old and 200 feet tall. It is currently managed within the Big Pine FAS site.

Photo 5. Base of Williams Peak Lookout.

4.7 Cultural Resources

During acquisition of Fish Creek State Park, the Montana State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) completed a cultural resource file search for the Fish Creek parcels and reported that there are a few previously recorded sites within the area. Most of the sites area associated with the historic Mullan Road, Milwaukee Railroad, and stage services along the Clark Fork River corridor. The Williams Peak fire lookout was originally established in 1934 and subsequently replaced with the existing tower in 1977. It is no longer in use, and has not been designated as historic.

Future projects involving the development of facilities in which there are ground disturbing activities will be subject to Montana State Antiquities laws and SHPO consultation.

5. Regional Recreation Opportunities

Fish Creek State Park is located within the larger recreation context of Mineral County and is within close proximity to Missoula County and the population base of Missoula. The Park is also a less than three hour drive from Kalispell, Coeur d'Alene, Idaho and Spokane, Washington. The Park is surrounded by the Fish Creek WMA, DNRC state trust lands, and the Lolo National Forest. Also adjacent to the Park is the Alberton Gorge of the Clark Fork River, a whitewater destination managed by FWP.

Current regional recreation opportunities in the area, while vast, are mainly low density, dispersed recreation with minimal facility development. The current user base to the Fish Creek drainage is primarily local residents in Mineral County and residents from the Missoula area. Historical uses of the area mainly include hunting, fishing, firewood gathering, berry picking, horseback riding, OHV and snowmobiling on open roads, and rafting.

Fish Creek State Park's main attractions that could enhance regional recreation opportunities are the convenient location along I-90 and close proximity to the greater Missoula metro area citizens, the potential to provide for developed camping as well as a trail system, and the rustic setting and scenic vistas that connect to larger landscapes like the Fish Creek WMA and the Great Burn Proposed Wilderness. The Park has an extensive road system already established from former logging activities that could serve the basis for a high-quality trail system for non-motorized and motorized recreation.

Photo 6. View west of Bitterroot Mountains from Williams Peak Lookout.

While there are a variety of rustic and backcountry camping on nearby public lands, the area does not have a developed campground with electrical hook-ups that could accommodate RVs as well as camper units and tents. The Park's easy access to I-90 offers a good location to develop a modern campground in the northern portion of the Park. In addition to a developed campground, Fish Creek State Park includes the Williams Peak Lookout that has tremendous 360-degree views, and could be upgraded as an overnight rental facility—a unique and currently unmet amenity within the State Parks system as well as a highly desirable opportunity given the popularity of Forest Service lookouts. Additional overnight opportunities in the Park could also include rustic campsites, backcountry sites with hike-in and bike-in access, and development of huts, yurts, or cabins.

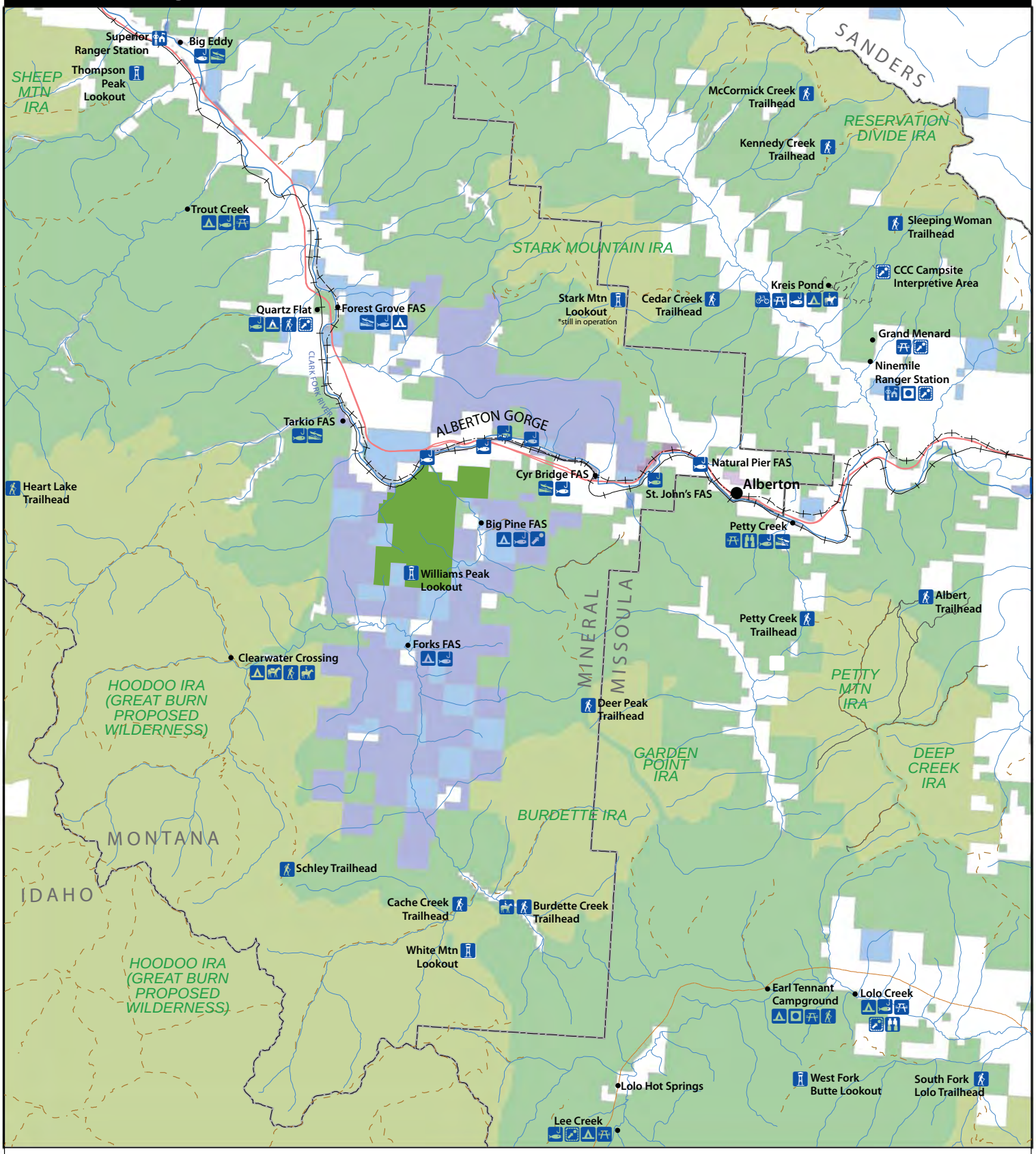
During public scoping, mountain biking and motorized recreation user groups voiced their interest in a trails experience at Fish Creek State Park. These groups expressed a strong desire to see more trails built in the region specifically for mountain biking and OHV use, allowing recreationists the opportunity to get off of public roads and onto trails. Public scoping comments indicate that while there is a high percentage of public land within the region, there is currently not equal opportunity for these types of trail uses.

Additional feedback from the Mineral County Commissioners and Glacier Country Tourism further indicate that diverse uses for Fish Creek State Park are desired. Although motorized recreation is a historic activity in Mineral County, there aren't many trails specifically designed for this use. The Mineral County Commissioners strongly support multiple use opportunities on public lands, and would like to see motorized recreation provided at Fish Creek State Park to preserve this use while also provide access for elder populations and mobility-limited recreationists. Likewise, mountain biking trails for adventure cycling is a growth market according to Glacier Country Tourism, and a trail system with varying levels of challenge could elevate this area to a regional destination and expand opportunities beyond hunting and fishing.

Fish Creek State Park has the potential to become a regional destination and attract a larger user base by diversifying recreation opportunities with developed camping and a multi-user trail system—amenities that could be enhanced in the region while preserving historic access and user activities. The Park can also provide a central base to access opportunities on nearby public lands for hunting, fishing, horseback riding, and whitewater rafting.

This section analyzes regional recreation opportunities within Mineral County, Missoula County and on the Lolo National Forest, and includes discussions on how Fish Creek State Park could enhance recreation that is currently occurring in the region with new opportunities for facility and trail development. **See Map 7 for regional recreation opportunities.**

MAP 7. Regional Recreation Opportunities



Fish Creek State Park
MT Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Lolo National Forest
Inventoried Roadless Area
MT State Trust Lands (DNRC)
County Boundary

Boat Ramp
Campground
Equestrian Campground
Fishing Access
Horsepacking Trailhead
Interpretive Site

Lookout Tower
Picnic Area
Point of Interest
Ranger Station
Trailhead

Non-motorized Trail
Montana Rail Link
Abandoned Railroad ROW

0 1.5 3 Miles

This map is for informational purposes only and is a graphical representation of data. Users of this information should review or consult the primary data and information sources to ascertain the usability of the information. Produced by Montana State Parks for the Fish Creek State Park Draft Mgmt Plan.

5.1 Montana Recreation Participation and Trends

According to the Montana Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) for 2014-2018[17], about 77% of Montana households used walking/jogging/bicycling paths in 2011, the most of any facility/recreation area. Rounding out the top five most used facilities/resource areas are hiking trails (72%), picnic areas (62%), heritage/historic areas (60%), and campgrounds without hook-ups (59%). Other facilities and recreation areas that received use by more than 50% of households include motorized boating areas, natural or wild areas, scenic byways, and wildlife viewing areas. About 29% of households used bike lanes, 28% used off-road ATV trails, and 22% used mountain biking trails. Specialty facilities like horseshoe pits, tennis courts, splash decks, archery ranges, volleyball courts, and BMX parks were used by 10% or less of Montana households.

The Montana SCORP also details the top primary outdoor recreation activity and most frequent activity for Montanans in 2011. The top primary activity was walking (24.5%), followed by backpacking/hiking, fishing, hunting, and gardening/yard work. When respondents were asked about the most frequent activity on a weekly basis, walking was done on average 4 times per week, jogging/running at 3.2 times per week, and gardening/yard work at 3.1 times per week. Although backpacking/hiking, fishing, and hunting are primary activities for outdoor recreation, they are not necessarily done the most frequently, but rather on average about once per week.

The top statewide need reported by all respondents in the Public Recreation Use Survey done in conjunction with the SCORP is bike lanes, followed by rifle/handgun ranges, off-road ATV trails, and sledding/tubing areas. Bike lanes in particular had the highest response, whereby more respondents rated a need to increase for bike lanes over an adequate need of bike lanes.

In Glacier Country Region, which includes Mineral County, bicycle facilities were identified as the top need among respondents, and OHV trails were in the top three for the region. Approximately 59% of SCORP survey respondents who ride OHVs indicated that the number of OHV trails in the region need to increase, while 29% of mountain bikers felt that the number of mountain biking trails need to increase. About 38% of respondents indicated walking/jogging/biking paths need to increase. These results indicate that people in Montana (and Western Montana specifically) actively use trails, and feel that the availability of trails for hiking, jogging, biking, and OHV use needs to increase.

In the Facility and Natural Resource Recreation Area Needs Survey also completed for SCORP, land managers were also asked about the quantity and quality of various outdoor recreation facilities and natural areas. The top facility that managers indicated should be increased is walking/jogging/biking paths (51.4%). Of the top six facilities that had over 30% response rate for a need to increase, four facilities addressed trail needs, both on-road facilities and off-road trails for hiking, bicycling, and mountain biking. Approximately 31% of recreation managers surveyed indicated that mountain biking trails should be increased, while 22% indicated that they don't have mountain biking trails but would like to on their lands. Of the mountain biking

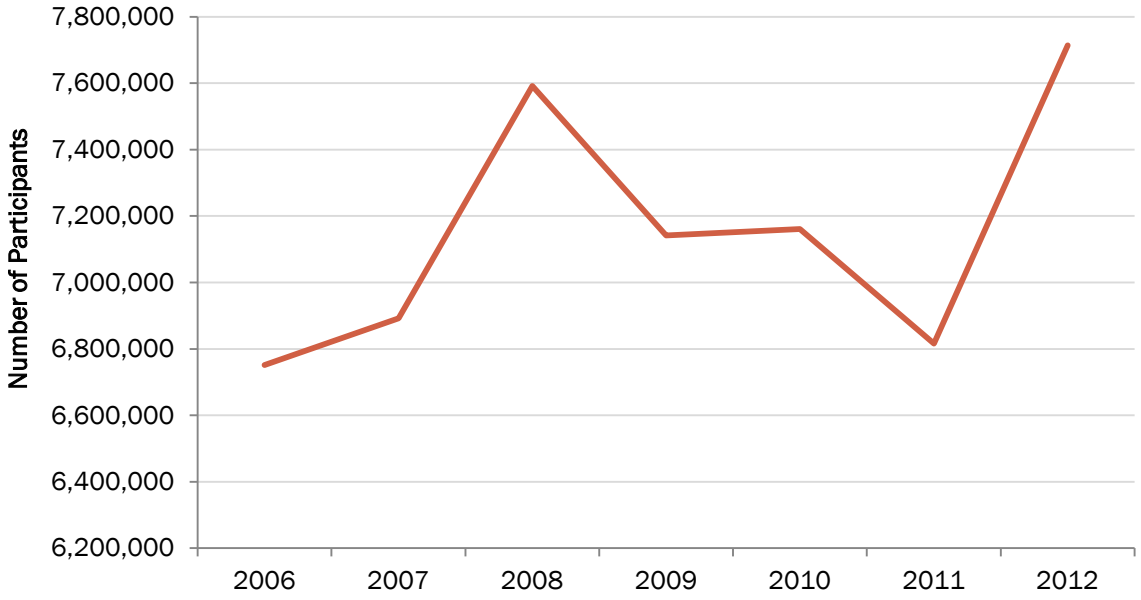
[17] Montana State Parks. 2013. Creating a Vibrant Future for Montana's Outdoor Recreation Heritage: 2014-2018 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan. http://stateparks.mt.gov/about-us/scorp.html.

trails currently on public lands, 43% of managers indicated they are in poor to fair condition, while another 43% indicated they are in good condition.

About 14% of managers surveyed in the SCORP indicated that OHV trails should be increased, while another 11% indicated that they did not have trails but would like to; 42% of managers indicated that the available OHV trails are in fair condition. About 51% of managers indicated that walking, jogging, and biking paths in general should be increased, while 37% indicated that hiking trails should be increased. Hiking and biking trails are identified as one of the top facility needs for the next five years among recreation managers. This demonstrates that there is an increasing demand among users for these facilities and an acknowledgment from managers that there are currently not enough paths and trails to meet these demands.

Bicycling is also identified by The Outdoor Industry Foundation as a growing activity in the U.S., particularly among youth and young adults (*Figure 3*). In 2012, 22.3% of Americans ages 24 and younger participated in biking in 2012[18]. About 12% of adults participated in biking in the same year. Close to 8 million Americans in total participated in mountain biking in 2012, up 13% from 2011 and up 14% from 2006. Mountain biking reached a high in 2008, before declining in participation through 2011. In 2012, participation jumped to a new high. Mountain biking participation numbers are not tracked at the state level for Montana specifically. According to the National Visitor Use Monitoring for the Lolo National Forest though, less than 1% of visitors participated in bicycling in 2011.

Figure 3. Participation in Mountain Biking (Non-Paved), 2006 to 2012



Source: Outdoor Industry Foundation. 2012.

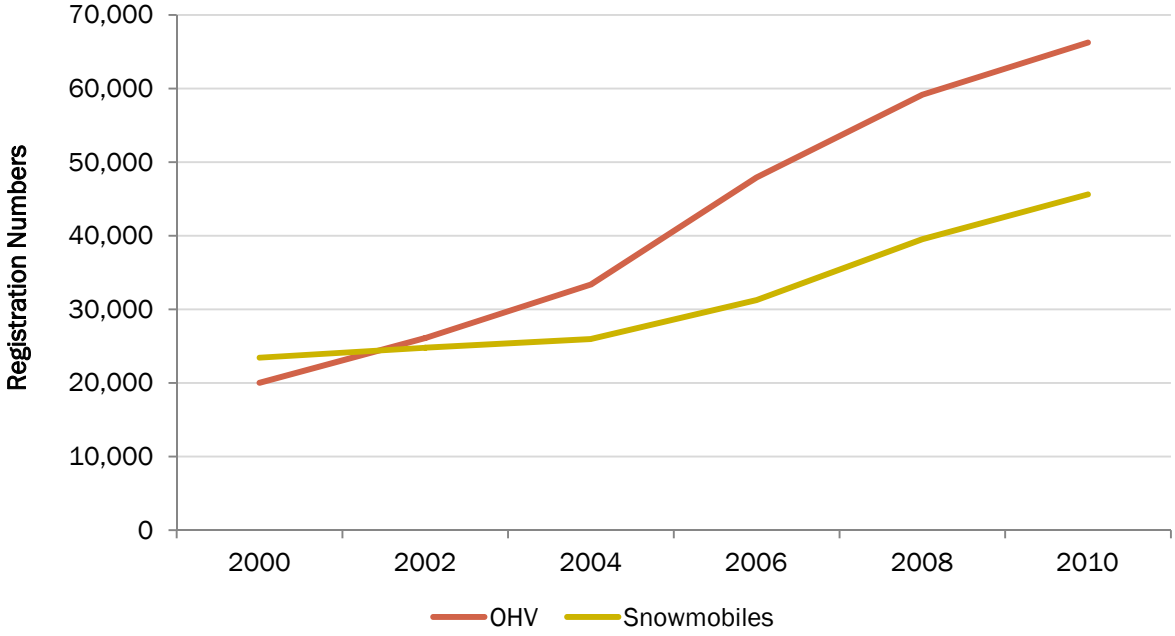
[18] The Outdoor Industry Foundation. 2012. Outdoor Participation Report 2012. http://outdoorindustry.org/research/participation.php?action=detail&research_id=193.

Motorized recreation is also a growing activity, and has significantly increased in Montana since 2000, specifically for off-highway vehicles (OHV) and snowmobile activities. OHV and snowmobile activities are funded by Montana State Parks through the OHV and Snowmobile Grant Programs, and participation numbers are provided through motor vehicle registration.

Photo 7. Motorized recreationists in Montana. Source: Montana State Parks.

Since 2000, OHV registration has more than tripled from about 20,000 registered units in 2000 to close to 70,000 units in 2010, a 300% increase (*Figure 4*). On average, about 5,000 new OHVs were registered each year from 2000 to 2010. Snowmobile registration has also increased during the same time period, but not nearly as drastic. Registered snowmobiles have doubled from 23,000 units in 2000 to over 45,000 units in 2010. According to the National Visitor Use Monitoring for the Lolo National Forest, 2.4% of visitors participated in motorized trail activities in 2011.

Figure 4. OHV & Snowmobile Registration in Montana, 2000 – 2010.



Source: Montana Department of Justice, Motor Vehicle Division.

A 2008 study from the National Survey on Recreation and the Environment on OHV recreation use found that the West has the largest proportion of people who are OHV users.[19] Over 28% of

[19] Cordell, H.K.; Betz, C.J.; Green, G.T.; and Stephens, B. 2008. Off-Highway Vehicle Recreation in the United States and its Regions and States: A National Report from the National Survey on Recreation and the Environment (NSRE). http://www.fs.fed.us/recreation/programs/ohv/IrisRec1rpt.pdf.

the population 16 years and older in the western US participated in OHV recreation in 2008. In Montana, this was slightly higher at 29% of the state's population, putting Montana in the top 10 states for OHV recreation. Neighboring states Wyoming and Idaho were at the top with 34% of their population participating in OHV use.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service also prepare the National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation (FHWAR) every five years, with the most recent completed in 2011[20]. The purpose of the survey is to collect and report on information on the number of people who fished, hunted, and wildlife watched, the extent of their activity, and the money they spent on their activities. In Montana, 62% of residents participated in wildlife-associated recreation, with 33% participating in wildlife-watching and 29% participating in fishing or hunting activities. Both of these are above the national participation rate, with hunting and fishing considerably higher than the national rate (16%). Montana had the fifth highest participation rate among states in hunting and fishing.

Although Montanans participate in fishing and hunting activities more than the national level, participation in fishing and hunting is generally declining when analyzing the license data. Fishing and hunting license data is provided by Montana FWP from 2000 to 2010, although data for 2001 was not available. Since 2000, resident fishing licenses sales has fluctuated from a low in 2002 of 220,000 licenses sold to a high in 2009 of 245,000 licenses sold, a difference of 11% between the two years. From 2009 to 2010, resident license sales dropped 2%. For non-resident licenses, sales have been slightly more consistent since 2000 with an average of 156,000 nonresident licenses sold a year. From 2000 to 2010, nonresident license sales have increased 5%.

Hunting license sales have decreased much more drastically from 2000 to 2010. From 2000 levels, resident license sales have decreased by 6%, while nonresident license sales have decreased by more than 40%. Both sales peaked in 2000 before dropping drastically in 2002. Non-resident sales have not fully recovered since 2002, while resident sales slowly rose until 2009 before dropping again in 2010. The decline in license sales for hunting in Montana is similar to the national decline in hunting, as hunting generally consists of older males. This is also demonstrated in the SCORP where hunting is the second most popular primary recreation activity among males and has an average age of 48. Hunting as the primary activity decreased from 6.9% in 2006 to 6% in 2011, meaning fewer respondents listed hunting as their primary activity. Nationally, hunting is most popular among those aged 45 to 54, closely followed by the next age group, 55 to 64. Together, those two groups make up 43% of the U.S. hunting population.

As Montana continues to change and evolve, so too does outdoor recreation participation for residents and visitors. Recreation participation reflects many elements, including population, demographics, recreation preferences, socioeconomic status, and barriers and limitations. Changing participation trends indicate that there is a general decline in hunting and fishing in Montana, while there is an increase in activities like wildlife-watching, hiking, biking, and motorized recreation. Although visitors to the Fish Creek drainage have historically participated

[20] U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. 2012. 2011 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation: State Overview. http://wsfrprograms.fws.gov/Subpages/NationalSurvey/National_Survey.htm.

in hunting and fishing, Fish Creek State Park could provide an opportunity to meet the projected demands of growing recreation users, particularly for trails, and draw a new user base to the area and to Mineral County.

5.2 Other FWP Departmental Lands

Immediately surrounding the Fish Creek State Park is the Fish Creek WMA, which is managed by the FWP Wildlife Division. The Fish Creek WMA is 34,573 acres, and comprises a large portion of the lower Fish Creek drainage. WMAs are managed with wildlife and wildlife habitat conservation as the foremost priority. Hunting is also allowed on the Fish Creek WMA according to established hunting seasons and regulations. The main game hunting seasons run from the second Saturday in April through May 31, and from September 1 through the Sunday of Thanksgiving weekend. Additionally, wolf and mountain lion hunting can extend through March 15 and April 14, respectively. Pack-in/pack-out dispersed camping is allowed.

