



Hell Creek State Park Draft Master Site & Management Plan

Public Comment Summary

December 2015

Background

The draft Hell Creek Master Site & Management Plan was presented to the Montana State Parks & Recreation Board (Parks Board) in October 2015. The draft plan identifies management issues such as maintenance needs, site capacity issues, concession operation, and other factors directly related to Montana State Park's management of the site including whether the division continues to manage the site.

The draft plan was posted for a 32-day public comment period, closing on Friday, November 27, 2015. Email correspondence inviting public comment on the draft plan was sent to key stakeholders and to visitors who made campsite reservations at the park through Reserve America over the last three years (2013, 2014, 2015). Public notices were posted in the Billings Gazette and area newspapers in Jordan, Glendive, and Miles City. Media coverage of the draft plan was covered during the public comment period by the Billings Gazette.

Comment Overview

A total of 81 public comments were received. Comments were received from individuals and agency partners, and identified both support and opposition for the continued management of Hell Creek State Park and proposed priority improvements. Of the comments received, 78 comments were from individuals, and 3 from agencies/institutional partners: Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), US Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS), and University of Washington Department of Biology.

Sixty-six comments expressed support for one the proposed outcomes. Fifteen comments did not take a stance on any particular outcomes. The final outcomes for support on the proposed options are:

- **Support Option 1 – 41 comments:** Continue to manage site and concession with priority improvements.
- **Support Option 2 – 2 comments:** Manage modified site boundary, relinquish concession to the US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE).
- **Support Option 3 – 23 comments:** Return site to the USACE in 2021 with minimal improvements for health and safety.

Public comment is summarized by major themes discussed to understand and identify substantive comments for consideration in the final.

Support Option 1

Forty-one comments were received that supported Option 1. In the draft plan, Option 1 was outlined:

Address the existing site infrastructure needs, make priority improvements and continue to manage the site and concession beyond the current USACE Agreement end date of April 2021 with a new contract or extension.

Those who supported Option 1 mentioned the value of the state park for providing access to Fort Peck and the high value fishing resource. Many people felt that the continued management of the site by Montana State Parks was important to maintaining experiences and keeping it within the state park system. In keeping the site within the Montana State Park system, some people felt improvements could be made to enhance the experience, particularly with regards to improving road to the site, developing more dry dock storage, maintaining overflow camping, expansion of other camping opportunities including group sites and primitive camping, and regulation of outfitters operating within the campground. These themes are discussed in more detail below.

The Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS), and University of Washington's Department of Biology all expressed support for Option 1. Generally, USACE and USFWS feel that Montana State Parks is the best agency to manage the site and concession as one operation. USACE is concerned about funding and priority if the site is turned back over to them, and they are not interested in taking over the concession separate from the site. USFWS believes Montana State Parks is a good partner in managing the site. The University of Washington's Department of Biology feels the site as a state park is important to their continued scientific research related to the paleontological resources. Complete comments from these agencies are included in the Appendix for more detail.

Support Option 2

Two comments received expressly stated support for Option 2.

Address existing site infrastructure needs and make priority improvements and continue to manage a modified site boundary beyond the current USACE Agreement end date of April 2021. In this scenario, Montana State Parks relinquishes the management of the concession operations to the USACE.

Comments received felt that Montana State Parks should continue to manage the park, but support the USACE taking over the concessionaire contract so the concessionaire would only have to deal with one agency.

Support Option 3

Twenty-three comments received expressly stated support for Option 3.

Montana State Parks would return the site to the USACE in April 2021 or sooner, according to terms of the USACE-State of Montana Agreement. Montana State Parks would make only minimal infrastructure improvements until the end of the agreement period.

Those who support returning it to USACE expressed frustration with current management of the site as well as proposed future updates, including the elimination of overflow camping, transition to reservation-only campsites, and management of the concessionaire. Many felt that these changes would restrict people's ability to access the park and reduce business for the concessionaire. Some felt the USACE could develop a better agreement with the concessionaire, potentially allowing the concessionaire to operate the park privately.

Reservation System and Camping Opportunities

A total of 43 comments were received about the reservation program and camping opportunities at Hell Creek State Park. Of those, 18 comments received opposed transitioning the park to reservation-only campsites. Many people felt this would take away spontaneity of the trip and require people to plan too far ahead. Many commented that prime weekends during the summer are booked up nearly a year in advance, leaving some with no opportunity to camp during popular times. One commenter felt that the reservation system would leave out people who pay only with cash, as they are not able to make a reservation ahead of time over the phone or internet.