Photo 8. Clark Fork River near Tarkio. Source: Mineral County website (mineralcounty.info).

Also close to Fish Creek State Park is the Alberton Gorge, a popular river recreation resource managed by the FWP Fisheries Division. The Alberton Gorge is a section of the Clark Fork River that is well-known for its Class III/IV whitewater. The main put-in for the Gorge is at Cyr Bridge Fishing Access Site (FAS) and the main take-out is at Tarkio FAS, just west of the Park. Amenities for the Alberton Gorge include a raft slide and stairway at Cyr Bridge and boat ramp at Tarkio FAS, camping at Forest Grove FAS, and vault toilets and picnic areas. Kayaking and whitewater rafting are the primary activities, although there are also limited opportunities for hiking on state lands. At the confluence of Fish Creek and Clark Fork River, river users often picnic along the cobble shoreline. Commercial use is authorized on the Alberton Gorge, and a permitted number of rafting companies provide half- and full-day whitewater trips through the Gorge in paddle rafts, kayaks, inflatable kayaks, and river boards. Development of visitor facilities at Fish Creek State Park could support these uses along the Gorge and on the WMA.

FASs occasionally have primitive camping on a first-come, first-serve basis and typically have vault toilets. Camping fees are charged at some FAS campgrounds, with a maximum seven-day stay limit. Sites are not improved with electrical hookups. The Big Pine FAS is located just outside of the Fish Creek State Park boundary along Fish Creek Road and is a prominent access site along Fish Creek. Overnight camping is currently offered at the site, along with a reservable group use area, latrine and food storage lockers. Big Pine FAS is named after the largest Ponderosa pine in Montana located on this site. The Big Pine stands at over 200 feet and is over

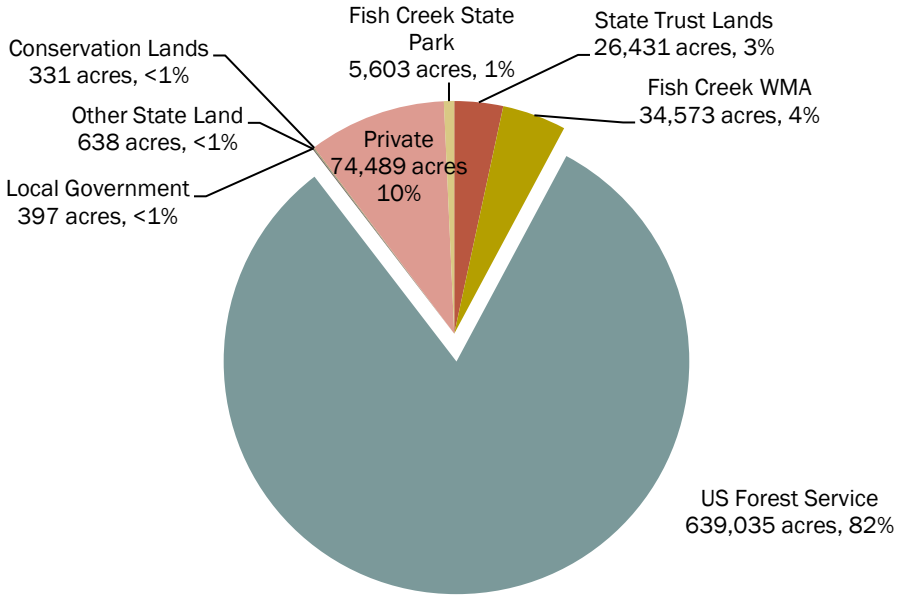
350 years old. It is a unique resource and point of interest for interpretation and education. Forks FAS also provides fishing access and camping about 6.5 miles south of Big Pine FAS and has a latrine and food storage locker. Along the Clark Fork River, a number of FASs provide river access for recreationists.

5.3 Mineral County

5.3.1 Mineral County Land Ownership

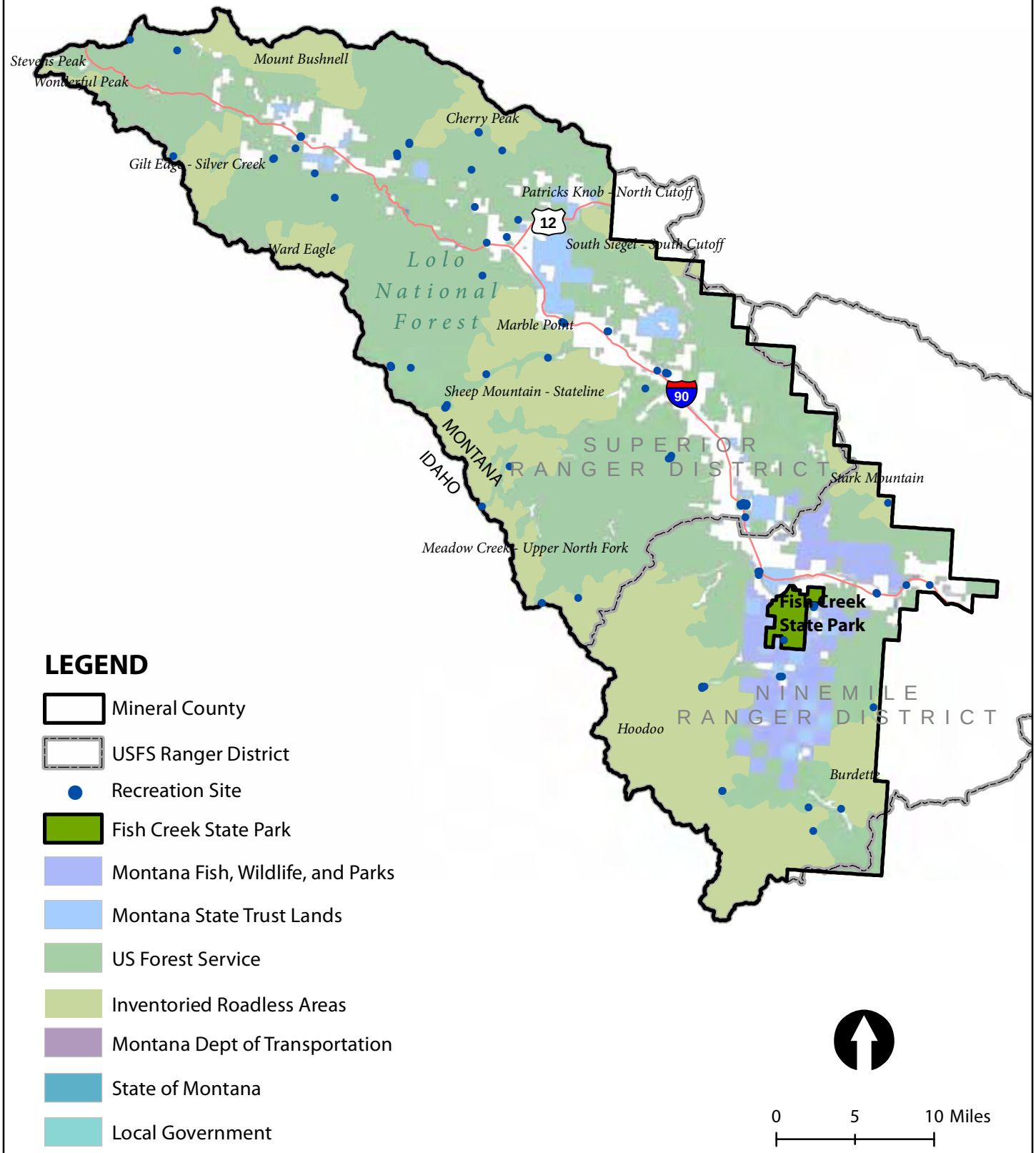
Fish Creek State Park is located in Mineral County. Mineral County is 90% public land, with 82% of the county managed by the U.S. Forest Service, or close to 640,000 acres (*Figure 5*). The County land base also includes 3% state trust land managed by DNRC, and 4% managed by FWP as the Fish Creek WMA. Fish Creek State Park makes up 1% of the total land ownership in the county. City and county governments own a total of 390 acres while private owners make up 10% of the land base. **See Map 8 for Mineral County land ownership.**

Figure 5. Land Ownership in Mineral County



Source: Montana Natural Heritage Program. http://mtnhp.org/

MAP 8. Mineral County Land Ownership & Recreation Sites



This map is for informational purposes only and is a graphical representation of data. Produced by Montana State Parks for the Fish Creek State Park Draft Management Plan.

5.3.2 Mineral County Parks and Recreation

According to the Mineral County Growth Policy, community recreational facilities in Mineral County are limited[21]. Developed parkland in the rural communities is mostly limited to playgrounds and recreational facilities provided on school property.

In Superior, the County's largest town, park facilities include three parks that have been developed to serve the needs of the local population for outdoor sporting activities and to provide play areas for the young children of the community. Recreational facilities in Superior's parks include two baseball fields, three picnic areas, two playgrounds, basketball court, baseball field, swimming pool, tennis court, restrooms and concession building. Programming is offered for youth/adult baseball and youth soccer, and swimming during the summer season.

Alberton, the closest community to Fish Creek State Park, has one park that is maintained by the city and volunteers. The 2008 Growth Policy calls for additional improvements to be made at community parks. The policy also highlights the importance of community parks as one of the most noticeable attributes of a healthy community and a reflection of pride and hospitality.

5.4 Missoula County

Missoula County is less than 5 miles from the eastern boundary of Fish Creek State Park, while the City of Missoula is about 35 miles east along I-90. Public recreation opportunities in Missoula County are primarily provided by Missoula County Parks and Trails Program at the county level and Missoula Parks and Recreation at the city level. Over 60% of the population in Missoula County lives in Missoula, and Missoula is a substantial user base currently and for future recreation at Fish Creek State Park.

5.4.1 Missoula County Parks & Trails

According to the 2012 Missoula County Parks & Trails Master Plan[22], there are 645.5 acres of park land and 91 parks sites in the county. Missoula County owns and/or oversees major assets in most local communities such as the Swan Valley Community Center in Condon, Lions Park in Seeley, Clinton Community Center in Clinton, East Missoula Lions Park in East Missoula/Bonner, Big Sky Park and Fort Missoula Regional Park in Missoula, and Lolo Beach Park in Lolo.

The County also manages approximately 45 miles of non-motorized trails. There are 10 miles of natural surface trails and close to 35 miles of improved (paved) surface trails. According to a user survey of Missoula County and City residents conducted in association with the Parks & Trails Master Plan, 50% of households use hiking trails, the most for any facility. Another 23% use paved commuter trails, making it the 4th most used facility. When all residents were asked about the top five facility needs overall, 80% of residents ranked natural surface hiking and biking trails as the highest need, followed by river access sites (69%), natural area/wildlife habitat (69%), paved commuter trails (64%), and group pavilions / picnicking areas (62%). For

[21] Mineral County Growth Policy. 2008. http://www.co.mineral.mt.us/Forms.aspx.

[22] Missoula County. 2012. Parks and Trails Master Plan. Developed by the Missoula County Parks and Trails Program and Rural Initiatives Office.

City of Missoula residents specifically, 84% of respondents ranked hiking/biking trails as the highest need.

Generally, Missoula County trails serve diverse recreational opportunities that are managed as non-motorized multi-use trails (pedestrian, mountain biking, equestrian). There are additional trails in the County on non-County lands that provide for authorized uses not served by Missoula County such as ATV/OHV trails and snowmobile trails. Typically, Missoula County trails are either unpaved, natural surface trails within parks or connecting neighboring parks and neighborhoods, or are paved trails that are aligned with public roadways for purposes of recreational use and for non-motorized commuting.

In the West Valley county park planning region, which includes Frenchtown and Huson (the communities closest to Fish Creek State Park), there are currently no County natural surface trails, although close to 2 miles are recommended by 2020. There are currently close to 4 miles of improved paved trails, with an additional 21 miles recommended by 2020. For the Missoula planning area, the County has identified that the availability of natural surface and improved trails is on par with their recommended level of service standards. The largest areas of need by 2020 for trails will be for improved surface trails, as well as developing natural surface trails connections between County parks and public lands.

5.4.2 Missoula Parks & Recreation

The City of Missoula passed the Master Parks and Recreation Plan for the Greater Missoula Area in 2004[23], which defines the 15-20 year vision for parks and trails in the Missoula Urban Area. Since then, the Parks and Recreation Staff and Park Board have been working to implement its goals in order to increase the quantity and quality of parkland and recreational opportunities in and around Missoula. In total, there are over 4,000 acres of public parklands, developed and undeveloped, in the greater Missoula area. There are 33 sites of City-owned neighborhood or pocket parks, as well as 3,800 acres of conservation lands.

Conservation lands are the focus of the 1995 and 2006 Open Space Bonds, which preserves areas with significant natural resource values. These lands comprise the largest acreage of "parkland" in the Missoula area. The largest conservation properties are Mount Jumbo, North Hills, and Mount Sentinel. The larger conservation land properties have become very popular for activities including hiking, mountain biking, horseback riding and general outdoor recreation. Still, the management emphasis of conservation lands is on preserving or enhancing the natural environment rather than providing lands for intensive use by people. Their character is defined by their inherent natural, ecological, historic, and scenic values.

In addition to park and conservation lands, there are 22 miles of off-street, multi-purpose trails in the Missoula area, including trails along the Clark Fork River in the downtown area and near the University of Montana, and up the Rattlesnake National Recreation Area. Natural surface trails have been established in many of the conservation land properties and are widely used by residents for hiking (50%) and mountain biking (~25%).

[23] City of Missoula. 2004. Master Parks and Recreation Plan for the Greater Missoula Area.

5.5 Lolo National Forest

The Lolo National Forest spans 2 million acres in western Montana. In descending order of land area, the Lolo NF is located in parts of Mineral, Missoula, Sanders, Granite, Powell, Lewis and Clark, Flathead, and Ravalli counties. National Forest System Lands managed by the Lolo National Forest make up the largest component of ownership in Mineral County.

5.5.1 Recreational Activities and Facilities

As established in the 1986 Forest Plan, recreation in Lolo NF is primarily low user density in rural and primitive settings. Within Mineral County, there are two ranger districts (the Superior and Nine Mile Ranger Districts), and 18 campgrounds, 12 trailheads, and six fishing access sites. Additional overnight opportunities include four cabin rentals and two lookouts (a third is still in operation).

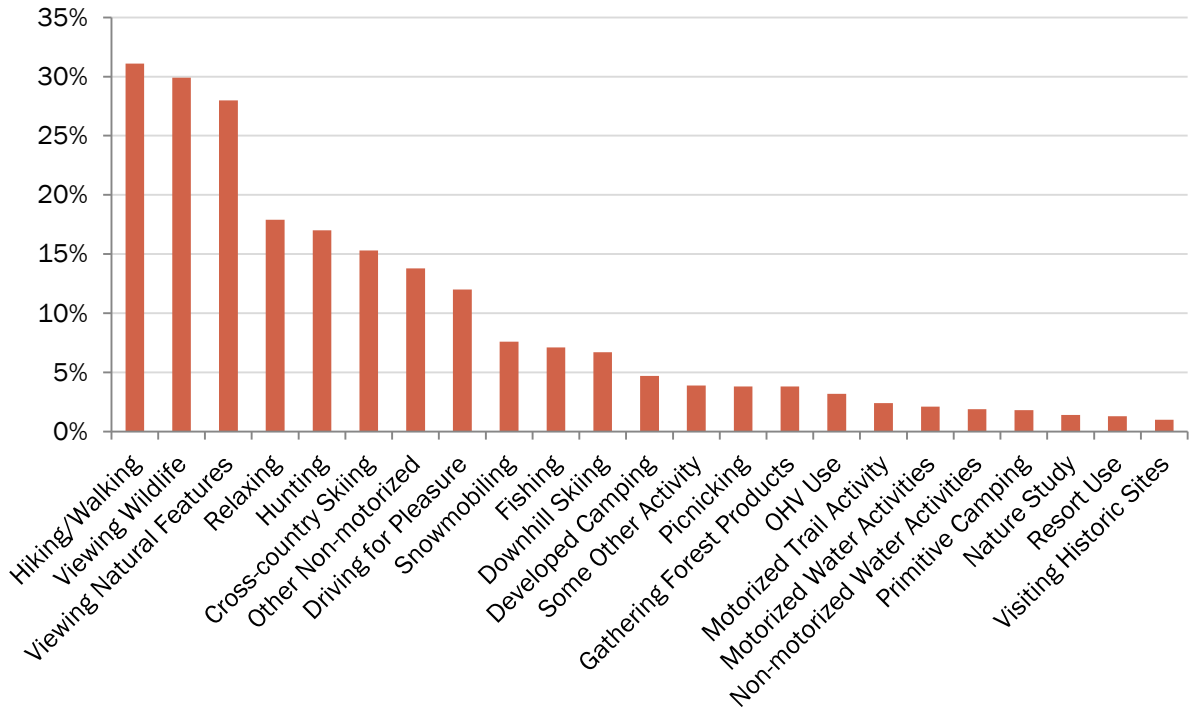
Close to Fish Creek State Park, there are a number of rustic and primitive camping opportunities. Clearwater Crossing Campground is an equestrian campground and staging area that is located about five miles southwest of the junction between Williams Pass and Fish Creek Roads along the North Fork Fish Creek. The campground is very small, with only a few sites, and does not have any modern amenities. The Quartz Flat campground is located northwest of Fish Creek State Park immediately off of I-90 next to a rest area. The campground accommodates RV sites with water and dump stations, however its proximity to the Interstate and its lack of electrical hook-ups makes it more of a "passing-through" campground than a destination campground.

Other camping and overnight facilities on nearby Forest Service land include the Trout Creek Campground; Thompson Peak Lookout which is available for rental; and Kreis Pond that has primitive campsites that are limited to two-night stays. Kreis Pond also has 35 miles of trails open to hiking, mountain biking, and horseback riding.

According to the National Visitor Use Monitoring program, there were about 1.4 million visits to Lolo NF in 2011, of which 21% were day use developed site visits, 7% were overnight developed site visits, and 1% were designated wilderness visits. The majority (77%) of visits were for general forest area visits. The primary recreational activities were hiking/walking and viewing wildlife and natural features (*Figure 6*).[24] Winter activities like cross-country skiing, snowmobiling, and downhill skiing are also fairly popular in the Lolo NF, while other activities like OHV and motorized trail use received less than 5% of participation. About 96% of the visits were just to the Lolo NF and about 82% of visitors indicated the main purpose of their trip was for recreation. Only 9% of visitors were passing through, suggesting that the majority of people are visiting the Lolo NF as their main destination on their trip.

[24] U.S. Forest Service. 2013. National Visitor Use Monitoring: Lolo National Forest.

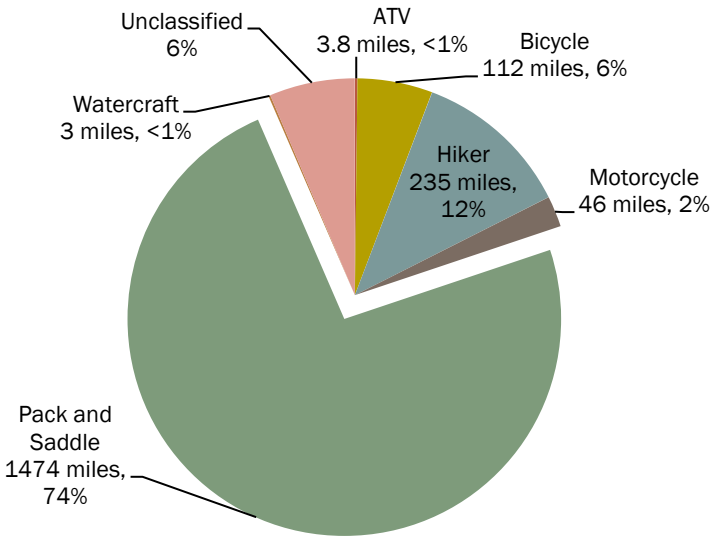
Figure 6. Percent Participation of Recreational Activities in Lolo National Forest



Note: Showing recreational activities with participation higher than 1%.
Source: USFS National Visitor Use Monitoring, Lolo National Forest. http://www.fs.fed.us/recreation/programs/nvum/.

There are over 2,000 miles of trails in the Lolo National Forest (*Figure 7*). About 85% of the trails are specifically designed for pack and saddle (horseback) and hiking (1,709 miles total). About 112 miles (5%) are designed for biking, and 46 miles (2%) are designed for motorcycle use; only 3.8 miles are designed for ATV use. There are over 1,500 miles of open roads within the Lolo NF, and mountain biking and motorized recreation is allowed on the roads. Although not designed for these uses specifically, many roads do provide opportunities these users desire to a certain degree. Trails designed specifically for mountain biking and motorized recreation in the region are fewer in contrast to the amount of trails for equestrian use and hiking, and comments received during public scoping suggest that these users are looking for more unique experiences than can be

Figure 7. Miles of Trails by Specific Design Type in Lolo National Forest



Data Source: US Forest Service, Lolo National Forest, Geospatial Data. Trails (trails data.mdb). Updated April 5, 2010. http://www.fs.usda.gov/detailfull/lolo/landmanagement/gis/.

provided on National Forest roads.

According to the U.S. Forest Service trails geospatial data for the Lolo NF, there are 377 miles of trails on NF lands in Mineral County specifically. Of these, 337 miles of trails are designed for pack and saddle use, 32 miles are designed for hiking/pedestrians, and 3.5 miles for motorcycle. Approximately three miles of the Route of the Hiawatha is in Mineral County, and is open to bicycles. About 48 miles of trail is designated as the State Line National Recreation Trail that traverses the Montana and Idaho border.

Based on the available opportunities on National Forest lands managed by the Lolo National Forest in Mineral County, Fish Creek State Park could provide a number of opportunities that could enhance the recreation landscape in this region. A developed campground with modern amenities including electricity—currently not offered at the nearby Clearwater and Quartz Flat Campgrounds—could cater to RV users that desire getting away from the main road and are looking to spend more than one night in an area. A developed campground could also support opportunities on nearby Forest Service and other public lands for hunting, fishing, hiking, rafting, and other activities.

While a developed campground could support a currently unmet desire in the region, a high quality multi-user trail system could elevate Fish Creek State Park to a regional destination and attract visitors to the area to stay longer and explore more. Trails designed specifically for mountain biking and motorized recreation are limited, and there is a strong desire from user groups to see these developed at Fish Creek State Park. The large landscape, varied terrain, and the already established road system provide a good foundation for developing and improving trails open to non-motorized and motorized activities, while maintaining access for historic activities like hunting, firewood gathering, and berry picking.

5.5.2 Inventoried Roadless Areas

A prominent land designation in the Lolo NF is Inventoried Roadless Areas (IRA). IRAs are a group of USFS lands that have been identified as undeveloped "wildlands" typically exceeding 5,000 acres managed for non-motorized recreation and feature of wide diversity of values and conditions. Roadless areas are not designated Wilderness Areas, but provide many of the same values similar to Wilderness. Still, a wide range of activities are still permitted in roadless areas, depending on management direction. Roadless areas may contain roads that were already constructed upon designation, and roads may be utilized for vegetation management and timber harvesting in accordance with Forest Plans and management areas. Roadless areas are different than Wilderness Areas in that mechanized equipment is allowed, like mountain bikes. In the Lolo NF, motorized recreation is generally prohibited in roadless areas.

In Mineral County, approximately 323,800 acres of Forest Service land are designated as IRAs, or about 45% of the NF land area in Mineral County. About 3% of the roadless areas or close to 10,500 acres in Mineral County have developed roads and/or timber harvest activity. The predominate use in these roadless areas are horse packing and guiding, and backpacking/hiking. The Hoodoo IRA, also known as the Great Burn Proposed Wilderness, is the largest IRA in Mineral County at 105,000 acres and encompassing 15% of the total NF land in Mineral County. It is part of the Great Burn Proposed Wilderness that encompasses 1.8 million total acres in

Montana and Idaho representing the area of the 1910 Great Burn, the largest fire in regional history that burned 3.0 million acres in northwestern Montana, Idaho, and Washington in less than three days in 1910. The Forest Plans for the Lolo NF and Clearwater NF recommend 275,000 acres of the area for Congressional designation as the Great Burn Wilderness Area.

Within 10 miles of Fish Creek State Park, there are numerous trailheads to access eight IRAs totaling over 218,000 acres. About 7,780 acres have developed roads, or 4% of the IRA land area around Fish Creek SP. The main trailhead into the Great Burn Proposed Wilderness is at Clearwater Crossing, about five miles southwest of the park. Recreational activities generally include hiking, backpacking, horseback riding, hunting, fishing. Mountain bikes are allowed in these roadless areas, however the overall use is minimal.

5.6 State School Trust Lands

State school trust lands are managed by the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC). There are close to 27,000 acres of state trust lands in Mineral County, including some lands adjacent to Fish Creek State Park. Montana State law requires DNRC to manage state school trust land in a manner that produces revenue to help support Montana's public schools. State trust lands are open to recreation, however DNRC does not actively manage the lands for recreational use. Legally accessible state lands that are not closed or restricted are open to anyone possessing a valid Recreational Use License.

According to DNRC, "general recreation" on state trust lands includes most types of noncommercial and/or non-concentrated activities, <u>except</u> cutting and gathering firewood, collecting valuable rocks/minerals, mineral exploration, or collection or disturbance of archaeological, historical, or paleontological sites (fossils, artifacts, dinosaur bones, old buildings, etc.) These excepted activities require separate authorization from DNRC. Persons who possess a valid Montana Conservation License from Montana FWP will be authorized to engage in hunting and fishing on legally accessible state trust land that is not closed or restricted to such use. Persons desiring to conduct all other types of noncommercial and/or non-concentrated types of activities such as hiking, skiing, sight-seeing, and day horseback use will be required to possess a "State Land Recreational Use License," unless such activities are conducted in conjunction with and incidental to hunting, fishing, and trapping.

A Special Recreational Use License is required for trapping, commercial recreational use (such as outfitting), and concentrated (group) use. It is also required for uses outside of the restrictions applicable to general recreational use. For example, overnight horseback use or overnight use (camping) more than 200 feet from a customary access point or for more than two days on leased/licensed state trust lands.

Recreational use on DNRC state trust lands near Fish Creek State Park includes mainly fishing, hunting, and dispersed camping.

5.7 Regional Opportunities for Mountain Biking and Motorized Recreation

Mountain biking and motorized recreation mainly occur on National Forest System Lands currently, although the City of Missoula and nearby ski resorts do provide trail opportunities for mountain biking on lands they manage. This section details regional opportunities for mountain biking and motorized recreation specifically, given the increasing use of these activities and the proposed focus for trail development at Fish Creek State Park.

5.7.1 Mountain Biking

While there are limited mountain biking trail opportunities in the area around Fish Creek State Park, there are a number of opportunities in the greater Missoula area. The Rattlesnake National Recreation Area (NRA) is particularly popular for mountain bikers. The Rattlesnake NRA is located in Missoula County and is south and adjacent to the Rattlesnake Wilderness Area. It encompasses 28,000 acres and includes 73 miles of system trails. Nearly all of the multiple use trails are open to mountain bikers in addition to hikers, horseback riders, joggers, cross-country skiers and dog walkers. About 21 miles of trails are designed specifically for mountain bikers. Off-trail mountain biking, construction of jumps and/or other structures and user-built trails is prohibited.

The mountain biking user group Mountain Biking Missoula mapped 13 main trailheads in the Missoula area for mountain biking[25]. A majority of the trails highlighted on their website are between 5 miles and 15 miles in length. There are two "Epic Rides" between 24 and 29 miles in length, both of which are located in the Rattlesnake NRA. Other areas highlighted include Pattee Canyon, Mount Jumbo on City of Missoula conservation lands, Snowbowl Ski and Summer Resort, and Blue Mountain Recreation Area. During the summer, Snowbowl offers close to 30 miles of biking trails, with most trails ranging between 5 and 7 miles in length. The Blue Mountain Recreation Area southwest of Missoula includes 8.3 miles open to mountain biking, with 4.9 miles specifically designed for mountain biking.

Montana's First Ride Center

In 2013, Montana's capital city Helena received a Bronze-level Ride Center Designation from the International Mountain Biking Association, the first of its kind in Montana and only one of 17 Ride Centers designated in the world. The designation is a competitive designation that provides recognition for large-scale mountain bike facilities and communities that offer something for every rider. Helena is a small community surrounded by National Forest lands managed by the Helena National Forest. Through partnerships with the Helena NF, City of Helena, Prickly Pear Land Trust, Helena Tourism Alliance, and local bike stores and riders, an extensive trail system of more than 70 miles of single track mountain biking trails have been developed in the region around Helena. Higher up, the MacDonald Pass portion of the Continental Divide Trail yields a challenging backcountry experience with scenic vistas. Helena also offers a vibrant cycling scene and bike lanes throughout the city, meaning bikers can easily enjoy a car-free mountain biking vacation. The Ride Center designation is expected to help put Helena on the map as a mountain biking destination, which can ultimately help create economic development opportunities and enhance the overall quality of life of the community.

[25] Mountain Biking Missoula. http://www.mountainbikingmissoula.com

Another popular recreation opportunity for bicycling in the region west of Fish Creek State Park is the Route of the Hiawatha. The Route of the Hiawatha is a Rail-to-Trail project that converted 14.4 miles of abandoned railroad along the old Milwaukee Railroad into a gravel trail for bicycles. First developed in 1998, the trail is open to biking and travels over seven trestles and through 10 tunnels. In the summer of 2010, approximately 32,000 visitors traveled the Route of the Hiawatha. The trail's eastern terminus is located in the Superior Ranger District near Taft, Montana, while the majority of the trail is in Idaho. The entire trail is closed to motorized vehicles.

Many of these biking areas receive heavy use, particularly in the Rattlesnake NRA along the main trailhead. There is a desire by mountain bikers to have more full-day to multi-day trail rides of longer lengths, and to have more trails specifically designed for mountain biking. Fish Creek State Park is close enough to Missoula to draw potential users to the Fish Creek area, while also removed enough to provide a different and rustic experience.

5.7.2 Motorized Recreation

For motorized recreation, other than winter/snowmobile use, motorized vehicle travel is allowed only on designated trails and roads on the Lolo National Forest. Off-road and trail travel is prohibited unless specifically designated. There are also areas on the Lolo NF where snowmobile use is allowed only on designated trail systems. Motor vehicle use maps are maintained by the U.S. Forest Service for the Lolo NF that provides information on routes, mileage, and seasonal designations. Around Fish Creek State Park, exact mileage of roads open to highway travel in the Ninemile Ranger District is hard to calculate. There are 3.5 miles open to motorcycles with seasonal designation, and 1.8 miles open to wheeled vehicles 50 inches or less in width with seasonal designation.

Source: Chaney, Rob. June 11, 2013. Route of the Olympian: Old railbeds open miles of recreation. The Missoulian.

The St. Regis watershed in the Superior Ranger District of the Lolo NF is popular with motorized recreation, and includes a number of open roads, motorcycle trails, and trails open to wheeled vehicles 50 inches or less in width, with seasonal designations. The St. Regis area is also growing in popularity with motorized recreation with the recent development of the Route of the Olympian by the U.S. Forest Service. The Route of the Olympian is a 31-mile trail converted from the Milwaukee Railroad heading east from the Idaho/Montana border at Taft to St. Regis. In the Final Decision Notice issued in March 2013[26], some portion of the route will be available for all types of users and recreational experiences

[26] USDA Forest Service. 2013. Route of the Olympian Project: Decision Notice. Lolo National Forest, Superior Ranger District. Mineral County, Montana. Issued March 2013.

during the summer season. Approximately 11 miles will be open to all motorized use, about nine miles will be designated as non-motorized trail, and about 15 miles will be a motorized trail open to ATVs. During the winter, snowmobiles will be allowed on all segments except the tunnel and trestle, while the entire trail will be open to cross-country skiing and snowshoeing.

In Missoula County, motorized recreation is allowed at the Blue Mountain Recreation Area (RA) and in the Petty Creek area. The Blue Mountain RA is less than 10 miles from Missoula, and is a 4,900-acre recreation area that includes 41 miles of trails. A majority of the 41-mile trail system is for non-motorized use. Blue Mountain provides 14.5 miles of motorcycle trails, of which 3.8 miles is open to ATV use. Facilities include a loading ramp for motorized users. In the winter, the main road (Road 365) is closed and available for snowmobiling for one mile. There is also close to 15 miles of motorcycle trails at the Albert Trailhead just northeast of Petty Creek.

5.8 Conclusion

The area around Fish Creek State Park mainly provides opportunities for low-density, dispersed recreation like hunting, fishing, hiking, and horseback riding. Participation trends suggest that although more Montanans fish and hunt that the national average, fishing and hunting activities in general are declining and there is a shift towards other activities like wildlife watching, hiking, biking, and motorized recreation. The Montana 2014-2018 SCORP identified hiking and biking trails and ATV trails as top needs for future recreation management. Currently, trail opportunities for mountain biking and motorized recreation are limited in scope within the Montana State Parks system, as well as in the Fish Creek area. The opportunity to provide for these activities at Fish Creek State Park is significant, and if designed right, could help make the area a regional destination and attract a new and diverse user base to the State Parks system and to Mineral County.

Photo 9. Mountain biking near Helena. Source: Helena Tourism Alliance.

Many opportunities exist for mountain biking on trails around the Missoula area, however public scoping comments suggest that these trails are becoming crowded and mountain bikers are looking for more challenging full-day to multi-day experiences. Trail opportunities for motorized recreation are more limited, although there is a large system of open roads for street legal vehicles within the Lolo National Forest. Opportunities to connect trails from Fish Creek State Park to adjacent public lands, particularly on the National Forest System Lands, would enhance connections between public lands, and provide for better access to already established trails and roads on the Lolo NF, thus enhancing the overall recreation opportunities in the region.

Additionally, the development of a campground and associated facilities at Fish Creek State Park could also enhance the current spectrum of recreation opportunities. Facility development is minimal in the area around the Park, and there is currently not a campground in the area with electrical hook-ups. As Mineral County is a popular route through Montana, a developed campground at Fish Creek State Park could draw people off the highway and encourage visitors to stay in the area longer. A developed campground could also serve as a base to support uses occurring on nearby public lands, like the Fish Creek WMA, Alberton Gorge, and Great Burn Proposed Wilderness.

As discussed in Chapter 4, Fish Creek State Park also includes many wildlife and fisheries values that are interconnected with the Fish Creek WMA. There is a balance that should be met at Fish Creek State Park with providing increased recreational opportunities and supporting stewardship of wildlife values. Research cited in U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's conservation plans that analyzes and articulates recreation impacts on wildlife is helpful in understanding potential recreation impacts within Fish Creek State Park. In a Canyonlands National Park study comparing the effects of trail bikes, hikers, and vehicles to bighorn sheep behavioral responses, distances moved, and duration of responses, Papouchis et al. (2001)[27] found that hikers caused the most severe responses in desert bighorn sheep (animals fled in 61% of encounters), followed by vehicles (17% fled) and then mountain bikers (6% fled), apparently because hikers were more likely to be in unpredictable locations and often directly approached the wildlife. Generally, wildlife exhibit a stronger response to humans that approach them directly and to humans located off designated trails.

In another Utah study comparing mountain biking and hiking disturbance to mule deer, antelope, and bison, both on- and off-trail, Taylor and Knight (2003)[28] found little difference between the responses to hiking or biking. However, their results did show differences in species and based on whether the activity takes place on- or off-trail. They did suggest that, because bikers travel faster than hikers, they may cover more ground in a given time period than hikers, thus potentially disturbing more wildlife per unit of time.

The FWP Wildlife Division noted that the Park includes areas of important winter range for wildlife in addition to the winter range provided on the WMA and other adjacent public lands. Winter activities may also have impacts on wildlife, particularly on big game populations. In two different studies of winter recreation impacts to wildlife in Yellowstone National Park, Aune (1981)[29] and Cassirer (1990)[30] found that, except for coyotes, all wildlife species observed (mostly big game) reacted more quickly to an approaching skier than to a snowmobile, and the flight distance was generally greater from skiers. Skiers were found to move slower and be in an area longer, thus potentially prolonging the disturbance, while snowmobiles moved quickly albeit more loudly. In another study, elk began to move when skiers approached to within 15

[27] Papouchis, C.M., F.J. Singer, and W.B. Sloan. 2001. Responses of desert bighorn sheep to increased human recreation. Journal of Wildlife Management 65:573-582.
[28] Taylor, Audrey R. and Richard L. Knight. 2003. Wildlife responses to recreation and associated visitor perceptions. Ecological Applications 13:951-963.
[29] Aune, K.E. 1981. Impacts of winter recreationists on wildlife in a portion of Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming. M.S. thesis. Montana State University, Bozeman, MT.
[30] Cassirer, E.F. 1990. Responses of elk to disturbance by cross-country skiers in northern Yellowstone National Park. M.S. thesis. University of Idaho, Moscow, ID.

meters in an area heavily used by humans year-round, and within 400 meters in an area where human activity is much lower (Cassirer et al. 1992)[31].

Fish Creek State Park has the potential to bring new and diverse users to Mineral County, and provide opportunities that enhance the current regional recreation landscape with developed visitor facilities and a high quality trail system. Good design and planning of facilities and trails with the appropriate screening as needed would help minimize human-wildlife conflicts and protect fisheries resources on the State Park while also enhancing the recreation experience for an increased user base, many of whom enjoy viewing and experiencing wildlife while on trails. Additionally, the promotion of Leave No Trace outdoor ethics is a priority of the Montana State Parks interpretation and education program, and applying the principles of Leave No Trace can greatly reduce adverse resource impacts. ***More discussion on trail standards and best practices is included in Chapter 7.***

Photo 10. Fish Creek State Park landscape.

[31] Cassirer, E.F., D.J. Freddy, and E.D. Ables. 1992. Elk responses to disturbance by cross-country skiers in Yellowstone National Park. Wildlife Society Bulletin 20:375-381.

6. Recreation Economy and Tourism

6.1 Mineral County

Mineral County is located in western Montana on the Montana-Idaho border. Superior is the County seat. The county is 1,223 square miles, and has just over 4,200 residents with a median age of 49.8 years, approximately 10 years older than the median age for the State. Interstate 90 is the main thoroughfare through the County, and also serves as one of the most popular entrances into Montana.

At 90% public land, the County offers a variety of dispersed and low density recreational opportunities that draw people interested in hunting, fishing, hiking, horseback riding, and sightseeing. Recreationists also enjoy whitewater rafting in the Alberton Gorge, biking on the Hiawatha Trail, snowmobiling on the Superior area trails, OHVing on forest roads, and downhill skiing at Lookout Pass. The Mineral County Challenge identified recreation and tourism in the County as a growing sector and opportunity for economic development however the potential for outdoor recreation and tourism has not yet been fully realized.

6.1.1 Changing Socio-Economics

The economic vitality of the communities of Mineral County has been historically linked to the timber industry, and forestry and forest products are an important part of the heritage and economic base of the County. Over 84% of the County is timberland, of which 84% is owned by the US Forest Service. Another 14% is in private ownership, and the remainder in State and other public ownerships. Harvest by ownership has changed over the years, particularly in regards to the National Forest. The focus of the national forests has evolved over time from timber management to ecosystem management that emphasizes amenity values, fuel treatments, and forest health restoration. According to the Mineral County Challenge, from 1981 to 2004, timber harvest on National Forest land in the County dropped from 50% to 25%. The forest products industry represented 40% of the economic base of western Montana in the late 1960s as measured by labor income, but dropped to about 25% in the late 1990s and 20% in 2006. Still, forest products represent $300 million of western Montana labor income.

Photo 11. Timber harvest in Mineral County. Source: Mineral County Challenge Report.

Contrary to the reduction in the timber industry, the population of the county has actually increased 39% since 1960 to 4,223 residents in the 2010 census. The fastest growing age group is 50-54 years, followed by 45-49 years. The biggest decreases came in the age 30-34 and 25-29 group. This suggests that younger families are moving out of Mineral County and baby boomers/retirees are moving in. According to the Mineral County Challenge, there were 1,179 jobs in 1970. In 1995, that had grown to 1,652 jobs, and in 2006 there were 2,213 jobs, a total

increase of 87% since 1970. The fastest growing type of income since 1970 has been "non-labor" income, which consists of dividends, interest, rent and investment income; and payments from government to individuals or transfer payments (i.e. Social Security, Medicare, disability, unemployment, and welfare). The growth in non-labor income can be an indication that a place is an attractive place to live and retire. Non-labor income can also be important to places with struggling economies, either as a source of income maintenance for the poor or as a more stable form of income in areas with declining industries and labor markets.

For the economy, the largest sector in the County is manufacturing, which accounts for 49% of output and 32% of employment. Other large sectors include sawmill and wood products, construction, and the public sector. The fastest growing sector in Mineral County is the Service sector, which includes health, legal, and business services, and retail trade. The Service sector increased 80% in employment from 1970 to 2000.

6.1.2 Economic Development Challenges

In the BitterRoot Economic Development District's (BREDD) draft Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) for Mineral and Missoula Counties[32], a number of issues were uncovered during the strategic planning process that influences and informs the planning context of Fish Creek State Park.

Identified in the strategy, Mineral County struggles with higher unemployment and higher rates of poverty than the state average. As such, there are many challenges and perceptions that County residents feel currently restricts economic development. A few of those beliefs and understanding about the region's economic climate are listed below:

- Mineral County is a pass through region. People drive through but they do not stay and spend money in the region.
- Mineral County does not have the recreational opportunities of other rural counties, and is suffering from a national trend of "lock up and lock out" when it comes to forest management.
- Publically owned land (as a large percentage of land in Mineral County) limits business, economic and community development opportunities.
- There is recreational disconnect between users from the community and users outside of the community. Locals are mostly motorized recreationalists (ATV and snowmobiles) vs. out-of-town users are bikers, rafters, skiers. Access for motorized sports has declined.
- There are few living wage jobs ($15-$20 per hour), and few blue-collar jobs left in the region. There is also a lack of skilled labor.

These beliefs are important considerations for the region's economic development, and provide an important context for the planning and development of Fish Creek State Park to better understand the challenges and perceptions that County residents have of publically-owned land. There is a strong feeling among recreationists that public lands are not open to their activities, like motorized recreation. Providing trails for motorized recreation at Fish Creek State Park would enhance opportunities for this activity on public land. A number of these beliefs also

[32] BitterRoot Economic Development District. 2013. Draft Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy for Mineral and Missoula Counties. http://www.bredd.org/current-project/comprehensive-economic-development-strategy-ceds/.

speak to the importance of cultivating economic development and providing access for historic recreation alongside destination recreation.

The draft CEDS outlines a number of goals to help the region reduce unemployment and increase incomes through the creation of an economic roadmap to diversify and strengthen regional economies. The goals address infrastructure needs to improve the quality of life of residents, community development strategies including to create and promote healthy and active opportunities, and business development to create a resilient economy.

6.2 Economic Opportunities

Fish Creek State Park could help facilitate Mineral County's efforts to meet the goals of the regional economic strategy by providing diverse recreation opportunities and opportunities for economic development. Motorized activities are a major use for local residents and also of interest to visitors, and motorized trails in Fish Creek State Park can enhance access for motorized users and provide opportunities to get outdoors. Likewise, a diverse trail system with motorized and non-motorized trails and visitor amenities like developed and rustic campgrounds at the Park could also support all users looking to bike, raft, hike, ski, horseback ride, hunt, fish, OHV, and snowmobile in the region, creating a regional destination within Mineral County. The Park could provide recreational opportunities for a wider range of socioeconomic profiles throughout the region, and could draw more people to come to Mineral County, recreate, and explore the area. Trail development at Fish Creek SP could also support efforts to improve connectivity between public lands and communities, and to the region's existing trail systems.

Opportunities for economic development could be cultivated through concessionaire contracts, commercial use permits, and development of park infrastructure. Concession opportunities and partnerships with private businesses will be a central consideration during development of facilities and provision of activities at Fish Creek State Park. Concessions are long-term contracts that provide multiple services or products on Department land. Examples include lodging, equipment rental or sales, retail sales and food services. In 2012, Montana State Parks evaluated concessionaire opportunities for the state parks system. Campgrounds were identified as one area that concessionaires could partner with the State to develop full-service campgrounds, which are highly desired among many park visitors. Many other agencies partner with the private sector to develop full-service campgrounds, including the National Park Service and Forest Service.