Twelve comments received addressed the proposed elimination of overflow camping. Many felt there is enough space at the park to accommodate all campers, and that overflow camping should be continued. Some felt that due to the long road required to travel there, people should be allowed to camp when they arrive regardless.

Four comments supported transitioning to reservation-only campsites, feeling it would help address capacity issues and alleviate overcrowding. One comment received supported the elimination of overflow camping, feeling that it adds to the capacity issue. One comment received expressed concern over multiple vehicles per unit and felt management should initiate firm capacity limits and have an increased fee for additional vehicles.

Eight comments received supported expansion of camping opportunities, included more group sites, tent camping, walk-in camping, primitive camping, and handicapped sites. A few comments suggested additional primitive camping could be accommodated at Boy Scout Point. One comment suggested improving Devils Creek or Crooked Creek campgrounds to help spread the use of the resource over a larger geographic area.

Condition of Hell Creek Road

Note: Hell Creek Road, managed by Garfield County, is not included in road improvements within the plan. It is beyond the scope of the proposal.

Thirteen comments received expressed concern and frustration over the condition of 26-mile Hell Creek Road to get from Jordan, MT to Hell Creek State Park. Many of them stated that the road was a hindrance to people going to the park, and regularly causes damage to vehicles driving on the road. One felt that paving the road could help the Jordan economy by attracting more visitors to the park.

Outfitters and Guides

Six comments received addressed the operation of outfitters and guides within the park. Five comments received expressed concern about commercial operations in campsites, and felt it should be against regulation. One comment received, from an outfitter, expressed support for commercial operations at campsites, stating that they are not based in Hell Creek but only exchange money at the site prior to guiding.

Cost of Services

Ten comments received addressed the costs of services and improvements. Specific suggestions include the following, with those suggestions receiving multiple mentions detailed below.

- Increase user fees/camping fees to pay for upgrades. (2 comments)
- Charge to use the RV dump. (2 comments)
- Address responsible spending of funds that already exist.
- Implement cost-effective decisions, including low-flow toilets, water efficiency, LED lights.
- Partner with fishing/hunting sources to pay for improvements.

- Re-implement state park pass for residents to generate additional funds.
- Establish haul out policy to eliminate trash removal
- Establish recycling and tie in with Jordan recycling.
- Implement a key card system as an option for showers to limit water use.
- Add winter use fees.
- Charge a fee for use of fish cleaning station.
- Consider electric meters at sites and charge for usage.

Additional Amenities

Many comments received expressed support for additional amenities and improvements to facilities. The following is a list of improvements mentioned in comments.

- More dry dock storage for boats (7 comments)
- Improvements to fish cleaning station (4 comments)
- Installation of cell tower (4 comments)
- Power locations for campers (2 comments)
- Build a park visitor center at park entrance (1 comment)
- Expansion of toilet and shower facility (1 comment)
- Build a basketball court for families (1 comment)
- Oppose dog park (1 comment)

Process

Two comments received questioned the visitation statistics for daily use. They felt that the quoted 2,500 visitors during a weekend were too high. One comment felt that meetings regarding Hell Creek State Park should be mainly held in the Hell Creek area.

APPENDIX. Agency/Institution Comments

- 1. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers**
- 2. U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service**
- 3. University of Washington Department of Biology**



DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
CORPS OF ENGINEERS, OMAHA DISTRICT
FORT PECK PROJECT OFFICE
PO BOX 208
FORT PECK, MT 59223-0208

November 25, 2015

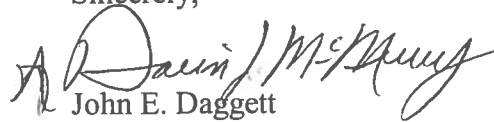
Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks
Mr. Doug Habermann
Region 5 Park Manager
2300 Lake Elmo Drive
Billings, MT 59105

Dear Mr. Habermann:

My staff and I have completed review of the Hell Creek State Park Master Site and Management Plan. Attached find comments specific to the plan identified by section and paragraph.

Should you have any questions regarding these comments, please contact me or Darin McMurry at 406/526-3411.

Sincerely,


John E. Daggett
Operations Project Manager

Enclosure

Hell Creek State Park Master Site & Management Plan -- US Army Corps of Engineers, Fort Peck Project, November 25, 2015.