Allowing outside businesses to provide appropriate services encourages economic development and partnerships, and allows Montana State Parks to have more flexibility to interact with visitors and further the park system mission. Concessionaires also provide an opportunity to accommodate visitors who desire and seek out more developed services or non-traditional types of recreational experiences at state parks, like zip line tours. Additionally, cabins or cottages of the park model variety were also identified as a great opportunity to pursue for public/private partnerships. Cabins, yurts, and huts are all potential concessionaire opportunities for Fish Creek State Park.

Commercial use permits also offer short-term, seasonal partnerships to provide unique, non-facility related customer services. Examples of commercial use activities include trail rides, guided walks, guided mountain bike rides, professional dog training, firewood cutting, etc. Educational tours and activities could also be provided through special use permits by area non-profits and educational institutions.

Both concession contracts and commercial use permits provide opportunities that could draw visitors to come to the park while providing opportunities for local businesses and communities to generate revenue based on use at Fish Creek State Park, including small business opportunities like bicycle shops and rentals. These opportunities could encourage entrepreneurship and support the economic vitality of Mineral County, and add to the overall quality of life in the region with easy access to outdoor recreation for residents and visitors.

The 2008 Mineral County Growth Policy also includes a number of recommendations that address parks, recreation, trails, and tourism efforts in the County. The development of Fish Creek State Park could help facilitate the County's efforts to meet these recommendations, and encourage new partnerships to accomplish the following goals:

- Assist the recreation and tourism industries as a vital part of the local economy. (Economic Development)
- Encourage better partnerships between the State, Federal and local governments for access, recreational, and educational opportunities. (Natural Resources)
- Expand pedestrian and bicycle trail facilities to promote appreciation of the natural resources of Mineral County and Alberton and Superior. (Natural Resources)
- Develop park facilities and recreation programs through establishment of a park and recreation plan addressing needs in the urban and rural areas. (Public Facilities)
- Expand pedestrian, equestrian and bicycle trail facilities where feasible. (Public Facilities)

Public lands will always be a big part of the Mineral County identity, and it is important to residents of the County that park land and recreation facilities are provided in a way that promotes access and connections between lands and communities and supports community desires and goals. Fish Creek State Park could support a community and destination recreation experience that allows for historical use while also encouraging new partnerships and development that expands the range of access and opportunities for all park visitors. Fish Creek SP has the potential to become a regional destination and encourage community improvements and economic development in the area to support and enhance the large landscape State Park.

6.3 Economic Benefits of Trails

Trails benefit communities in many ways. Far from being just connections between locations, trails and pathways facilitate social interactions that lead to real benefits for individuals and their communities. As such, trails are increasingly becoming an attraction for communities throughout the West that are known for scenic public lands, abundant wildlife, and unsurpassed

recreation appeal. The following sections describe the economic, health, and social benefits of trails and supporting research.

6.3.1 Non-Motorized Trails

In 2011, the University of Wyoming produced an economic impact study on trails around Jackson Hole, Wyoming.[33] The study concluded that the Teton County trail system generated approximately $18 million in economic activity in 2010 alone. Over $16 million was generated by non-local trail users, with the rest coming from local trail users. Employment and wages relating to the trail system in Teton County was $3.6 million. The average amount spent per non-local trail user was $126.18. Jackson Hole trails supported 35 full time and 18 part time jobs in 2010, with total wages of equating to over $362,000 for the six month summer season. Considering the bike and outdoor shop employment figures as well as the Jackson Hole trail employment figures, the Teton County trail system influenced a total of 213 employees with a payroll of $3.6 million. Considerable tax revenue was also generated by users of the trail system, which goes to support important public services.

The study found that mountain biking was the most frequently tallied trail activity with 53% of total participants, with hiking being the second most often performed trail activity. Thirty six percent of respondents ride, hike or run for three to five miles on average and another 30% recreate for six to ten miles on average. A significant portion of trail users (55%) use the trail system more than twice a week, with a third using it two to four times per week and a fifth of the users utilizing the trail five to seven times per week. For non-local visitors specifically, hiking and biking were the next most sought after activities, with 25% seeking hiking and another 20% seeking biking adventures.

A number of bike shops interviewed in the study claimed to have seen an increase in bicycle activity since 2005, with one bike shop experiencing more than 50% growth in bicycle sales. Two of the four bike shops indicated a substantial growth in bike rentals. One shop indicated they had increased their bike rentals from 936 in 2000 to 3,148 in 2009, a 236% increase. One of the guide services claimed to have experienced a growth in number of clients from 1,800 in the year 2000 to 3,000 clients in 2010. Many bike shop owners attributed this to the growth of the Teton County trail system over the past decade, and saw the industry continuing to grow with more trail development and more visitors interested in trails, and in mountain biking specifically.

The trail system in Jackson Hole attracts tens of thousands of local and non-local users annually. The investments made in the Teton County trail system over the past decade (an estimated $1.7 million by the economic impact study) demonstrates that the area is committed to developing and maintaining a world-class trail system to boost tourism dollars as well as to contribute to the quality of life of local communities. The results of this study demonstrate how a well-planned and supported trail system can generate significant tourism dollars that contributes to the overall economic vitality of the area.

[33] Kaliszewski, N. 2011. Jackson Hole Trails Project Economic Impact Study. University of Wyoming. http://www.friendsofpathways.org/assets/291/kaliszewski_JHTP_final-1.pdf.

Economic Highlight: Oakridge-Westfir Community Trail System

There are many small towns throughout the West that are like the communities that make up Mineral County: former timber economies, large acreage of forest land, abundance of mountains and rivers, rural population, and great access to the outdoors. One such community is Oakridge, Oregon, a gateway to recreation opportunities including hiking, hunting, boating, fishing, mountain biking, horse-back riding, and skiing. The community of Oakridge was closely linked to the timber industry, which decreased over time leaving the community without a solid industry. In an effort to attract economic development, the City of Oakridge began looking toward tourism, recreation and the associated retail business to diversify its economic base.

Mountain Bike Oregon, 2011. Photo credit: Tim Zimmerman. Source: VitalMTB.com

In 2007, Oakridge and neighboring community Westfir prepared a community trails plan to identify economic development related to recreation and trails, and to prioritize strategies to develop a niche market for mountain biking.[34] Since then, Oakridge has been successful at attracting recreationists to the area by capitalizing on the growing popularity of mountain biking. The national forests surrounding Oakridge offer a multitude of diverse trails, and the area has developed a reputation as a regional destination and even a statewide destination among enthusiasts. The community has developed a number of events to increase visitors to the area and encourage the community's growth as a mountain biking destination.

One such event, Mountain Bike Oregon, started in 2005 in Oakridge. The three-day mountain biking event has been steadily growing in popularity and attracting more visitors to the region every year. The event was named best mountain bike festival by Outside Magazine in 2013, and the Oakridge community is designated a Ride Center by the International Mountain Biking Association (IMBA), a competitive designation that provides recognition for large-scale mountain bike facilities and communities that offer something for a every rider.

In 2013, Linfield College in Oregon developed a project brief on the economic impact of mountain biking events in Oregon, and looked at Mountain Bike Oregon (MBO) in addition to three other events around the state during summer 2012.[35] The events attracted upwards of 1,800 participants, with 65% coming from outside of Oregon. Participants in MBO stayed for an average of 3.9 nights, and the average expenditure per person per day was $99 while the average group expenditure was $1,210. The MBO event alone generated $1.2 million in county-level tourism spending—the most of any of the mountain biking events analyzed. Total sales were $1.69 million, and the event generated $647,000 in labor income and created 26 jobs.

Trail systems and facilities have the potential to provide significant economic benefits to the local communities in which they occur. Local trail users and visitors provide direct economic benefits to hotels, restaurants and other businesses from increases in tourist activity and increased spending on durable goods such as bikes and soft goods such as gasoline, food, and drinks. This, in turn, has been shown to attract and revitalize businesses, create jobs, and increase public revenue. Trails also provide motivation for users to visit an area and potentially stay overnight, as well as create social interaction among recreationists to walk, run, bike, and ski together. Mountain biking events in particular draw thousands of participants and spectators, bringing direct spending into those communities. The long-term impact of trails in communities like Oakridge is beginning to take place, as new businesses are opening up and more people are interested in visiting the region and staying longer to enjoy the trail system.

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[34] Oakridge-Westfir Community Trails Committee and Area Chamber of Commerce 2007. Oakridge-Westfir Community Trails Plan. http://www.ci.oakridge.or.us/portals/oakridgeor/documents/oakridge-westfir_trails%20plan.pdf.

[35] McNamee, J., Main, K., Hasimato, K. 2013. Project Brief: The Economic Impact of Mountain Bicycle Events in Oregon. Linfield College.

6.3.2 Motorized Trails

In 2009, Oregon State University prepared a report for the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department on the economic impacts of off-highway vehicle recreation in Oregon.[36] Within Oregon, an estimated 68,202 households engage in recreational OHV riding. The report found that these households spent an estimated $291 million on OHV equipment in 2008. The purchase of OHVs made up 37% of all expenditures, followed by tow vehicle (26%) and trailers (12%). Other equipment expenditures included insurance, storage, repair and maintenance, modifications, and accessories.

The report found that statewide, the average household spent $4,259 on equipment, of which $1,596 was for OHV vehicles and $1,105 was the cost of vehicles attributable to towing OHVs. Statewide, this spending generated $53.5 million in labor income, including employee compensation and proprietary income. This income supported 1,162 jobs.

An estimated 2.6 million household trip days were taken statewide in 2008. These trip days include all OHV riding, from an hour-long ride on adjacent land to a week-long vacation hundreds of miles away. Combined, local, non-local, and out-of-state trips were associated with $250 million in trip expenditure in Oregon. A substantial portion of this total was for gasoline, to be expected given the record high gas prices that year. Statewide, this spending generated $64.1 million in labor income, and this income supported 2,369 jobs.

Another study completed by Ohio University in 2010 found that OHV recreation and tourism in southeastern Ohio generated a total of $1.3 million in direct spending, $1.8 million in total output, close to $657,000 in total labor income, and 26.26 full-time equivalent jobs in 2008.[37] The majority of expenditures were for gasoline, trail permit fees, camping, and retail food/beverage.

In addition to the economic impacts, the report also conducted an importance-performance analysis to assess the OHV riders' satisfaction with the experiences in the southeastern Ohio tourism region. Attributes that riders indicated were important to their experience include the following (in no order):

- Maps at trailheads
- Reasonable trail fees
- Maintenance of trails
- Trailhead amenities – water, parking, restrooms
- Campgrounds near the trailheads
- Well-marked roads and attractions
- OHV stores and service centers, fuel stations
- Welcoming attitudes of host communities
- Longer trail lengths
- Technical challenges

[36] Lindberg, K. 2009. The Economic Impacts of Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) Recreation in Oregon. Prepared for the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department. Oregon State University – Cascades Campus, Bend, Oregon.

[37] Martin, B., Meng, F., Li, M., Tanzer, J. 2010. Economic Impact of Off-Highway Vehicle Recreation & Tourism in Southeast Ohio. Ohio University, Athens, Ohio.

6.4 Health and Social Benefits of Trails

Trail activities, both active and passive, are well documented to help improve physical, mental, and emotional health and wellbeing when done on a regular basis. Physical activity does not need to be strenuous, but even small increases in activity will produce measurable benefits for people of all ages and abilities. Being active helps reduce the risk of chronic health diseases like diabetes, heart disease, osteoporosis and obesity, and helps improve long-term physical, mental and emotional wellbeing.

In the 2014-2018 SCORP, the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System survey found that a quarter of Montanans were inactive in 2011 and did not participate in regular physical activity, a number that has increased significantly from 2002 when 19% of Montanans were inactive. According to the 2013 Youth Behavior Risk Survey, about 11% of adolescents were physically inactive over a seven day period, and nearly a quarter watched three or more hours of television a day. Also, close to 30% of students played video or computer games or used a computer for something that was not school work for three or more hours per day on an average school day. Getting youth and adults engaged in recreation and on public lands is important to ensuring Montanans develop and stay committed to a healthy lifestyle.

Additionally, trails are one of the top priorities identified among land managers in the SCORP and one of the most used facilities among recreationists. Approximately 51% of land managers indicated that walking/jogging/and biking paths should be increased, while 37% of managers indicated that hiking trails should be increased. Hiking and biking trails are also identified as one of the top needs among land managers for the next five years, suggesting that there is more demand for trails at all levels of recreation.

Parks, recreation and trails are essential services for communities that contribute to the overall community health, provide a sense of public pride and cohesion, and demonstrate a tangible reflection of Montana's high quality of life. Healthy lifestyles also reduce health care costs to both individuals and society as a whole. A 2012 report by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation found that reducing the average body mass index in Montana by 5% could lead to health care savings of more than $700 million in 10 years and $1 billion in 20 years.[38] For every $1 spent on building biking trails and walking paths, Montana could save approximately $3 in medical expenses. For every $1 spent in wellness programs, companies could save $3.27 in medical costs and $2.73 in absenteeism costs.

Trail activities also help build community and encourage social interaction among recreationists. Trails provide the linkage for getting people outdoors and onto public lands, and many people recreate with their friends and family in fun and community-oriented experiences. Trails are the venue that brings people together to walk, jog, hike, bike, horseback ride, off-road, and ski, among other activities. Projects to acquire and develop trails can also build partnerships among private companies, landowners, neighboring municipalities, local government, and user groups that can enhance communication and cooperation to manage public land for recreational

[38] Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. 2012. Bending the Obesity Cost Curve in Montana: Issue Brief. http://www.rwjf.org/content/dam/farm/reports/reports/2012/rwjf401478.

experiences that everyone can enjoy. In addition, when residents and user groups are encouraged to become more involved in trail projects, they feel more connected to the community and to the resource, helping to ensure the long-term stewardship of both natural and recreational resources.

6.5 Montana's Recreation Economy

In 2012, the Outdoor Industry Association estimated that outdoor recreation in Montana generates $5.8 billion in consumer spending, which is 18% of all consumer spending in Montana (*Figure 8*)[39]. Additionally, outdoor recreation creates 64,000 direct jobs and generates $1.5 billion in wages and salaries, as well as $403 million in state and local tax revenue. Recreation is a growing industry in Montana, driven by Montana's diverse public lands and open spaces that brings in dollars from residents and out-of-state visitors.

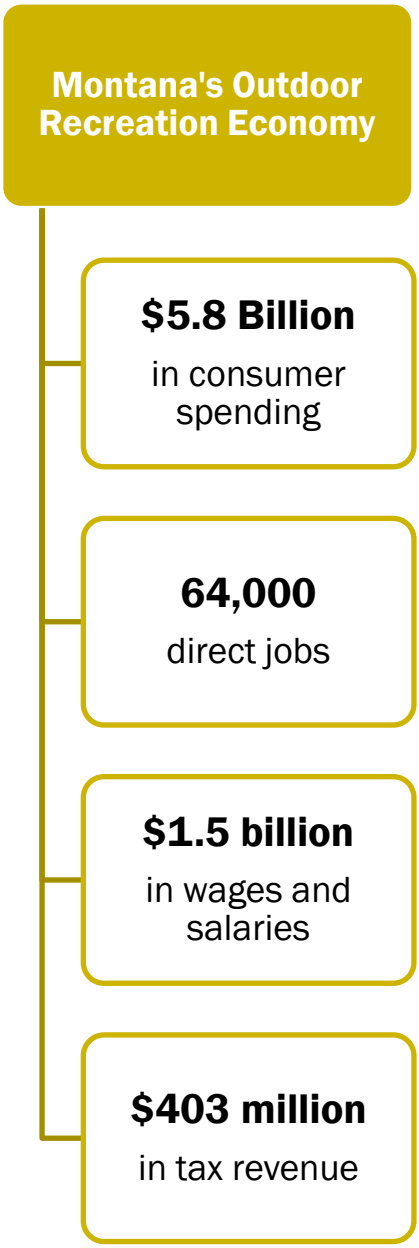


Figure 8. Montana's Outdoor Recreation Economy.

Montana as a whole is experiencing high growth in the Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation industry, according to July 2013 employment statistics from Montana Department of Labor and Industry[40]. From 2010 to 2020, the industry is expected to increase by 35% and grow 3% in employment—the fastest growing industry in Montana. Leisure and Hospitality and Accommodation and Food Services are also industries that are expected to grow at an average rate of 1.65% by 2020. Together, these industries currently employ almost 111,900 Montanans, which is about 27% of all service-providing employment. By 2020, these industries are expected to increase by 20% to employ 134,000 Montanans.

In 2007, the Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research estimated that 107,000 nonresident visitors spent at least one night in Mineral County, and spend an estimated $22 million in the County, about 54% of which was spent by hunters, anglers, and floaters/boaters[41]. About 64% of nonresident visitors to Montana are attracted to mountains and forests, and considering Mineral County is predominately a mountainous and forested landscape, there is great opportunity to attract more recreationists to the area. Mineral County is also the most frequently used entry point into Montana, and opportunity exists

[39] The Outdoor Industry Association. 2013. Montana Outdoor Recreation Economy. http://www.outdoorindustry.org/images/ore_reports/MT-montana-outdoorrecreationeconomy-oia.pdf
[40] Montana Department of Labor & Industry, Research & Analysis Bureau. Labor Market Information. July 2013. http://www.ourfactsyourfuture.org/.
[41] Mineral County Challenge. 2009. Phase 1: Our County Today.

to capitalize on this with a destination that attracts people "to" Mineral County versus "though" on I-90.

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."[42] 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. Nonresident park visitors alone spent $122.3 million. Approximately 60% of nonresident spending occurred outside a 50-mile radius from the parks. Hence the ability of Montana State Parks to provide economic opportunities throughout the entire state is evident, since nearly 60% of the total impact for employment, labor income and sales likewise occurred at least 50 miles outside the parks.

In Region 2, which includes Fish Creek State Park, nonresident visitors to state parks contributed $5.8 million in local spending, and helped create over 210 jobs, $5.4 million in labor income, and $16.7 million in industry sales.[43] Region 2 had the second highest economic impact among the State Park regions, after Region 1 in Kalispell. Both regions, however, are a part of the Glacier Country Tourism region. State parks attract both day and overnight visitors to areas, many of whom spend money in nearby towns and at local businesses. As such, state parks are important contributors to the local and regional economies and tourism industries.

6.6 Economic Contributions of Wildlife-Associated Recreation

According to the 2011 FHWAR report[44], hunters, anglers, and wildlife recreationists expended $145.0 billion nationally. Recreationists spent $43.2 billion on equipment, $32.2 billion on trips, and $14.6 billion on licenses and fees, membership dues, and other contributions. On average, each sportsperson spent $2,407 in 2011.

In Montana, recreationists spent $1.4 billion in wildlife-associated expenditures in 2011. Of that total, trip-related expenditures such as food and lodging were $666 million and equipment expenditures total $569 million. The remaining $173 million was spent on licenses, contributions, land ownership and leasing, and other items. By activity, hunters had the highest expenditures at over $627 million, with a majority going to equipment expenditures. Wildlife-watchers expended over $400 million, with $291 million on trip-related expenditures. Anglers expended over $339 million, with about $141 million each on trip-related and equipment expenditures.

[42] Bureau of Business and Economic Research. 2010. Economic Impact Survey of Visitors to Montana State Parks. Prepared for Montana State Parks. http://fwp.mt.gov/fwpDoc.html?id=47807.

[43] Fish Creek State Park was not a state park until 2010, so its economic impact was not included in the survey. It is expected that the economic impact of the park once it is developed will contribute to a higher regional impact overall.

[44] U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. 2012.

7. Management Concepts & Definitions

The following management concepts and definitions provide guidance for management of Fish Creek State Park and for future development of park facilities, trails, and allowable recreation activities. The intent of this section is to provide more information on the types of experiences, amenities, facilities, and activities proposed for Fish Creek State Park. This management plan sets the vision for the park, and future development will go through necessary Montana Environmental Policy Act process prior to approval. For more information on the development concepts, see Chapter 9.

7.1 Proposed Management Units

Helpful to the management planning process is the identification and delineation of Management Units. These are areas with defined characteristics and qualities for which there are related user expectations, management guidance and defined levels of development. These units reflect a progression from a primary focus on visitor service areas to more backcountry and minimally developed areas. Incorporated in each unit description is guidance for a desired management vision and visitor experience, as well as acceptable amenities, facilities, and recreation activities. **See Map 10 for proposed management units for Fish Creek State Park.**

Frontcountry (Unit A)

Desired Conditions: Park visitors would be provided safe and easily accessible recreational opportunities, including maintained public roads, overnight camping and day use, and high visitor interaction with park staff and volunteers. Developed facilities would be provided to enhance park administration, overnight camping, day use, sanitation, public safety, and public education. Existing roads would be analyzed for access needs, conversion to trails, or to identify roads that do not provide a high quality recreation experience and would be decommissioned and restored by natural processes.

Acceptable Amenities and Facilities:

- Public contact station as base of operations and administrative headquarters to serve the public
- Public roads (paved and unpaved):
    - Open to registered, street legal vehicles
    - Regularly maintained
    - Posted traffic control signs
- Shared use paths (excluding passenger vehicles)
- Developed campground with following amenities:
    - Access roads and designated parking areas
    - Information and fee collection kiosks
    - Designated, reservable campsites
    - ADA accessible campsites and toilets
    - Potable water
    - Electrified campsites

  - Designated steel fire grates
  - Picnic tables and areas
  - Vault or flush toilets, showers
  - Yurt or cabin rentals
  - Group use shelter(s) or pavilion(s)
  - Food storage lockers

Acceptable Recreational Activities:

- Passenger vehicle access (via public roadways)
- Camping (in developed, designated sites only, closed in all riparian areas)
- Interpretive and education programs (provided by park staff)
- Pedestrian trail use (less than ½ mile, paved and unpaved)
- Day use (picnicking, group use events, walking, fishing)
- Commercial Use or Concessions (will be considered if compatible with Park mission)
- Hunting and trapping may be permitted in designated areas
- No hunting "safety zones" would be established in appropriate areas for public safety

Natural (Unit B)

Desired Conditions: Park visitors would be provided rustic recreational opportunities, including trail use, overnight rustic camping and day use. The probability for encounters with park visitors and staff will be moderate to low. Developed facilities would be limited to those that enhance trail use and rustic overnight camping opportunities. Visitor experience would be variable in challenge, adventure, and time commitment. Natural conditions would be managed or modified to support visitor services, but still appear natural, with rustic development, and moderate levels of active recreation uses. Site hardening will occur as necessary to protect sensitive resources. Existing roads would be analyzed for access needs, conversion to trails, or to identify roads that do not provide a high quality recreation experience and would be decommissioned and restored by natural processes.

Acceptable Amenities and Facilities:

- Developed trail system:
  - Trailheads
  - Trail destinations and distance signage
  - Natural surface trails
  - Shared-use trails
  - Single use trails
  - Motorized trails on designated routes (OHV and snowmobile)
- Designated rustic campground with following amenities:
  - Moderate sites
  - No electric hookups
  - Picnic tables
  - Designated steel fire grates
  - Vault toilets
  - Food storage lockers or devices
- Fire lookout rental, yurt/hut system

- Hike in, bike in camping:
    - Accessed with backcountry permit
    - Designated sites
    - Minimal site development
    - Designated steel fire grates
    - Vault or pit toilets

Acceptable Recreational Activities:

- Camping in designated sites only
- Overnight opportunities
- Trail use (motorized, non-motorized, multiple use)
- Hunting and fishing in accordance with regulations
- Trapping (with permission only)
- Firewood gathering (by permit only)
- Day use (berry picking, picnicking, hiking, fishing, photography, etc.)
- Commercial Use or Concessions (will be considered if compatible with Park mission)
- No hunting "safety zones" would be established in appropriate areas for public safety

Backcountry (Unit C)

Desired Conditions: Park visitors would experience the park's natural landscape in an undeveloped setting with natural processes predominating, but could be modified slightly to support visitor use. Recreation would be managed where the probability for encounters with park visitors and staff would be low. Visitor experience would be moderate challenge and adventure, with high time commitment and discovery area with minimal on-site interpretation. Other focuses would be on low level of development to support visitor access to activities (e.g. trails, marked routes, designated backcountry campsites, pit toilets) and educational opportunities. Existing roads would be analyzed for conversion to trails or to identify roads that do not provide a high quality recreation experience and would be decommissioned and restored by natural processes.

Acceptable Amenities and Facilities:

- Minimally developed trail system:
    - Trailheads
    - Trail destinations and distance signage
    - Non-motorized trails (hiking, horseback, mountain bike, XC ski/snowshoe only)
    - Single use trails
    - Natural surface trails
- Hike in, bike in camping:
    - Accessed with backcountry permit
    - Designated sites
    - Minimal site development
    - Designated steel fire grates
    - Vault or pit toilets
    - Food storage lockers or devices

Acceptable Recreational Activities:

- Camping in designated backcountry sites only
- Non-motorized trail use
- Hunting and fishing in accordance with set seasons
- Trapping with permission only
- Firewood gathering by permit only
- Day use (berry picking, hiking, fishing, nature observation, photography, etc.)
- No hunting "safety zones" would be established in appropriate areas for public safety

Resource (Unit D)

Desired Conditions: Park visitors would experience the park's natural landscape in an undeveloped setting with natural processes predominating. Interpretation and education would be the primary focus, with day use activities for wildlife viewing and hiking. Areas could be modified slightly to support visitor use and to minimize recreation impacts. Existing roads would be analyzed for conversion to trails or to identify roads that do not provide a high quality recreation experience and would be decommissioned and restored by natural processes.

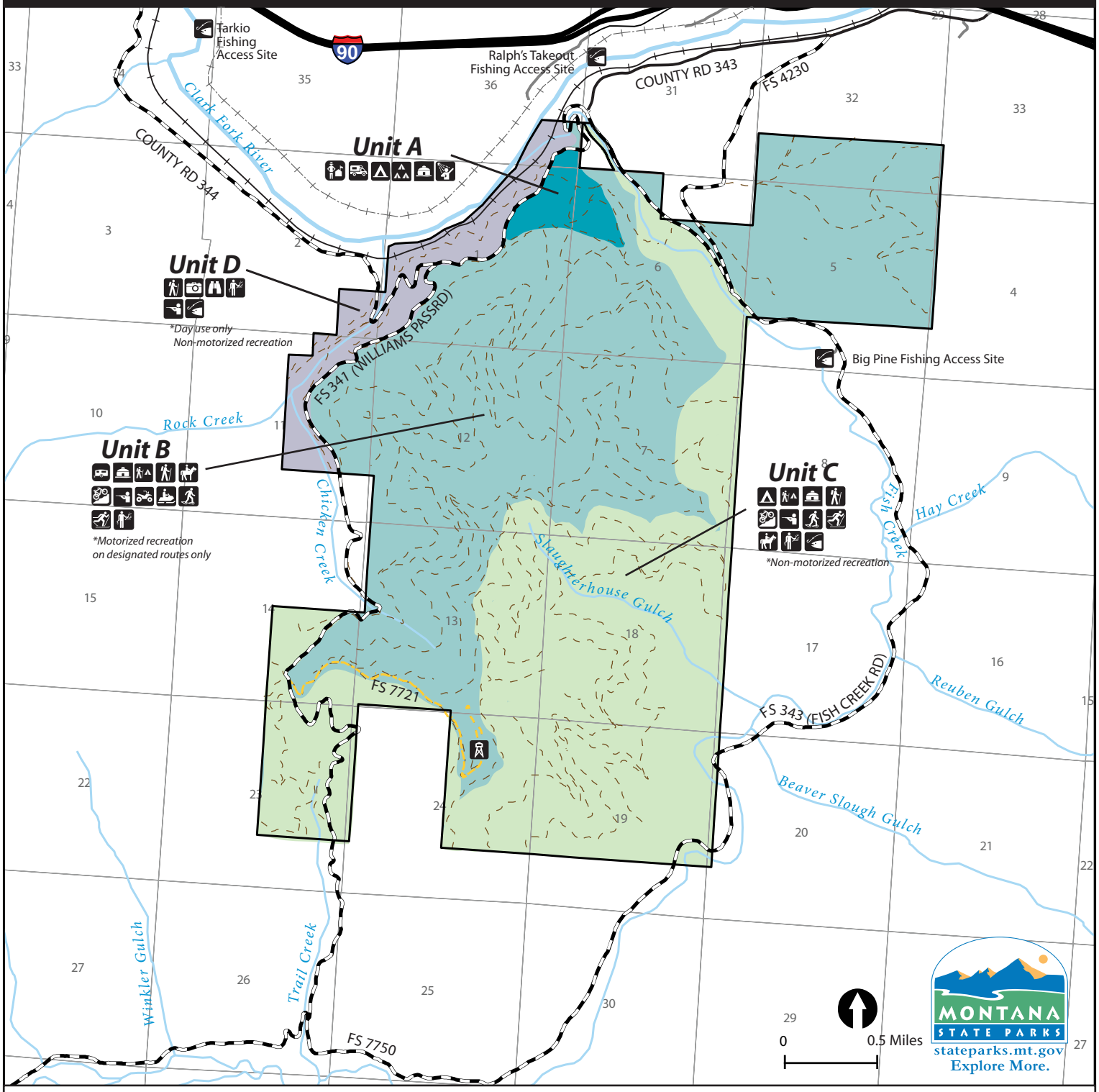
Acceptable Amenities and Facilities:

- Vault or pit toilets
- Minimally developed trail system:
    - Trailheads
    - Trail destinations and distance signage
    - Natural surface trails
    - Non-motorized trails
    - Single use trails

Acceptable Recreational Activities:

- Day use (berry picking, hiking, fishing, nature observation, wildlife viewing, photography, etc.)
- Non-motorized trail use
- Hunting and fishing in accordance with set seasons
- Trapping with permission only
- Firewood gathering by permit only
- No hunting "safety zones" would be established in appropriate areas for public safety

MAP 9. Proposed Management Units, Facilities & Uses



Legend

- Fish Creek State Park
- Public Road
- Montana Rail Link
- Abandoned Railroad ROW
- Logging Road
  **Roads outside of park boundary not shown.*
- Williams Peak Road (FS 7721)

Management Units

**Management areas help guide intensity of development and provide a guide for use of areas within the park.*

- Frontcountry (*Unit A*)
- Natural (*Unit B*)
- Backcountry (*Unit C*)
- Resource (*Unit D*)

Acceptable Facilities & Uses

- Developed Campground
- Firewood Gathering
- Fishing
- Group Camping
- Hiking
- Hike-in Campsites
- Horseback Riding
- Hunting
- Huts, Yurts, or Rental Cabins
- Modern Amenities
- Mountain Biking
- Off-Highway Vehicles
- Overnight Lookout
- Rustic Campground without Hook-ups
- Snowmobiles
- Snowshoeing
- Tent-only Campsites
- Visitor Contact Station
- XC Skiing

This map is for informational purposes only and is a graphical representation of data. Produced by Montana State Parks for the Fish Creek State Park Draft Management Plan.

7.2 Trail Types and System Concepts

Trail Types

Shared-Use Paved Trails

Shared-use paved trails are hard-surfaced trails that typically accommodate pedestrians, bicyclists, wheelchair users, horseback riders, and OHVs among other uses. With hard surfacing, these trails provide a high level of accessibility to users of all abilities. Generally, shared-use trails would be used to serve as access to and between facilities, use areas, and trailheads and staging areas for short distances. The most common applications would be within camp loops, day use areas and between facilities and use areas. Long term plans could connect the old Milwaukee Railroad line to Fish Creek State Park with a shared-use paved trail.

Natural Surface Trails

Natural surface trails are unpaved trails with crushed rock, wood chips, or dirt. Natural surface trails serve a variety of user groups, including hikers, horseback riders, mountain bikers, and OHV riders. Natural surface trails are soft surfaced, follow the contours of the land, and are more susceptible to natural forces than paved trails. Natural surface trails are generally shaped not built, and include carefully considered tread alignments, site slopes, and tread grades. Trail width and surface material will vary with anticipated intensity of use and user type, but generally width is preferred at less than 8'. Surface drainage across soft-surfaced trails should be designed to minimize erosion of the trail surface and edges.

Single Use Trails

Single use trails cater to one particular type of use to allow for a more customized and unique experience, including hiking, horseback riding, mountain biking, and OHV use. Single use trails are highly desired among recreationists because the trails can provide generally more secluded experiences, facilitate a closer connection to nature, and be generally more challenging with different technical features in the case of mountain bike and OHV single use trails. Single use trails often attract users as a destination location, if trails are designed well and offer variety in technical features and length.

Concepts[45]

Linear Trail Layout

This is the simplest trail layout and has a point of origin and a point of destination. It connects two points or links two trails and is used when there are points of interest or destinations along a single narrow corridor. This layout may also be used to connect other trail systems where the terrain restricts a trail to a single narrow corridor. A disadvantage to this layout is the user must return to the point of origin over the trail already traveled.

[45] Images Source: National Off-Highway Vehicle Conservation Council. 2006. Management Guidelines for OHV Recreation.

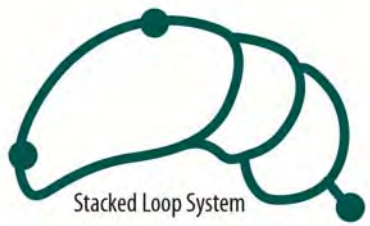
Single Loop System

Single Loop System

A single loop system is used most often for a single, long distance trail. It may also be used for shorter-duration around large features. Trails of this system type are easy to develop and administer, and can accommodate multiple trailheads along the loop. Trail design considerations include consistent difficulty over the entire length, so a user could finish the trail without being pushed over their skill level. One major disadvantage of a single loop system is that the user's choices are limited, however they do not have to travel on the same trail back to the trailhead.

Stacked Loop Trail System

Stacked loop trail system facilitates multiple levels of difficulty and allows the user to customize their experience based on a number of trail options. Generally, each stacked loop becomes more difficult, and the experiences are contained within a complete loop. This system generally only has one trailhead where the users begin and finish. Stacked loop trails are intended for use on small parcels of land, and is useful to provide trail user choices in where and how to travel on the trails. The various loop segments can also be used to segregate more difficult trails from easier trails.

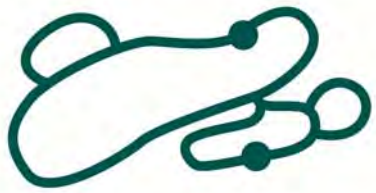


Stacked Loop System

Generally, the lower loop is a beginner loop that can accommodate younger, family-oriented, and beginner users. The middle loop of a stacked loop trail system extends higher or farther than the first loop, and generally covers the most ground. The final loop is the most difficult, and generally the highest or farthest from the trailhead. This loop accommodates advanced users, and can provide for more technical features and slower travel. A stacked loop trail system allows for users to build their experience based on their skill level, and creates unique and diverse user experiences that can be customized with each visit.

Primary and Secondary Loop System

This system has a primary loop, with multiple secondary loops. The secondary loops may offer a different level of difficulty, provide a different experience, or provide access to a destination. This system provides the most flexibility to meet user expectations for a variety of users. This type of system is ideal for multiple-use trails and may permit one-way or two-way traffic.



Primary and Secondary Loop System

Sustainable Trails

A sustainable trail balances many elements. It has very little impact on the environment, resists erosion through proper design, construction, and maintenance, and blends with the surrounding area. According to the International Mountain Biking Association,[46] design concepts to consider when constructing sustainable trails include trail alignment, average grade, soil type, annual rainfall, vegetation, type of users, number of users, and difficulty level of the trail.

Trail grade in particular is critical to sustainable trail design. Trails that are too steep funnel water and increase erosion. Average trail grades of 10% or less are most sustainable, although short steeper sections may be appropriate. Trail buffers are also important to limit ecological impacts, especially trails prone to erosion. Additionally, paying attention to user values is important to creating enjoyable, safe, and sustainable trails that engender stewardship and encourage users to take care of what they value. Sustainable trail design principles will be integrated into all trail design and development to minimize trail impacts while still providing a high quality recreation experience.

To minimize impacts to wildlife, trails should be designed with the zone of influence as an integral part of the trail. Align trails along or near existing human-created ecological edges, avoid specific areas known to sensitive species, populations, or communities, and disturb as narrow an area as possible to help minimize the zone of influence. It is also important to locate trails and supporting facilities in areas where they can be screened by vegetation or topography. Providing trails that are diverse and interesting also encourage recreationists to stay on trail, thereby keeping the zone of influence contained to the trail itself.[47]

According to the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources' Trail Planning, Design, and Development Guidelines,[48] the following are guiding principles for ecologically sustainable trails to protect, restore, and manage natural environments associated with trail development (*Figure 9*):

1. Avoid sensitive ecological areas and critical habitats
2. Develop trails in areas already influenced by human activity
3. Provide buffers to avoid/protect sensitive ecological and hydrologic systems
4. Use natural infiltration and best practices for stormwater management
5. Provide ongoing stewardship of the trails and adjoining natural systems
6. Ensure that trails remain sustainable
7. Formally decommission and restore unsustainable trail corridors

Application of these principles will minimize the impact of trails on natural resources and sensitive ecological systems. Importantly, the strict application of these guiding principles has to

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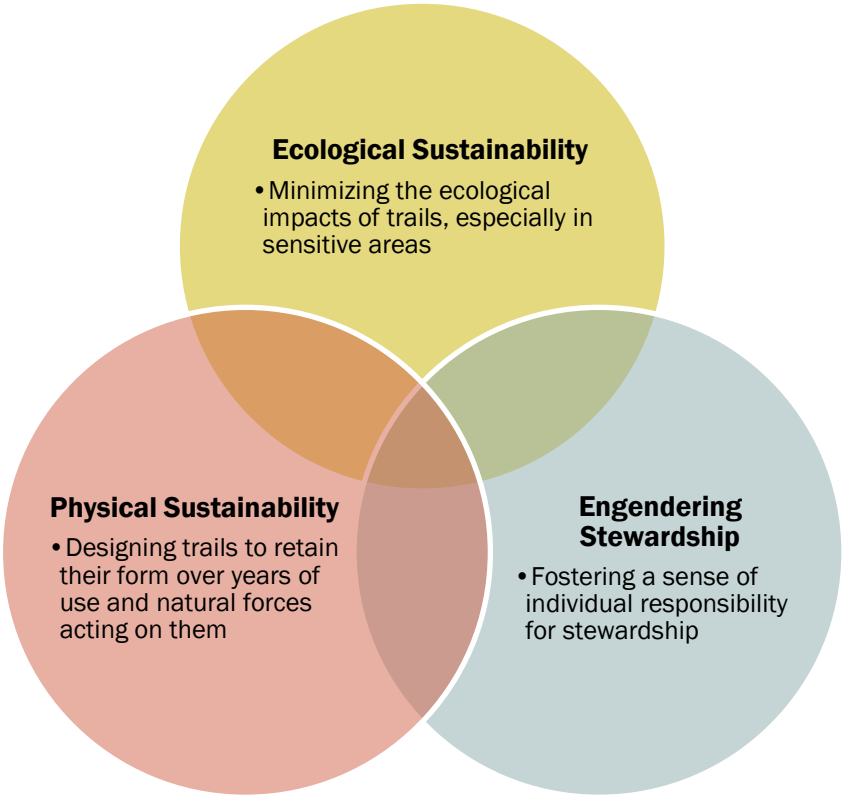
[46] International Mountain Biking Association. Sustainable Trail Development: A Guide to Designing and Constructing Native-surface Trails. Prepared for Town of Castle Rock, Colorado. http://crgov.com/DocumentCenter/Home/View/1430.

[47] Colorado State Parks. 1998. Planning Trails with Wildlife in Mind: A Handbook for Trail Planners. http://parks.state.co.us/SiteCollectionImages/parks/Programs/Trails%20Program/PlanningWithWildlifeInMind/trailshandbooksectionone.pdf

[48] State of Minnesota, Department of Natural Resources. 2007. Trail Planning, Design, and Development Guidelines. Trails & Waterways Division, 500 Lafayette Road, St. Paul, MN 55155-4052.

be balanced against the need to locate trails where they will be of high recreational value to the targeted users, who often want to be close to nature, enjoy beautiful scenes, and observe wildlife. This is an important consideration and underscores the need for resource managers and trail designers to work together to determine which values are most important for any given situation.

Figure 10. Three Factors in Trail Sustainability



Universal Design

Montana State Parks seeks to address the needs of all citizens and visitors to Fish Creek State Park. The concept of universal design will be used in trail and pathway design where feasible. Universal design principles seek to improve the lives of a broad spectrum of people, not just those with disabilities. These principles are particularly important to include in the design of connector paths between major facilities in developed areas within the park. Accessibility benefits everyone, and indicates the park is welcoming. Paved or hardened trails, with suitable grades and widths, linked to facilities such as restrooms, parking, and picnic areas with accessible features, benefit people who use wheelchairs, people on crutches, elderly people with diminished mobility, and people with kids in strollers.

8. Management Direction

During the planning process, the public and Montana State Parks addressed the following issues facing this park: recreational opportunities, facilities and services, trails (non-motorized and motorized), special uses, park operations and maintenance, visitor experience, and natural resources protection. A discussion of the issues raised is presented in the next sections, as well as in the Public Scoping Summary (*Appendix A*). The issues are organized under the following management themes:

- **Public Safety**
- **Recreation Management**
- **Facilities and Services**
- **Park Operations**
- **Tourism and Partnerships**
- **Natural and Cultural Resource Stewardship**
- **Interpretation and Education**

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 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.

8.1 Public Safety

Montana State Parks highest priority is to provide a healthy, safe, and family-friendly environment that fosters positive experiences and high levels of visitor satisfaction. An improved public safety presence serves as a strong deterrent to unsafe behavior and criminal activity in state parks. Increased law enforcement presence would be needed as park visitation increases.

Non-compliance with camping fees, quiet hours, disorderly conduct, and control of pets has historically represented common park rule violations that adversely affect visitors' enjoyment of the park. Montana State Parks will strive to gain compliance with these rules as a means of providing safe and family friendly park experiences.

Fish Creek State Park has the potential for serious incidents related to medical emergencies, search and rescue, wildland fire, and crimes against persons or property. In addition, Fish Creek State Park is located in bear habitat which presents a potential for human/bear conflicts. These risks are inherent to outdoor recreation in Montana and require a progressive approach to incident planning, response and management.

It is the intent of Montana State Parks to integrate public safety and law enforcement into daily state park operations as a means of providing greater public service, visitor protection, and resource stewardship.

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

Objective A: Provide professional incident preparedness and response.

A1. Integrate public safety and incident response training, preparation, and readiness into overall park operations and staff training.
A2. Develop and implement a progressive incident response and management plan for the park.
A3. Coordinate cooperative emergency responses and incident management with the Mineral County Sheriff's Office, Mineral County Search and Rescue, FWP Enforcement Division, Lolo National Forest Law Enforcement, other law enforcement agencies, local emergency medical service and fire suppression providers.
A4. Apply an Incident Command System framework to all incidents that are managed by Montana State Parks and encourage a unified command approach to incidents managed by other jurisdictions.
A5. Document and analyze the type, location and frequency of incidents and emergency responses and conduct incident reviews of all critical incidents occurring in the park.

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

B1. Integrate public safety, law enforcement, resource protection, and visitor education into daily assignments of all park staff.
B2. Actively identify, document and mitigate public safety risks and hazards.

B3. Ensure that developed campgrounds provide clean and potable drinking water for park visitors.
B4. Properly inform park visitors of travel routes, rules and regulations, safety advisories and trip planning information through the proactive use of park signs, printed materials, media releases and website information.
B5. Proactively disseminate information and advice regarding best practices to avoid human/bear conflicts.
B6. Enhance public safety in bear habitat by providing food storage lockers and/or devices and/or implementing food and attractant storage rules.
B7. Ensure traffic safety and control signage is properly posted on public roadways.

Objective C: Provide proactive presence by uniformed State Park personnel and qualified law enforcement personnel at Fish Creek State Park to enhance visitor safety and protection.

C1. Increase law enforcement presence to reflect increased visitation as needed. Uniformed staff will strive to positively influence visitor behavior and perception of Montana State Parks by emphasizing education, outreach, proactive and preventative law enforcement techniques and approaches.
C2. Uniformed staff will patrol park lands during optimal times and locations with an emphasis on public safety and resource stewardship.
C3. Field staff will maintain first aid and CPR certification and be well-trained in providing emergency incident response and management.
C4. Work to improve public understanding, and respect of park rules and regulations and expectations with regard to compliance and desired visitor behavior.
C5. Improve visitor compliance with entrance and camping fees
C6. Implement pet control and pet waste removal regulations through visitor education and preventative law enforcement.
C7. Proactively disseminate OHV safety information and actively enforce OHV regulations, including the requirement that OHV's utilizing public roads must be licensed and registered as a street legal vehicle.