Executive Summary: 1. Determine the Status of Montana State Parks at Hell Creek State Park - The US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) supports Montana State Parks (MSP) continued presence and management of Hell Creek State Park as proposed in Option 1 of this plan. Hell Creek State Park (HCSP) is a destination park providing primary access to the south side of Fort Peck Lake for visitors from southeast and south-central Montana as well as North and South Dakota, Wyoming, and Colorado. MSP's long presence and facility improvements ensure its recognition as the managing agency of this recreations site.

USACE is **not** interested in severing the State Park and the Concessionaire as identified in Option 2. USACE believes the continuation of one lead agency, managing all recreation services whether directly or through a concessionaire, best serves the recreating public.

To assist with the future management and development of HCSP, USACE supports and would likely accommodate long term agreements with HSP and the marina concession. The current term of the third party concession agreement cannot exceed the term of the master lease with MSP. When the current concessionaire agreement expires in 2018, it can only be renewed to the 2021 expiration date of the State Park's lease. USACE may consider early renewal of MSP Lease set to expire in 2021 to accommodate a longer term agreement with Concessionaire. With MSP's continued management of the HCSP, the logical action would be to renew the State's lease early in 2018 for 20-25 years which would allow negotiation of a long term (up to 20 years, Section 15.3) agreement with a concessionaire.

Regarding Option 3 where MSP returns the site to UASCE in 2021; USACE does not have the resources, money, staff, or equipment, to take over management of this recreation site and match the level of services currently provided by MSP. If MSP returns the area to USACE, it is possible this recreation site could be closed until an evaluation is completed to determine the best course of action for future management. Additionally, there is no guarantee that USACE would enter into a direct concession lease with the current lessee. Regulations require that USACE advertise and therefore compete all direct concession lease proposals.

Executive Summary: 2. Outfitters and Guides - Multiple outfitters have been providing commercial guide services from HCSP for some time under various levels of non-compliance with both MSP and USACE commercial services requirements. Beginning in 2016, all commercial guide businesses providing services from HCSP must be fully compliant with **all** applicable laws, regulations and rules. To help bring these service providers into compliance, MSP and USACE have been working to identify and communicate to these businesses both how they may legally operate from HCSP and where they may locate their base operation if they choose to develop support facilities within HCSP under a license or subcontract agreement. Further information regarding Outfitters and Guides is covered under Section 4.2 below.

Executive Summary: 3. Transition to Reservation-only Campground - This reservation only plan will exclude walk in campers which some segment of the users will not like. Is this consistent with other State Parks and do their customers like the 100% reservation only system?

Digital Sign at Jordan will infuriate people if this is their first opportunity to learn campground is full. What about website(s), social media sites, other means to make this message known? Visitors have likely traveled great distance just getting to Jordan. They do not want to turn back having come that far already.

4 Management Considerations:

4.2 Law Enforcement - Nothing here or in 4.6 mentions ex-officio officers/authority allowing Park Staff to conduct limited enforcement activities, including citations. If not an option within Agency Regulations at this time, should this be a management consideration to list in 4.6?

4.4 Outfitters - All commercial service providers operating on federal lands and waters must be permitted under a commercial license or other contractual agreement. If the outfitter is a Day Use Only service provider, USACE processes may allow the establishment of a set annual fee that covers the commercial activity no matter where or the frequency for which the outfitter accesses USACE lands and water.

If the outfitter will be based within the State Park, they will be required to either 1) enter into a sub-contract with the existing marina concessionaire and run their business, including financials, through that concessionaire or 2) enter into a concession license agreement with MSP and USACE, which will allow development and maintenance of support facilities at a designated location within HCSP. The fee structure (rent) for use of lands within HCSP would be determined by MSP and UASCE fee regulations and incorporated into the license or sub-contract agreement. Under either option for operating from within HCSP, all proposed commercial services and potential development must have prior written approval from both MSP and USACE.

Guide and Outfitter infrastructure "call out box" on left: Eliminate "Fuel Storage" from list. Current concessionaire provides fuel services that the outfitter may utilize. Why allow the outfitter on-site storage considering difficulty and infrastructure needed to meet storage requirements?

4.5 Private Cabin Owners (also 8.6) - Statute for State Park Access under \$6 opt out fee; what does it specifically state? Day use access only, therefore access to non-fee (camping and camping support infrastructure excluded?) activities and use of Day use facilities within the park?