8.2 Recreation Management

The Fish Creek area has long been valued as a regionally important destination for recreationists and activities like fishing, hunting, hiking, horseback riding, and camping to name a few. The development of Fish Creek State Park is an opportunity to enhance access to recreation, as well as provide important amenities and facilities to enhance the recreation experience. The Park offers visitors wide vistas and scenic viewpoints, open space, access to adjacent FWP lands, DNRC, and National Forest lands, connections to roadless areas, and solitude. The Clark Fork River through the Alberton Gorge is also a spectacular whitewater destination that draws visitors from all over the region to its Class III rapids.

During public scoping, a number of values were identified as important to park visitors. Many expressed the desire for a developed campground, while others wanted to have the option of camping in a more undeveloped and rustic setting. The public also expressed that camping facilities should be developed near water and trails, with easy access to roads and a strong connection with Alberton Gorge. For recreational opportunities, there was a strong desire to continue many of the current uses, including hunting and trapping, berry-picking, and firewood gathering. Opportunities for people of all accessibility levels and abilities were also important for visitors. Questions arose regarding seasonal use or year-round use, and many thought the park offered enough opportunities for year-round use, as long as conflicts with wildlife migration and hunting seasons are properly managed.

Around Fish Creek State Park, current camping facilities are limited in diversity and modern amenities, and public scoping comments suggest there is a desire for developed facilities in the area. Primitive camping is provided at the area FASs and on state trust land, including at Big Pine FAS just outside of the park boundary. The U.S. Forest Service maintains two campgrounds in the area, one small primitive campground for equestrian use at Clearwater Crossing, and Quartz Flat along I-90 that accommodates RVs but does not have electrical hook-ups. A developed campground with electricity and modern amenities was identified as a need that could be met at Fish Creek State Park, and was proposed in the Preliminary Management Plan from the 2010 acquisition EA. Other camping opportunities could include rustic camping without electrical hook-ups, hike-in/bike-in backcountry camping, cabins, yurts, and huts. The Williams Peak Lookout is a unique feature, and with improvements to the road and the structure itself, it could be transformed into a rental facility that would provide a special experience for visitors, unlike any other in the state park system.

Early on in the planning process, trail development was also identified as a major opportunity for the Park, including trails for both non-motorized and motorized uses. Mountain biking and OHV use in particular were identified as trail activities that are currently limited in Mineral County and the larger region. During public scoping, there was strong interest expressed from local mountain biking and OHV users and groups for trail development at Fish Creek State Park. Of the 377 miles of national forest trails in Mineral County, only 3.5 miles are specifically designed for motorcycles and approximately 3 miles are specifically designed for bicycles. There is also an extensive network of Forest Service roads open to all vehicle travel that trails on the Park could connect with.

Users are looking for trails that specifically support their activity and for a place to engage in a safe and welcomed recreation experience. The existing network of close to 70 miles of logging roads in the park presents many opportunities for road-to-trail conversions and more access for mountain biking and motorized recreation, as well as for hiking, horseback riding, and winter use. New trail construction can interconnect existing grades and incorporate interesting natural features and scenic views along the way, while avoiding more sensitive areas. The trail system can also be integrated with existing roads, trails and trailheads on surrounding state and federal lands, including non-motorized trails west towards the Great Burn Study Area and motorized trails east towards Petty Creek.

User groups can help with trail planning and development, and long-term maintenance of the trails and stewardship of the park. Single use trails, loop trails and destinations were highlighted as popular trail amenities that could provide half-day through multi-day experiences and elevate the park to a regional destination that draws users to the area. With good planning and design, the park has the potential to accommodate a wide number of trail activities for users of all skills and abilities while also maintaining the important natural resource values. To minimize conflicts among trail users and reduce impacts to the environment, a number of trails could be developed for single use and multiple use. The park could also provide a staging area for access to other public lands and areas for recreation activities.

Based on the input received during public scoping, data provided in the Montana SCORP, and research throughout the planning process—coupled with the park's convenient location, natural setting and potential for facility and trail development as a typical state park—there is demand for the following at Fish Creek State Park:

- Developed camping for tents and RVs
- Rustic camping and day use associated with trail use (hike-in, bike-in)
- Trail development for non-motorized activities, particularly mountain biking
- Trail development for motorized uses including OHVs and snowmobiles
- Rehabilitation of the Williams Peak Lookout for overnight rentals
- Concessionaire and commercial activities
- Continued access for hunting, fishing, berry picking, and firewood gathering
- Facilities and staging areas to support uses off-site on adjacent State and Federal public lands

8.2.1 Goal: Fish Creek State Park is developed as a high quality recreation destination for all visitors.

Objective A: Provide public access at appropriate and strategic locations that supports an array of recreational opportunities, stewardship goals, and maintains good neighbor relations.

A1. Develop a public access system to determine access routes, prioritize important wildlife corridors, and identify closures and restrictions where necessary. Designate open roads for public use on park lands. Close roads identified as hazardous, not significant, or creating resource damage, and gate and sign accordingly.

A2. Designate user fee stations in appropriate locations. Sign park entrances with park name, informational kiosks, and orientation maps. Direct majority of visitor access from I-90 at the Fish Creek exit. Work with Mineral County, US Forest Service, Montana Department of Transportation, and Montana DNRC to identify additional park access roads, trailheads, and signage that will direct public access into and through the park.
A3. Delineate park property boundaries as necessary and as funds become available.
A4. Work closely with the US Forest Service to identify and facilitate large-scale connections to national forest lands.
A5. Work with neighboring land owners to address access issues and reduce trespassing onto private property.

Objective B: Provide a variety of high-quality overnight camping opportunities that meet the standards of Montana State Parks.

B1. Provide a developed campground with modern amenities in Management Unit A. Consider yurts and/or cabin rentals in conjunction with developed campground where feasible.
B2. Provide hike-in and bike-in backcountry camping with access from trails in Units B and C.
B3. Investigate locations to provide a vehicle-accessible rustic campground in Unit B.
B4. Investigate opportunities to develop a hut-to-hut system in Unit B or C.
B5. Evaluate unregulated (dispersed) campsites on park land for designation and improvement.
B6. Investigate opportunities for an equestrian campground, including partnerships with the U.S. Forest Service to improve current equestrian facilities in the Lolo National Forest.

Objective C: Develop the Williams Peak Lookout as a safe and unique overnight rental experience accessed by OHV, hiking, biking, and horseback riding.

C1. Upgrade the structural stability of the facility to accommodate for public use.
C2. Develop and implement a reservation program for overnight use of the Lookout.
C3. Develop a marketing strategy with tourism partners to promote the facility and visitor experience.

Objective D: Improve visitation data collection.

D1. Develop a sampling strategy for data collection based on Parks Division visitation methodology.
D2. Field sample to develop metrics for calculating visitation in 2014.
D3. Identify main entrance points to track visitation. Install at least one traffic counter starting in 2014.

Objective E: Maintain safe and compatible hunting opportunities for the public away from high use areas.

E1. Provide seasonal access for hunting outside of high use areas, based on current seasons and regulations.

E2. Establish and sign no-hunting "safety zones" around high use areas and other major destinations, and establish conditions that allow hunters and non-hunters to safely share recreational resources.

E3. In compliance with Montana trapping regulations, allow trapping through written permission only. Carefully review trapping permits to review compatibility with visitors and their pets.

8.2.2 Goal: Visitors have access to a high-quality trail system consisting of trail loops, destinations within the park, and connections to other public lands.

Objective A: Engage user groups to create a vision for a trail system.

A1. Identify gateway locations, trailheads and staging areas to facilitate trail use.

A2. Work with user groups to evaluate potential trail locations, alignments, routes, and designations. Identify new trail connections. Provide trail experiences that are diverse and interesting to reduce the desire for users to create social trails.

A3. Provide trail orientation and informational signs at junctions with other trails or roads, parking lots, trail shelters and trailheads so that trail users understand allowable uses on each trail or trail segment.

A4. Develop implementation timeline.

A5. Partner with user groups to design trail features, identify funding sources for trail development, and consider stewardship agreements for maintenance of the trail system.

Objective B: Develop a high-quality destination mountain biking trail system that incorporates single use trails throughout the Park.

B1. Identify singletrack mountain biking trails using a stacked loop trail system to accommodate beginner, intermediate and advanced mountain bikers.

B2. Identify a long, intermediate to advanced downhill directional trail that incorporates existing and enhanced natural features and technical challenges.

B3. Develop educational signage along trails that promotes rider safety principles and ethics.

Objective C: Develop a high-quality non-motorized trail system that supports a diversity of recreational activities throughout the Park.

C1. Identify single use and multiple use linear and loop trails to major destinations that are open to all non-motorized users, including to the Williams Peak Lookout.

C2. Identify shared use paved trails for trail connections between campgrounds, trailheads, and other visitor amenities.

C3. Develop trailheads with appropriate facilities and amenities, including kiosks and signage, restrooms, picnic tables, horse trailer parking and unloading area, and bicycle parking.

C4. Develop strategies to manage user conflicts on multiple use trails, and to reduce soil erosion impacts on all trails.

Objective D: Develop designated motorized trail opportunities to Williams Peak Lookout and other identified loops in Unit B.

D1. Identify trails for shared use paths and off-road motorized travel for partial day rides with overnight camping amenities. Sign trails using a standard trail rating guide.

D2. Develop a central controlled OHV trailhead with appropriate staging area amenities and facilities, including unloading/loading ramps and a kiosk with trail maps, rules and regulations, interpretive and environmental information, and intended use.

D3. Investigate opportunities for an OHV training area that caters to youth and beginner riders to build off-roading skills and ethics.

D4. Develop educational signage along trails that promotes rider safety principles and ethics.

8.2.3 Goal: Provide consistent resource and recreation management of lands adjacent to Fish Creek State Park.

Objective A: Support high-quality water activities including angling along Fish Creek and white-water rafting through the Alberton Gorge.

A1. Facilitate access to high-quality fishing waters where appropriate based on preservation of Fish Creek's high fisheries and aquatic values.

A2. Work with Fisheries Division to promote fishing etiquette and distribute important information on sensitive species.

A3. Work with the Fisheries Division to develop strategies for preserving or improving streambank and riparian protection.

A4. Provide services and facilities that compliment recreation along Alberton Gorge.

Objective B: Reduce visitor confusion and management conflicts associated with adjacent public and private lands.

B1. Work collaboratively with the FWP Wildlife Division, Enforcement Division and fellow agencies to establish consistent public use rules, regulations and signing on park lands and adjacent public lands.

B2. Clarify recreational opportunities and recreation management on DNRC lands outside of and adjacent to the park boundary.

B3. Discuss with the FWP Fisheries Division the alternatives to manage Big Pine FAS as a day-use site once a developed campground is established in the State Park.

B4. Ensure the park boundary is properly posted and/or fenced.

8.3 Facilities and Services

Fish Creek State Park does not currently have any developed facilities to support visitor services. Full development of the park over time may include a park entrance, welcome and orientation kiosks and signage, visitor contact station, overnight camping facilities, group use areas, trails, and other amenities identified as important to the visitor experience. Necessary water and electrical lines would need to be constructed to supply utilities to the developed campground and visitor contact station. There is currently no on-site staff and no consistent visitor interaction. An RV site pad may be constructed in the developed campground to provide an initial point of contact during the summer season.

The park is closely linked to FWP lands within the adjacent Wildlife Management Area, and other public lands managed by the US Forest Service and Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation. Coordination between these agencies would be essential to maintain a seamless recreation experience with well-maintained public roads, appropriate signing of boundaries, posting of regulations and timely information, and coordinated recreation management. Allowed recreation activities may be different depending on the land management, so it is necessary to ensure all partners are informed of the rules and regulations, and authorized activities. Similarly, communication with neighboring landowners would be important to ensure good neighbor relations and mitigate trespassing onto private land.

Though certain amenities are expected be in higher demand, a variety of factors would 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.

8.3.1 Goal: Fish Creek State Park has an array of high quality facilities and services to enhance the visitor experience.

Objective A: Develop a travel system for the park roads.

A1. Designate appropriate travel methods and routes in accordance with established park management units.
A2. Develop a naming or numbering convention for park roads and trails.
A3. Develop consistent standards for signage throughout the park.
A4. Develop 1:24,000 scale maps of quadrants with roads labeled, including open/closed status, condition, grade, route designation, mileage, facilities, and points of interest.
A5. Install traffic safety and control signage on park roads with speed limits, grade, and other necessary information.

Objective B: Provide welcome and orientation to visitors with timely, accurate, and appropriate information.

B1. Identify and develop a Ranger Station in a highly prominent and accessible location to serve as a primary point of visitor contact.

B2. Develop orientation signage along Interstate 90 and Highway 12 to direct visitors to the park. Promote the main park entrance from Interstate 90 at the Fish Creek exit. Work with Montana Department of Transportation and Mineral County to design and install orientation signage based on standards.
B3. Develop entrance signage and informational kiosks at secondary entrance points, including along Williams Pass Road (NF 343) and Fish Creek Road (NF 341).
B4. Display current maps, brochures, regulations, seasonal closure reports, and additional information on entrance kiosk.

Objective C: Upgrade the Williams Peak Lookout to serve as a rental facility.

C1. Implement structural improvements and repairs to make the fire lookout safe for public use. Allow for public overnight access through a reservation system. Maintain gated access to Lookout for use by reservation holders, and to implement any necessary closures.
C2. Design and install a kiosk with information and regulations related to using the Lookout.
C3. Improve the road to the Lookout for use by OHVs and non-motorized users during summer season.
C4. Investigate a strategy to maintain road for seasonal conditions and potential winter use. Evaluate opportunities for snowmobile access during the winter season, depending on snow levels.
C5. Identify funding sources and partnerships to complete required renovations to update lookout for public use.

Objective D: Investigate options to install necessary utilities and infrastructure to support recreation uses in Unit A.

D1. Identify areas in the park for installing water, electrical, sewage connections, including where, type of connection, and the type of activities to support.
D2. Investigate and identify use of energy efficient building practices and infrastructure (solar panels/lighting, alternative heat sources, building insulation, etc.) and high-efficiency water conservation practices and infrastructure (composting toilets, gray-water recycling, shade tree plantings in campground, etc.) Use of alternative paving materials vs asphalt.
D3. Identify necessary County and State permitting requirements and procedures to install utilities.

Objective E: Provide support amenities for trails and recreation activities.

E1. Identify locations for day use areas in conjunction with a developed campground, as well as along trails. Develop a group use shelter at the developed campground.
E2. Develop designated parking areas, water, toilets, and shelter/rest areas at strategic locations along roads and on trails as necessary. Develop necessary OHV, equestrian, and mountain biking facilities at trailheads.
E3. Install gates and signage as necessary to manage multiple use trails throughout the park.

Objective F: Identify potential concessionaire services at the park.

F1. Consult with concessionaire professionals to evaluate concession needs and opportunities.
F2. Work with partners to determine and provide high demand services that meet the needs of the park.
F3. Build off of the Mineral County Challenge effort to encourage economic development associated with the park.

8.3.2 Goal: Fish Creek State Park is well-managed through good relations and communications with visitors, agencies, and adjacent landowners.

Objective A: Partner with Mineral County, U.S. Forest Service, and Montana DNRC to manage conditions of public roads that travel through the park.

A1. Work cooperatively with partners to properly maintain thru-roads Williams Pass Road and Fish Creek Road. Determine best action to improve park road surfaces, considering cost, feasibility and durability.
A2. Prioritize high traffic areas in the park needing the most attention due to dust, wear, deteriorating road conditions. Coordinate with neighboring private landowners as necessary.
A3. Work with partners to ensure that appropriate speed limits and road advisories and regulations are properly signed. Educate visitors about road maintenance costs, and driving techniques to reduce impacts.

Objective B: Develop and maintain current and up-to-date information for public reference.

B1. Develop a park brochure with map, rules and regulations, fees, reservation details, emergency and park contact information. Distribute to local venues, community sites, rest stops, Chambers of Commerce, and tourist facilities in the region.
B2. Develop and maintain park informational and regulation signs and kiosks.
B3. Work collaboratively with Glacier Country Tourism to incorporate seasonal park information on the web, in print publications, and social media marketing.
B4. Improve directional signage to the park locally and along major transportation routes including Fish Creek Road, Interstate 90, and Highway 12.

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

C1. Outline a communication strategy to regularly coordinate with FWP Wildlife and Fisheries Division, DNRC State Trust Lands Division and area U.S. Forest Service ranger districts to discuss land and recreation management.
C2. Work collaboratively with Mineral County Commissioners to openly discuss goals, developments, and activities at the park.
C3. Continue to promote visitor compliance with all park fees. Continue to promote cooperative public safety, law enforcement, search and rescue, and facility partnerships, particularly with Mineral County.

C4. Communicate openly and often with adjacent landowners. Host an annual meeting to offer details about upcoming activities and projects, and address questions and concerns as they arise.

8.4 Park Operations

As a recent addition to the Montana State Parks system, there is a strong need to allocate funding and FTE at a level that supports the fundamental park operations values of *safety, service, stewardship and sustainability*. These values must be integrated into all levels of park management and operations.

Currently, a total of 0.65 FTE (full time equivalent) employees are allocated to Fish Creek State Park. This FTE is divided between a park manager, park ranger and maintenance staff. As Fish Creek State Park evolves, additional uniformed paid staff as well as volunteers would be required to provide routine maintenance and upkeep of facilities and grounds and to serve visitor needs. Professional public safety and law enforcement services would need to be addressed through dedicated Parks Division allocations.

As Fish Creek State Park becomes more developed and visitation increases, a strategically located Ranger Station will be needed to serve as a primary point of visitor contact as well as a facility to support park maintenance, administrative and emergency response functions. In addition, vehicles, equipment, supplies and materials will need to be stationed on site to facilitate cost effective park operations.

Effective communications are fundamental to effective protection of public and employee safety and provision of visitor services, thus a reliable communications system to support park field operations may rely on one or more of the following methods of communications: land lines, cell phones, hand-held radios, radio repeater, or satellite phones.

Trails, in particular, offer a powerful avenue for encouraging volunteerism and stewardship in state parks. People love to volunteer on trails, and trail management can greatly benefit from volunteers. With limited staff and resources at Fish Creek State Park, volunteers will be an integral part of the stewardship strategy, and volunteers must be cultivated prior and during development stages to ensure that long-term maintenance is at the forefront of any project. User groups in particular can help create, maintain, restore, or close trails. Friends groups can raise money and advocate for funding. Individuals and organizations can adopt trails. However, for volunteerism to be effective, it must be guided, directed, and managed.

Concession opportunities and partnerships with private businesses will be a very important consideration during development of facilities and provision of activities at Fish Creek State Park. This supports strong partnerships with businesses and provides opportunities for local businesses and communities to generate tourism-based revenue based on public use at Fish Creek State Park.

8.4.1 Goal: Ensure staff resources and funding levels are appropriate to meet park operational needs.

Objective A: Secure staff to support increased use and development of the park.

A1. Pursue long-term staffing to increase the State Parks operations presence both seasonally and on a year-round basis to support public safety, resource stewardship, site maintenance, facility management and community engagement.

A2. Increase law enforcement presence to reflect increased visitation as needed. Uniformed staff will strive to positively influence visitor behavior and perception of Montana State Parks by emphasizing education, outreach, proactive and preventative law enforcement techniques and approaches.

Objective B: Generate Parks Earned revenue to support park operations.

B1. Actively educate visitors about camping, non-resident entry, and other user fees through signage, informational kiosks, website information and other forms of outreach.

B2. Establish user fee collection facilities at strategic locations with appropriate signage to disclose user fees.

B3. Implement fee compliance checks on a regular basis and maintain current fee signs. Take appropriate educational and enforcement action with visitors who fail to pay fees

B4. Emphasize park services, programs and recreational activities that provide immediate potential for revenue generation.

8.4.2 Goal: Ensure appropriate facilities, equipment and communications are provided to support park operations.

Objective A: Provide appropriate operational support equipment and facilities.

A1. Pursue long-term funding to support the procurement of vehicles, equipment, supplies, materials, services and facilities needed to support long-term park operations and maintenance.

A2. Pursue capital construction funding to provide a Ranger Station to serve as a primary point of public contact and facility to support maintenance and administrative functions.

A3. Provide an appropriate communications system to support public and employee safety and overall park operations.

8.5 Tourism and Economic Opportunities

Fish Creek State Park provides an excellent opportunity to enhance the Fish Creek area and Mineral County as a regional destination that caters to high quality mountain biking as well as hiking, camping, OHV riding, horseback riding, hunting, fishing, whitewater rafting, and winter activities like snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, and snowmobiling. With a high quality system, developed facilities, and high quality visitor services, Fish Creek State Park can help draw visitors to the region to recreate and explore while helping encourage economic development in local communities. Special programs and events can build a dedicated base of users, and highlight the Park as a destination for family camping weekends as well as multi-day adventures both in the Park and on surrounding public lands.

The location of the park along I-90 through—one of the most popular entrance points into Montana—is ideal for drawing people off the highway and encouraging them to stay in the area longer. Many small communities in Oregon, Wyoming, and throughout the West have demonstrated how investment in trails and public lands can lead to the creation of business opportunities related to lodging, food and other services that supports a resilient economy and improves the quality of life of local residents. Fish Creek State Park has the potential, with good planning and a strong tourism focus, to bring new awareness of Mineral County and help grow a strong and diverse recreation- and conservation-based economy.

Partnerships will be essential to the success of Fish Creek State Park, including partnerships with Mineral County, Glacier Country Tourism, area Chamber of Commerce, adjacent land managers, user groups, organizations, and educational institutions to develop opportunities and promote the park. Partnerships with recreation ethics organizations like "Leave No Trace" and" Tread Lightly!" can help deliver educational messages, promote safe and responsible recreation behavior, and ensure that recreation at Fish Creek State Park is done in a sustainable manner that reflects the importance of the resources.

Fish Creek SP can be a resource as well as asset for many different entities, and it is the goal of Montana State Parks to make this park an integral part of the local and regional tourism and economic community.

8.5.1 Goal: Fish Creek State Park is a regional destination with strong community ties that enhances the quality of life and economic vitality of the area.

Objective A: Promote Fish Creek State Park as a State Park and regional destination, with particular emphasis on a developed campground, recreational trails and the Williams Peak Lookout.

A1. Develop marketing techniques and messages to promote and brand Fish Creek State Park.
A2. Promote the Williams Peak Lookout rental as a unique overnight opportunity for Montana State Parks and the region.
A3. Partner with Mineral County, Chambers of Commerce, regional businesses, and the tourism industry to increase knowledge and awareness of the state park.

A4. Work with bicycle and OHV tourism advocates to effectively communicate mountain biking and OHV opportunities with local, state, and national user groups and organizations.
A5. Advertise and market year-round park opportunities with regional media, including out-of-state media in Idaho and Washington.

Objective B: Promote and encourage business and economic opportunities in local communities.

B1. Encourage park-based commercial services that enhance the experience of park visitors.
B2. Work with community business leaders to encourage business and entrepreneurial opportunities that serve park visitors.
B3. Consider partnerships to develop park facilities, including local sourcing of materials and contractor services to help facilitate business development.

Objective C: Develop year-round special events and programs to highlight Fish Creek State Park opportunities and encourage visitation.

C1. Develop at least one annual special event for the park to draw in visitors from around the region.
C2. Develop programs that highlight the park's resources in a sustainable manner and encourage visitors to get out and explore the park. Program ideas could include summer campground discussions, guided hikes, nature viewing, photography, plant and wildlife identification, and survival basics.
C3. Partner with surrounding communities to identify ways to incorporate Fish Creek State Park programs and activities into community events.

8.5.2 Goal: Fish Creek State Park has a strong foundation of partnerships and volunteers to support long-term stewardship of the park.

Objective A: Engage volunteers and recreation user groups to assist with stewardship of the park in meaningful ways.

A1. Work with the Montana State Parks AmeriCorps program to recruit and retain a volunteer base for stewardship and maintenance projects.
A2. Identify priority projects that will enhance the visitor experience, develop and improve trails, and conserve wildlife habitat.
A3. Identify and develop partnerships with key user groups interested in trail development, maintenance, and stewardship of the park's resources. Consider developing Memorandums of Understanding with key groups to facilitate stewardship goals.

8.6 Natural and Cultural Resource Stewardship

The landscapes within and surrounding Fish Creek State Park have a suite of incredibly high wildlife and aquatic resource values, including habitat and migration corridors for forest carnivores, significant winter range for elk and deer, and high quality spawning and rearing habitat for native trout. As such, the area provides exceptional fishing, hunting, trapping, and wildlife viewing opportunities. There is also significant plant community distribution that consists of Douglas fir, ponderosa pine, and western larch in the higher elevations, as well as western red cedar habitat and cottonwood forests in the riparian areas.

Future recreational uses should coexist with and complement natural and cultural resources within the park, and recreation activities and facilities development will undergo the appropriate environmental analyses to properly protect and conserve identified areas of natural resource value in the park boundaries. To determine where there are areas of suitability for development and recreational use, Montana State Parks has developed management units to reflect the intended level of development, kinds of recreational use, and overall recreation experience throughout the park. The park will be thoughtfully managed within the context of the region, and the rural character and primitive setting of the park will be a continuous theme with park development and improvements. High use areas will be hardened to protect resources, and to help reduce impacts in more sensitive areas.

Sustainable trail design would also be a key factor to mitigate trail impacts while also providing fun and diverse trail experiences. Seasonal designations and necessary buffers would be established according to regulations and best practices to keep recreational activities back from streams and sensitive areas. Vegetative screening in high use areas, camping areas, trailheads, and staging areas would be used to reduce visual disturbance and provide a buffer from wildlife. The large acreage at Fish Creek State Park allows for development of a good trail system while maintaining large, quality areas of undisturbed habitat. Methods to protect large areas include developing edge trails that go around an area and keeping the density of trails lower within and near high quality areas.

Fish Creek State Park provides an opportunity not only to enhance recreational experiences within the Park's boundaries, but to also contribute to a shared vision for the Fish Creek Watershed and surrounding area. While the Parks Division will take care to minimize recreation-related resource impacts within the park, the Parks, Fisheries and Wildlife Divisions, along with other partner agencies should work together to balance recreation needs and resource concerns across the larger landscape. This approach provides the opportunity for each entity to maintain individual management authorities and responsibilities while assessing the impacts, and potential mitigations, of localized recreational development and use patterns on a larger, landscape scale.

Forest management would be a focus within park management. It is anticipated that future forest seedling thinning could be significant, but site specific areas have yet to be determined. The concept of "isolated planting patches" could result in a decade or so of adequate cover for which improved wildlife habitat could be anticipated. From a wildland fire management perspective, Montana State parks would strive to avoid "closed canopy" timber stands, as they

add substantially to the risk of a ground wildfire jumping into the crowns and then "blowing up."

A specific forest management plan for the Park is necessary to address desired timber stocking from a recreational and forest health perspective and to recognize that over the next several decades the Park will be required to deal with a rapidly growing replacement stand with a need for stand density management, by both pre-commercial and ultimately, commercial thinning of stands.

For heritage resources, 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.

Montana SHPO completed a cultural resource file search for the Fish Creek area during acquisition of the larger site, revealing historic use from the Mullan Road, Milwaukee Railroad, and stage services along the Clark Fork River. Additional field survey work is needed to determine whether previously located sites still exist and whether new sites have been exposed by wind and water action.

8.6.1 Goal: Natural resources of Fish Creek State Park will be managed cooperatively to maintain and enhance conservation practices and healthy landscapes.

Objective A: Monitor and control for noxious weeds.

A1. Update the weed management plan, including performing an inventory/survey of existing infestations
A2. Conduct mapping and photo surveys to monitor changes over time.
A3. Develop weed spraying and control schedule that supports active management of noxious weeds while not conflicting with recreational activities.
A4. Continue biological control releases in appropriate areas.
A5. Coordinate routinely with Mineral County weed district.
A6. Work with neighboring landowners on weed control efforts across property boundaries.

Objective B: Maintain landscape connectivity to WMA and adjacent public lands for fisheries and wildlife management activities.

B1. Coordinate development and management of Park with management activities on adjacent Fish Creek WMA, school trust lands, and National Forest lands as necessary.
B2. Support efforts to enhance wildlife habitat and connectivity as necessary and reduce human disturbance on park lands. When possible, leave large, undeveloped areas of habitat within the park.
B3. Cooperatively work with FWP Fisheries and Wildlife Divisions to support trend surveys and monitoring activities as needed.
B4. Enact appropriate seasonal closures of sensitive areas as necessary to support winter range for elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, and moose.

B5. Identify and evaluate opportunities to stabilize and revegetate closed roads. Decommission roads that are identified as hazardous and/or not suitable for recreation.

Objective C: Manage forest resources to address recreational and forest health perspectives and to plan for a rapidly growing replacement stand.

C1. Develop a forest management plan for the Park to address desired timber stocking and plan for a rapidly growing replacement stand with a need for stand density management. Consider commercial thinning of stands as appropriate.

C2. Coordinate future management of forested areas with adjacent land managers to ensure that adequate forest cover and large-diameter trees and snags are maintained across the landscape for wildlife and wildlife habitat.

C3. Work with agency partners and private landowners to manage forest edges along the Park boundary.

Objective D: Maintain high quality natural resource values in conjunction with facility and trail development.

D1. Coordinate trail and facility development with management activities and regulations on adjacent Fish Creek WMA, school trust lands, and National Forest lands as necessary.

D2. Limit development to outside of the floodplain. Implement buffer distances and visual screening along riparian zones and around sensitive habitat areas where necessary.

D3. Locate trails and facility development in areas where they can be screened and separated from sensitive wildlife by vegetation or topography.

D4. Consider new trail development within the context of necessary connections within the existing system, routing users around hazards, and improving the visitor experience with scenic viewpoints and destinations.

D5. Maintain day use activities in Unit D, and limit developments to those necessary to support wildlife viewing, hiking, interpretation, and education activities. Continue to work with local residents, FWP Fish and Wildlife Divisions and other neighboring property owners to enhance the value of the wildlife corridor linkage in Unit D.

8.6.2 Goal: Document and preserve prehistoric and historic resources.

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

A1. Work with the Parks Division Heritage Resource Program Manager to develop a strategy for conducting additional cultural resource survey work within the Park. Coordinate with FWP Fish and Wildlife Divisions on surveys on the adjacent WMA and FASs if applicable.

A2. Develop a site monitoring program; use trained volunteer site stewards as feasible.

A3. Consider candidates who can help complete research and compile information; consider County resources, graduate students or qualified site stewards.

A4. Work with local Indian tribes, museums and heritage resource specialists as appropriate in locating additional prehistoric and historic sites.

A5. Compile all heritage information into one report, with a version available for public use that excludes sensitive information (e.g. site locations).

8.7 Interpretation and Education

Interpretation and education is an integral part of quality outdoor recreation experiences, and must be expanded and tailored to encompass a wide variety of age groups, learning abilities and special needs. Interpretive materials, especially emphasizing the appreciation and careful stewardship of natural and cultural resources and responsible outdoor recreation will help to ensure the public's long-term enjoyment of, and support for, conservation and recreation at Fish Creek State Park.

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

Objective A: Develop appropriate educational and interpretive themes consistent with the park's values and resources.

A1. Utilize student interns and/or the State Park AmeriCorps program to recruit and develop volunteers and provide interpretive programs.

A2. Determine best methods to interpret information for visitors, considering feature location, access, public use and funding, and protection and preservation of resources. Develop interpretive and educational programming to support day use activities in Unit D.

A3. Market and promote Fish Creek State Park as an outdoor classroom for outdoor education and interpretive activities with area schools and colleges.

A4. Incorporate wildlife interpretation and environmental education into trail development.

A5. Educate the public on ethical recreation behavior. Promote Leave No Trace and Tread Lightly! principles and ethics in programs, materials, and educational signage.

9. Development Concepts

Development concepts show how to fit needed facilities into the park. These concepts would provide a suggested blueprint for the park over the next 10 years. The development concepts reflect resource constraints, as well as, demand and address the goals as determined in the planning process. The concepts describe the potential types of opportunities that would be considered for each management area, expected location, and design standards that would be considered in future development. This is intended to provide guidance during the development of future site plans or additional plans, and may be modified as necessary throughout the public review process.

Due to high resource values adjacent to and within the Fish Creek State Park, most of the developed recreational facilities are proposed for the northern portion of the Park. The exception is a high quality system of trail loops to be located throughout the Park and in connection with adjacent public lands that offer connections to regional recreation opportunities. Facilities to support trail use would be sited in conjunction with public roads, or on main trail loops to provide "backcountry" experiences.

In future developments, park facilities would be proposed at locations where access is feasible, where topography and other resource constraints would accommodate development, and where conflicts with resource and habitat values and neighboring uses can be avoided or minimized. Design parameters to be considered include the following:

- Providing good access and circulation for vehicles and non-motorized travel within the park;
- Locating facilities, roads and trails in a manner that is understandable by the public in navigating through the park;
- Avoiding significant impacts on important natural or cultural resources in or adjacent to the park;
- Presenting an appearance that is harmonious with the setting of the park;
- Providing choices for park visitors who may have different desires for park amenities and settings;
- Providing ADA access and universal design;
- Taking advantage of scenic views;
- Clustering development to keep most of the park undeveloped;
- Use of energy efficient and water conservation technologies for all developments and facilities.
- Avoiding or mitigating conflicts with local services or adjacent uses; and
- Avoiding or mitigating potential impacts on the park by adjacent uses.

All development will go through the Montana Environmental Policy Act process with an environmental assessment, and will be built to grading, drainage, fire safety, and erosion control standards. Use of native landscaping materials will be encouraged to retain the character of the park and integrate natural resources. Public feedback will be solicited during this process prior to approval and development.

9.1 Park Infrastructure

Facility/System	Description	Design Guidelines
Water Supply System • Potable water • Flush toilets • Showers	• Identify water source and delivery needs and facilities • Estimate water needs by uses • Identify types, locations, and capacities of storage facilities • System maintenance	• Locate in main campground in northern section of park • Facilities and capacities must be consistent with County/State code and health standards • Use of energy efficient, high-efficiency water conservation practices and infrastructure such as composting toilets, gray-water recycling.
Sewage/Wastewater System Flush toilets Septic and drain field systems Vault toilets	• Estimated sewage and wastewater flows associated with park uses. • Identify types, locations, and capacities of proposed collection, treatment, and disposal facilities	• Facilities and capacities must be consistent with County/State code and health standards • Use of energy efficient, high- efficiency water conservation practices and infrastructure such as composting toilets, gray-water recycling.
Electrical System • Visitor contact station • Electrical hook-ups for campsites	• Identify electrical source and delivery needs and facilities • Estimate electrical use needs by uses	• Locate in main campground in northern section of park • Provide highly-shaded campground/campsites to reduce energy use (air conditioning, etc.)
Park Ranger Contact Station • Park registration and office building. • Visitor contact area, orientation area • Self service check-in station • Design for possible small park store incorporated into building	• Locate close to entrance to main campground • Storage building • Trail connections to trail system	• High visibility and welcoming • Front desk area • 1 to 3 offices for staff • Up to 2,000 square feet • Parking for up to 10 vehicles • Use of energy efficient building practices and infrastructure such as solar panels and lighting, alternative heat sources/fixtures, building insulation, etc.
Maintenance Facilities	• Shop building sized for park needs. • Maintenance yard with security fence, sized for park needs • Accessory storage buildings and areas	• Visually subordinate • Staff parking for up to 5 cars. • Use of energy efficient building practices and infrastructure such as solar panels and lighting, alternative heat sources/fixtures, building insulation, etc. • Include facilities for waste stream recycling, fuel storage,
RV Dump Station and Garbage Area		• Visually screened from entrance road and campground

9.2 Overnight and Day Use Facilities

All camping will be in designated areas and sites. Facilities will be developed in phases over the lifetime of the plan.

Proposed Management Unit	Types of "Uses" Allowed	Description	Design Guidelines
Developed	• Tents • RVs • Group camping area	• North central area of park • Access from FS Road 344 (Williams Peak Road) • Vehicle access • Close to I-90 access • Trail connections • Reservation system	• 40-60 sites, 2-3 loops • Consider double sites • Paved • Electrical hookups • Potable water • Modern amenities (shower, flush toilets) • Picnic table, fire pit at each site • Up to four RV host sites • Provide up to 5 walk-in/bike-in tent sites
	• Yurts, cabins	• Reservation system • Designated parking • Trail connections within area and to trail system • Concessionaire opportunity	• 4-6 buildings • One room buildings from 200 to 400 square feet • Sleeps up to 6 people • Electricity, heat source • Fire pit at each yurt, cabin • No plumbing
	• Group day use area		• Enclosed shelter, up to 1,500 square feet • Picnic tables • Parking for up to 25 vehicles
Natural	• Tents • Camping units	• Rustic camping setting • Vehicle access	• 8-12 sites • No electrical hookup • No potable water • Picnic table, fire pit at each site • Vault toilets with solar lighting and ventilation. • Potential for host site
	• Hike-in, bike-in	• Located 1-3 miles from trailhead • Backcountry permit system	• 5-8 individual sites • Fire grate • Composting toilets with solar lighting and ventilation. • No host site
	• Fire Lookout	• Hike in, bike in, OHV access • Reservation system	• Must be upgraded to geotechnical design standards • No electricity • No potable water • Composting toilets or pit toilets with solar lighting and ventilation.
	• Yurts, huts	• Hike in, bike in, OHV access • Hut-to-hut system along trail • Concessionaire opportunity • Reservation system	• 1 yurt/hut per location • One room buildings from 200 to 400 square feet • Sleeps up to 6 people • No electricity • No plumbing • Fire pit at each site • Composting toilet or pit toilets at each site with solar lighting and ventilation.

Proposed Management Unit	Types of "Uses" Allowed	Description	Design Guidelines
Backcountry	• Tent • Camping units	• Rustic camping setting	• 8-12 sites • No electrical hookups • No potable water • Picnic table, fire pit at each site • Composting toilets with solar lighting and ventilation. • No host site
	• Hike-in, bike-in	• Located 2-4 miles from trailhead • Backcountry permit system	• 3-5 individual sites • Fire grate • Composting toilets or pit toilets with solar lighting and ventilation.
Resource	• Day use only	• Emphasis on wildlife viewing, hiking, interpretation and education	• Limited development to support day use activities • Natural processes dominate • Highly sensitive wildlife corridor will require visual screening and buffers as necessary to mitigate wildlife disturbances

10. Implementation

This plan proposes guidance and the desired outcomes over the next ten years for Fish Creek State Park. The priorities have been developed based on public scoping and comment, Fish Creek State Park staff input, Montana State Parks and FWP staff expertise, partner agency feedback, funding considerations, and resource availability.

As a long-term management plan, objectives and action items would be implemented in phases based on priorities and opportunities for implementation. Fundamental needs for a new state park to meet Montana State Parks system standards would be pursed first to establish a strong State Parks presence and build an understanding of the Fish Creek State Park rules and regulations. These fundamental needs include:

- Pursue adequate staffing in response to anticipated growth and visitation
- Sign park boundary in appropriate places
- Install park entry signs and kiosks
- Post key regulations at appropriate locations
- Install fee collection devices in appropriate locations
- Pursue establishment of visitor point of contact
- Disseminate appropriate information on recreation opportunities
- Engage in educational and preventative enforcement of park regulations

Management priorities at the park should be reviewed and updated every two years depending on available staff resources and funding. Fundamental needs and maintain existing facilities, like the Williams Peak Lookout and the existing roads, will be considered high priorities. New developments will be pursued as funding and partnerships are cultivated. To reduce maintenance needs of new developments, like a trail system, the Parks Division will pursue memorandums of understanding with relevant and active user groups to help develop and maintain facilities for visitor use. Exact 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.

Prior to implementation, certain development projects will be subject to an environmental assessment and additional public review as required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act. As the plan is implemented, communication will be a critical component. Communication will be a priority between the FWP Parks Division and Fish and Wildlife Divisions, as well as with partner agencies including the U.S. Forest Service, DNRC, Mineral County Commissioners, Glacier Country Tourism, and others. Communication with neighboring land owners, both public and private, will be essential to ensure a quality recreation experience is maintained across the landscape given the myriad of agency rules and regulations, as well as maintaining private property rights and reducing impacts to private lands.

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 in the plan, 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.

11. Appendices

A. References

B. Public Scoping Summary

Appendix A. References

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Fish Creek State Park

Public Scoping Summary

March 2013

Introduction

Montana State Parks initiated a management planning process for Fish Creek State Park beginning in 2012. This is the first management plan for the park, which was acquired by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks in 2010 as part of the Fish Creek acquisition from The Nature Conservancy. The management plan will only address the State Park, and not the adjacent wildlife management area (WMA). In addition, the plan will also look at recreational activities around the Alberton Gorge of the Clark Fork River, and strategies to continue to provide and enhance opportunities for the public over the coming years.

Fish Creek State Park provides a unique opportunity to support a variety of recreation activities including but not limited to hiking, picnicking, wildlife viewing, photography, snowshoeing, hunting and fishing. The park has an extensive network of old logging roads that could provide for motorized and non-motorized recreation as well. The park also hosts the Williams Peak Lookout, a potential rental opportunity for park visitors, and the possibility of developed and primitive camping. With the proximity to the Alberton Gorge, the park also provides access to whitewater rafting and kayaking.

Public Scoping Process

Public scoping is an early and open process to determine public concerns, values, and vision for a management plan. Following is a summary of the project and the feedback gathered through public scoping efforts.

Montana State Parks initiated the process with an open house on September 19, 2012 in Superior, MT. The purpose of the open house was to introduce the process and solicit initial public input on the management of Fish Creek State Park. A total of **29 people** signed in for the public scoping meeting. The majority of attendees were neighboring landowners and interested individuals. Notable attendees included Rep. Gordon Hendrick HD-14; Mark Sheets, candidate for SD-7; Tim Read, Mineral County Planner & Sanitarian; and a representative from DNRC. The meeting was videotaped for the Mineral County Commissioners, who could not attend in person.

At the open house, people were directed to four workstations for discussion and questions regarding the following themes: facilities, trails (motorized & non-motorized), recreational opportunities, and special uses.

Following the open house, public scoping efforts continued through February 15, 2013. Throughout the process, people were asked to consider the following questions:

- What is your vision for Fish Creek State Park?
- What do you value about the Park?
- What recreational uses are important to you?
- What are your concerns for future management of the Park?
- What opportunities would you like to see offered?
- What amenities/facilities would you like to see developed?

- What makes a quality recreational experience for you that Fish Creek State Park could provide?
- What improvements, if any, are desired for Alberton Gorge?

Montana State Parks distributed two news releases to local media and public information sources between September and January. News releases appeared in:

- The Missoulian
- Billings Gazette
- Great Falls Tribune
- Mineral County Independent
- Big Sky Press

Considerable effort was also given to reach out to user groups and organizations for more specific input and feedback, although not all contacts were successful in soliciting scoping comments. A one page information sheet was provided to organizations and posted on the Montana State Parks website. The following organizations and user groups were contacted during the scoping process:

- U.S. Forest Service – Lolo National Forest
- Glacier Country Tourism Board
- Alberton Gorge Commercial Guide Permit Holders
- Montana Mountain Bike Alliance
- MTB Missoula
- Backcountry Horseman of Missoula
- Montana Backcountry Hunters and Anglers
- Montana Trail Vehicle Riders Association
- Missoula Snowgoers Snowmobile Association
- Rocky Mountaineers
- Missoula Nordic Club
- The Nature Conservancy
- Montana Trout Unlimited
- Sierra Club
- Great Burn Study Group
- Wildlands CPR

Additional comments were received from neighboring landowners and interested individuals.

It should also be noted that during the acquisition of the Fish Creek drainage in 2010, an extensive public process was conducted for the environmental assessment (EA) of the acquisition. During that process, 71 people signed into a public hearing, with 11 people testifying on the acquisition. Additionally, 97 individuals or organizations provided public comments for the record during the 30-day comment period. While the Fish Creek management planning process builds upon the acquisition EA, this summary only pertains to the scoping specifically for Fish Creek State Park from September 2012 through February 15, 2013.

Public Scoping Themes

During the scoping period, Montana State Parks accepted comments several ways: oral comments captured on flipcharts at the open house; emails or letters sent to Montana State Parks; and discussions over the phone and in-person. In addition to the open house, 21 written comments were received during the scoping period of September 2012 to February 2013.

The following is a summary of the major themes and concerns outlined in the comments, with representative comments as appropriate. Specific comments from organizations are identified further on.

A. Recreational Opportunities

Comments emphasizing recreational opportunities spoke to the need to diversify recreation access and experiences in the area. Below are summaries regarding the specific opportunities referenced in the comments.

Camping: Comments received for camping were both in support and opposition to camping and campground development. Comments supporting camping felt a developed campground would be beneficial for the area, while comments opposing camping felt it would conflict with the conservation values of the adjacent WMA. Generally, the comments spoke to light to moderate level of campground development with minimal hardscaping. Many felt RV facilities would not be appropriate given the context of the park, the proximity to the WMA, and the rural character of county.

The following are representative comments that reflect the variety of ideas related to campgrounds, both in support and opposition:

- Camping should be developed near water and trails, with easy access to roads.
- Please develop a campground with basic facilities: tent pad, toilets, tables, fire pits. No elaborate RV park-like facilities.
- If developing RV sites, please provide separate camping areas for RVs and tents.
- Provide primitive, dispersed camping for backcountry used.
- Walk-in sites would appeal to cyclists.
- Consider car camping at Big Pine FAS.
- Leave Fish Creek as is per the EA: no vehicles or overnighters, no campsites.
- Facilities should be limited to those appropriate to FWP primitive parks.
- Campsite should be small in scale and out of riparian areas and streams.
- No camping, day use only.
- Don't pave the park.

Related to camping, some comments felt the Williams Pass lookout provided a good opportunity for diversifying the recreation and overnight experience at Fish Creek State Park. Maintaining the road to the lookout was important to maintain access for all visitors. Conversely, some comments thought upgrading the lookout was a waste of money when the current road system is already so degraded.

Non-motorized Recreation: Non-motorized recreation was emphasized as the most compatible recreation activity among the majority of comments. As described by the comments, non-motorized recreation includes: hiking, mountain biking, cross-country skiing, and horseback riding. Non-motorized use should be segregated from any motorized use, and trails should be developed for

specific experiences, i.e. hiking only, mountain biking only, equestrian only. There is particular interest from the mountain biking community for recreation opportunities at Fish Creek State Park.

Motorized Recreation: Comments were received for both support and opposition to motorized recreation. Comments that support motorized recreation spoke to the growing demand in OHV riding and the need for more safe and legal trails. Supportive comments also highlight the importance of separating motorized recreation from non-motorized recreation to mitigate conflicts, as well as imposing seasonal restrictions to reduce wildlife and habitat disturbance. Generally, comments that emphasized conservation priorities were opposed to motorized recreation.

Trails: Trails were referenced by user groups and individuals as a unique opportunity at Fish Creek State Park, particularly among the mountain biking community. Non-motorized and motorized trails were mentioned, however non-motorized use received more support among the comments. Facilities to support trail use should include trailheads, kiosks, parking areas, restrooms, and staging areas. Connections should also be made between trailheads and camping areas to support non-motorized use. Comments more favorable to non-motorized trail use felt that as many roads as possible should be closed to motorized recreation or at least separate the uses to minimize conflicts. Trail access to the Clark Fork River was also highlighted as a potential opportunity. Loop trails were cited as particularly popular for providing high quality experiences for mountain bikers and OHV users. Many felt that a diversity of skill levels could be satisfied with a trail system.

Comments opposed to trails highlighted the need for road restoration throughout the park, and felt that there could be unintended incursions into the WMA and disturbances to wildlife. Enforcement was a big concern.

Hunting and Trapping: Comments received on hunting support hunting within the State Park, but trapping was met with both support and opposition. Generally, any potential conflicts with hunting should be mitigated with seasonal closures and safety zones around high use areas. Some comments would like to see commercial hunting instituted again.

Special Uses: Comments supportive of other special uses include firewood gathering and berry-picking.

B. Conservation Priorities

Comments emphasizing conservation priorities generally state that preserving or improving upon the area's current natural values should be the primary objective of park management. Conservation values highlighted include: the high quality of the Fish Creek ecosystem; wildlife habitat and corridors, particularly winter range habitat; riparian areas and water quality; fish habitat, particularly for bull trout and cutthroat trout; maintaining quality hunting opportunities; and connections to larger wilderness landscapes. With this, comments called for limited to no development, maintaining the rural character of the park (described as "primitive"), and embracing opportunities for solitude and quiet.

Related, a few comments were received that generally disapproved of state parks and maintained that the area should be managed as the Fish Creek WMA.

C. Economic Impact

A few comments received addressed economic impacts of the State Park, both positive and negative. Comments highlighting the economic benefits of the park felt that promotion and visitors could help spur economic growth in nearby communities, and draw people into the area for several days at a time. Many spoke to the need for a regional destination in the area, and thought the park and the potential trail system could serve as the destination, particularly as a mountain biking destination. The opportunity for year-round recreation was also highlighted as an economic benefit.

Comments were also concerned with the impacts to infrastructure and emergency services that the state park could place on Mineral County, like roads, bridges, and Search & Rescue. Mineral County does not have additional revenue to support increased services, and a strong concern was voiced regarding increased costs to the County.

Revenue sharing with the County was mentioned as one way to alleviate any increased costs to the County. Conversely, it was also suggested that the money generated by the State Park should stay within the park and support its operations and maintenance, not go to support the County.

D. Issues and Concerns

A number of issues and concerns were voiced at the open house and in the comments. Below is a general list of concerns.

Roads: The road grade is steep throughout Fish Creek State Park, and many were concerned about unsafe conditions, soil erosion from degraded roads, invasive weeds along roads, and general impacts to watershed health from the road system. Developing a travel management plan for assessing the road condition should be considered, as well as prioritizing restoration of roads unsuitable for travel. Long-term maintenance of interior park roads and thru-roads around the park were also strong concerns.

Weed Control: Many comments were concerned with the spread of invasive weeds, both throughout the park from increased use, as well as onto private land.

Increased visitation: Impacts related to increased visitation was a concern in regards to costs to Mineral County infrastructure and emergency services, overcrowding in the park and along the creek, over-fishing and impacts to fish levels, dust control, spreading of weeds, waste management control, enforcement, and trespassing onto private lands.

Enforcement: Enforcement issues were raised in regards to the potential increase in visitation and the limited staff presence at the park. Enforcement concerns were particularly expressed for regulating motorized recreation and ensuring a safe riding experience.

Motorized Recreation: Concerns associated with motorized recreation include soil erosion, illegal incursion into nearby wildlife and roadless areas, noise, conflicts with other uses, and the presence of steep road grades that create safety hazards.

Operations & Maintenance: Long-term costs associated with operations and maintenance was a concern due to the limited staff at the park and the high cost of construction to develop the park to a high quality standard.

Specific Comments from Organizations

Below are summarized comments from organizations:

U.S. Forest Service – Lolo National Forest

- There is a need for OHV and equestrian trails, but the level of sustained demand over time is questionable.
- There may be opportunities for longer OHV routes to the east of Fish Creek SP towards the divide country between Fish and Petty Creek drainages. There may also be loop options, circling back towards Fish Creek State Park down through Wall Canyon and Deer Creek drainages, which lie to the southeast of Fish Creek.
- Planning should consider where new supply of trail users will come from in regards to any trail development.

Glacier Country Tourism

- Fish Creek State Park could draw people into a location that isn't accessed much currently, and could provide a new and unique opportunity for recreation.
- Focus should be on trails, both motorized and non-motorized uses.
- Would like to see Montana State Parks develop formal partnerships with public land managers to access additional trail systems, as well as generate and foster relationships with user groups.
- There is a strong economic benefit with Fish Creek, as an increase in visitation means an increase in visitors in the community.

Montana Mountain Biking Alliance & MTB Missoula

- There is a need for mountain biking trails in the Missoula area. A good quality trail system will motivate bikers to visit Fish Creek State Park, both as new and return trail users. Every generation can benefit from a good trail system at the park.
- We would like to stress the importance of being able to provide a loop trail system to the public, specifically a Stacked Loop Trail concept, designed for travel both uphill and downhill directions.
- A Stacked Loop concept could range from 14 to 21 miles long, with a lower loop, a middle loop, and an upper loop. Connections between the loops would allow for trail customization. This trail system could support beginner to more advanced mountain bikers.
- Don't necessarily need mountain biking-only trails, but those are desirable and important for making a destination location.
- Downhill trails are also in high demand, but only cater to more specialized cyclists.
- Facilities to support mountain biking use should include a developed campground with easy access to main roads and connections to trailheads, walk-in campsites, staging area for day users, and other trailhead amenities.
- MTB Missoula in particular highlighted their efforts to promote responsible mountain biking, as well as their partnership potential to cultivate volunteers for Fish Creek, trail

design and planning expertise, and fundraising abilities. MTB Missoula is the local mountain biking community in the Missoula area.

Montana Trail Vehicle Riders Association

- Fish Creek State Park is a great opportunity for many different kinds of recreation. With the large number of ATVs in Missoula County, there is a growing need to have designated ATV routes in western Montana.
- OHV routes should be closed from October 15 to May 15 for hunting season, to reduce soil erosion, and limit wildlife disturbances. A route could be left open for handicap riders.
- Roads currently closed to full size vehicles could be altered to accommodate OHVs that are 50 inches and less. We do not propose to close any open roads.
- Suggested opportunities include loop routes.
- OHV trails with an emphasis on safety for kids and families should be the priority. Beginning riders will be safer on designated OHV routes, and families with young riders can learn about safety and ethical riding.

The Nature Conservancy

- As planning moves forward for the 6,200 acre Fish Creek State Park, we urge that focus remains on the ecological characteristics such as critical winter range, a corridor for movement of forest carnivores and important habitat for native bull and cutthroat trout.
- There is also tremendous support for continued primitive use of the area by local residents and visitors for hunting, fishing and dispersed camping opportunities.

Montana Trout Unlimited

- Given the extraordinary fish, wildlife and recreational values in the drainage, we recommend that the park be managed similarly to those parks the Montana Legislature has designated as "primitive parks" (MCA 23-1-116). Improvements should be limited to the minimum necessary to protect the natural resources of the parks while still providing recreational access.
- We are especially concerned about recreational development that could potentially reduce the value of the park and WMA as critical winter range for big game and as important habitat for resident and migratory populations of bull and cutthroat trout.
- We recommend development and recreational promotion occur only at levels that will not create potential recreational conflicts, overcrowding, or which demands large investment in long-term maintenance and management. Recreation should be focused on wildlife and current use, including wildlife viewing, hunting, angling and berry picking.
- We are reluctant to endorse construction of a developed campground, particularly for those who primarily float the Alberton Gorge. If a campground must be constructed, it should be small and located at the lower end of the park and away from the stream. Facilities should be limited to those appropriate to FWP primitive parks.
- The following should not be approved: development within the Rock Creek drainage; development except for mitigation efforts at Big Pine FAS; motorized trail use; and a hut-to-hut hiking system which would be costly and underutilized. Trail and some road improvements, with minimal signing, would be appropriate.

Great Burn Study Group

- Our most pressing concern is about protecting wildlife and wilderness values for Fish Creek and for the proposed Great Burn Wilderness. We urge FWP to place priority on wildlife and aquatic resources for Fish Creek State Park.
- We are concerned about enforcement in the state park, particularly related to motorized use that could result in illegal incursions into the proposed Wilderness.
- We question the level of development of the park and the potential recreational use.

The Rocky Mountaineers

- We would recommend developing formal trailheads with signage, parking lots, and restrooms.
- We would encourage you to keep as few roads open as possible to be used for hiking, skiing, and biking.
- Close as many roads as possible to motorized recreation, but if going to allow motorized recreation than separate the use from non-motorized recreation.

Missoula Nordic Club

- Would be interested in skiing opportunities around Williams Peak, starting from the top of the pass.
- Desire loop trails with a variety of ups, downs, and turns.

Backcountry Horseman of Missoula

- I'm contacting you to advocate for an equestrian trailhead and appropriate trails open to horses and hikers in this new state park. I would especially be interested in a trail system that will connect trails in the West Fork Fish Creek drainage.

Montana Backcountry Hunters & Anglers

- We envision the priority management to be for protection and enhancement of wildlife and fish habitat.
- We encourage continued reduction of motorized routes, and do not support additional motorized access routes nor encourage motorized recreational activities.
- The area could accommodate minimal, generally dispersed low impact recreational uses that do not conflict with wildlife, fish, nor management objectives of adjacent federal lands. Any development should be small in scale and out of riparian areas and streams.
- We request no management or development that conflicts with proposed wilderness designation of the Great Burn.

Attachment A. Press Releases

Public Invited to Scoping Workshop on Fish Creek State Park

-Wednesday, Sept. 19

(Missoula, MT) – Montana State Parks (stateparks.mt.gov) has scheduled a public scoping workshop in Superior on Sept. 19 to begin developing a plan to guide the management of Fish Creek State Park, located near Alberton.

The public is invited to offer suggestions and comments on how to achieve a high-quality recreational experience at the park, while preserving and enhancing the park's natural resources. The feedback will be used in developing a management plan for the park.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks acquired Fish Creek State Park in 2010 as part of a larger acquisition along Fish Creek. This plan will only address the State Park, and not the adjacent wildlife management area.

"Fish Creek State Park is a unique park with the potential to be a regional destination for hiking, biking, OHV use, camping, and more," said Park Manager, Mike Hathaway. "We want the public to weigh in and help craft the vision for the park in this first step toward a ten-year management plan."

State park officials will also be asking for suggestions on ways to enhance recreational activities around the nearby Alberton Gorge of the Clark Fork River.

Montana State Parks prepares management plans for state parks to guide quality recreational experiences, enhance park resources, and preserve the park's natural assets.

The workshop is set for 6:30-8:30 p.m., Wednesday, Sept. 19, at Superior High School in the Multi-Purpose Room, 410 Arizona Avenue, Superior, MT.

Written feedback may also be sent by email to: mhathaway@mt.gov , or by mail to: Attn: Fish Creek State Park, 3201 Spurgin Road, Missoula, MT 59804.

The Fish Creek State Park draft management plan will be released in 2013 and there will be opportunities for public review and comment.

Fish Creek State Park is made up of 6,200 acres of forested land surrounding Williams Peak in Mineral County, with portions of the Clark Fork and Fish Creek rivers running through it. Open year-round, park activities include hiking, mountain biking, hunting, fishing, and nature viewing. The Alberton Gorge of the Clark Fork River, with first-rate whitewater rafting, is nearby.

Visit Montana State Parks (stateparks.mt.gov) and enjoy camping, hiking, fishing, swimming, boating and more and discover some of the greatest natural and cultural treasures on earth.

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Public Asked to Provide Ideas on Recreation Planning for Fish Creek State Park

-Deadline is Friday, Feb. 15-

(Helena, MT) – Montana State Parks (stateparks.mt.gov) announced today it is seeking the public's input to help guide recreation planning for Fish Creek State Park, located about 35 miles west of Missoula. This public scoping will help identify priorities for the park's first management plan.

"Fish Creek State Park is a unique location with great potential due to its recreational trail system and close proximity to Alberton Gorge," said Mike Hathaway, Park Manager.

Recreational activities identified by the public and interested user groups in earlier scoping include year-round hiking, mountain biking, horseback riding, motorized use and winter activities. Other opportunities include developed and backcountry camping, fishing, hunting and wildlife viewing. Landscape conservation and management is also a priority.

"We want to involve as many people as possible in helping shape this park's future," Hathaway said.

Among the questions Montana State Parks is asking:

- What is your vision for Fish Creek State Park?
- What do you value about the Park?
- What recreational uses are important to you?
- What amenities/facilities would you like to see developed?
- What improvements, if any, are desired at the nearby Alberton Gorge, also managed by Montana State Parks?

Fish Creek State Park encompasses 6,200 acres of forested land surrounding Williams Peak in Mineral County, with portions of the Clark Fork and Fish Creek rivers running through it.
The Fish Creek State Park draft management plan is expected to be available for public review later this year.

For more information about Fish Creek State Park, go to http://stateparks.mt.gov/fish-creek/ .

Comments may be emailed through Friday, Feb. 15 to Mike Hathaway, Fish Creek State Park Manager: mhathaway@mt.gov , or mailed to: Montana State Parks, Attn: Fish Creek State Park, 3201 Spurgin Rd., Missoula, MT 59804.

Visit Montana State Parks (stateparks.mt.gov) and enjoy camping, hiking, fishing, swimming, boating and more and discover some of the greatest natural and cultural treasures on earth.

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Attachment B. Public Scoping Open House Meeting Notes

Date: September 19, 2012
Location: Superior High School, Superior, MT
Time: 6:30 – 8:30 pm

A total of **29 people** signed in for the Fish Creek SP public scoping meeting. The majority of attendees were neighboring landowners and general citizens. Notable attendees included Rep. Gordon Hendrick HD-14; Mark Sheets, candidate for SD-7; Tim Read, Mineral County Planner & Sanitarian; and a representative from DNRC. The meeting was videotaped for the Mineral County Commissioners, who could not attend in person.

Following an introductory presentation, people were directed to four workstations for discussion and questions: facilities, trails, recreational opportunities, and special uses. The following is a list of input, feedback, concerns, and suggestions we received during the meeting.

Facilities

- Fire lookout
    - Improve for rental property
    - Mineral County could get a portion of fees from rental revenue
- Consider rural setting for the park during any development
- Camping
    - Developed campground would be nice
    - Previously identified location from acquisition is not a good location → referred to as "Whitetail Flats"
    - Camping should be developed near water, trails, with easy access to roads
    - Coordinate campground with Alberton Gorge corridor activities
    - Provide primitive camping for backcountry
    - Consider car camping at Big Pine
- Mineral County Search & Rescue is underfunded
    - County will need help for any increase in use from improvements

Trails

- Mountain Biking
    - Trail loops should be around 10 miles for a partial day ride
    - Single track with built-in trail features to challenge rider abilities
    - Bicycle access to trails
    - New trails for river access
    - Embrace bicycle tourism as a focus for the park
- Desire non-motorized hiking trails that are separate from motorized trails
- Major thru-roads
    - Will roads be closed in the winter?
    - Whose responsibility for dust control, maintenance?
    - Consider best roads for park access that don't limit or invade private property

- Fish Creek Road by Cyr Ranch needs adjusting
- Support closing of "cut-off" road between Rock Creek Rd. (7764) and USFS 341 as indicated in interim management plan
    - Consider turning into hiking trail
    - Keep road and structure, possibly gate for access
- Possibility of trail connection from FS 4320/343 junction area East-Northeast towards lower contour road from Hay Creek drainage
- Look at possibility of connecting trails from State Park to public lands outward (to NF lands)
- Designate hiking trails to loops and destinations
- Provide a connection to the river

Recreational Opportunities

- Provide opportunities for people of all accessibility levels
    - Berry-picking
    - Hunting
    - Trails
- Will the park have seasonal or year-round use?
- Hunting:
    - Keep hunting and trapping opportunities open
    - Provide diversity of walk-in and drive-in hunting
    - Close off hunting in high use areas only
    - Preserve mule deer and elk opportunities
    - Implement wildlife closures when and where necessary to maintain populations
- Motorized recreation:
    - Would like to see trails open in winter for snowmobiling
    - Interested in quality 4-wheeler trail loops
    - Concerns expressed to turning whole park over to OHV use
    - Better to focus OHV use in specific areas instead of open riding
- Non-motorized recreation:
    - Separate motorized and non-motorized use
    - Develop hiking-specific trails
- Berry-picking used to be good, but weed control has ruined crop
- River along northwest border is cut-off by railroad tracks
    - Concerns expressed that people might try to get to river in an unsafe manner
- Sandy beach at confluence of Fish Creek and Clark Fork River is over-utilized by rafters
    - Creates a sanitary issue
    - Would like to see beach cleaned up and managed better

Special Uses

- Firewood gathering should be continued
    - All neighbors use wood for heating
- Is there a way for the County to receive a % of special use revenue?
- Manage park for historic/traditional local uses

Other Issues

- Funding: Who is going to pay for improvements/developments of the park? Can we afford it?
- Economic Benefit: Can the park provide revenue to Mineral County?
- Infrastructure & Services: Concerned about effects of park development on County
- Further Acquisition: Is Montana State Parks considering acquiring more land for the park, or considering land trades?
- Weed Control

Attachment C. Fish Creek Scoping Information Sheet & Map

Montana State Parks is preparing a management plan for Fish Creek State Park. This is the first management plan for the park, which was acquired by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks in 2010 as part of the Fish Creek acquisition. The management plan will only address the State Park, and not the adjacent wildlife management area. In addition, the plan will also look at recreational activities around the Alberton Gorge of the Clark Fork River, and strategies to continue to provide and enhance opportunities for the public over the coming years.

Background
Fish Creek State Park provides a unique opportunity to support a variety of recreation activities including but not limited to hiking, picnicking, wildlife viewing, photography, snowshoeing, hunting and fishing. The park has an extensive network of old logging roads that could provide for motorized and non-motorized recreation as well. The park also hosts the Williams Peak Lookout, a potential rental opportunity for park visitors, and the possibility of developed and primitive camping. With the proximity to the Alberton Gorge, the park also provides access to whitewater rafting and kayaking.

What is important to you?
Montana State Parks is interested in your input on Fish Creek State Park. A public scoping meeting was held on September 19 in Superior, MT to solicit initial input on Fish Creek. From the meeting, four overarching themes have been identified related to management of Fish Creek.

1. Trails (motorized & non-motorized)
2. Recreational Opportunities
3. Facilities
4. Special Uses

Planning Timeline	
Summer 2012	Information Gathering
Fall 2012	Public Scoping workshop
Winter 2013	Analyze public input and develop draft plan
Spring 2013	Release draft plan for public comment
Summer 2013	Finalize, approval, and public notice

Based on these themes, please consider the following questions:

- What is your vision for Fish Creek State Park?
- What do you value about the Park?
- What recreational uses are important to you?
- What are your concerns for future management of the Park?
- What opportunities would you like to see offered?
- What amenities/facilities would you like to see developed?
- What makes a quality recreational experience for you that Fish Creek State Park could provide?
- What improvements, if any, are desired for Alberton Gorge?

For timely consideration of your input, please provide feedback by February 15, 2013. For more information, visit www.stateparks.mt.gov/fish-creek/.

Contacts:
Mike Hathaway, Park Manager
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Maren Murphy, Parks & Recreation Planner
marenmurphy@mt.gov, 406-444-3750