MSP collects shower fees through quarter machines and therefore generate some income from the cabin owners showering at the park. Is the shower fees collected not covering maintenance costs for the facility the issue?

USACE posts comfort stations within campgrounds as: Registered Guests/Campers Only. We do allow non-registered campers to shower, but they must pay \$5.00.

4.6 Management Considerations - There should be discussion on using volunteers for camp host, interpretation, or maintenance activities? Possibly include Volunteer Village/Campsites instead of or in addition to Outfitter Camp as potential management considerations.

6.1 Campground Development Considerations - The Concessionaire is permitted and located within the HCSP boundaries and provides multiple services. Based on the combined services of MSP and Hell Creek Marina, should HCSP be classified as a General Services Campground?

8.7 Certified Water and Sewer Operator - Per statute, is concessionaire required to be certified as an operator? Based on the numbers identified in this section, services provided, and discussions of type of campground designation in Section 6.1, this needs further review and clarification.

Expansion of the concessionaire's facilities and services that would serve in excess of the daily numbers listed here would require certification, possibly his own treatment facilities for both sewer and water. (Also Section 13.2, second paragraph and expanded concessions services.)

9.2 Solutions Considered for Electrical and Telecommunications -

Option 1: Is it possible that existing customers along the route between Jordan and Hell Creek may also share in the cost to upgrade power to 3-phase?

Option 5: Add charging stations to the parking areas:

Though not mentioned here, USACE assumes there would be a charge for use of this service to offset construction and maintenance?

Option 6: Provide wireless internet services in campground:

As a commercial service through a provider, such as Mid-Rivers Telephone, provider may need concession permit from USACE. If MSP is the provider, this service may be covered under the license agreement.

11 Boat Ramps and Internal Access Roads - Low Water Boat Ramp

east of the concessionaire currently listed as Category I, could be either a Category I or Category II boat ramp. Maintenance could be outgranted to MSP or the Concessionaire. The main issue with the Category I and II ramps, regardless of who maintains, is that users cannot be charged a launch fee for use of the ramp. Users can be charged an Entrance Fee to use a recreation area that may include a Category I or II ramp.

11.1 Known Internal Access Road and Boat Ramp Issues -

Fourth Paragraph: Locating facilities within the pool (below elevation 2250) is not the best situation due to the potential to flood; however, USACE does have Projects with recreation facilities, some removable, located within flood pool elevations. The placement of primitive camping or day use facilities, such as moveable tables and grills, in the pool may be considered.

12 Hell Creek Road - (Third Paragraph) FLAP money received by Garfield County is for replacing multiple culverts. Based on recent USACE conversation with Federal Highway Department, no reconstruction work on last four miles of road is planned.

14.3 Concessionaire Desired Investments - Additional Staff Housing on-site may have to be limited, especially with limited development space for public infrastructure. Concessionaire has indicated that additional family may one day become involved or take over the business. What are current concessionaire's long-term plans and business transition plan if this occurs? Do the concessionaire's plans include separate houses for himself and the additional family member, plus additional employee housing?

15.4 Prioritize Investments - USACE agrees that prioritization of investment is critical to the future development and management of HCSP. Additionally, USACE must ensure that current and future development is compliant with all applicable laws and regulations to limit potential liability to both MSP and UASCE.

USACE supports MSP's continued management of HCSP as one recreation site, to include management of the concession. USACE looks forward to working with MSP, the public, and other stakeholders regarding further development of this Management Plan and the future development of Hell Creek State Park for the benefit of recreating users.



United States Department of the Interior

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE



Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge
P.O. Box 110
Lewistown, MT 59457

November 25, 2014

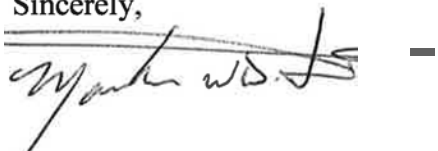
Doug Haberman
Regional Parks Manager
Montana State Parks
1420 East 6th Avenue
POB 200701
Helena, MT 59620

Dear Mr. Haberman,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Hell Creek State Park Master Site and Management Plan and for the visit you made on November 25, 2015 to Jordan, Montana. We have considered the three Options that you have presented in the plan and we would like to encourage the State of Montana to select Option #1. We concur with your assessment that the existing site infrastructure is in need of updating and improvement and we would like to the Park continue to be managed with the site and concession beyond the current ACOE Agreement end date of April 2021 with a new contract or extension. The Hell Creek State Park is a small parcel within the USACE lands and the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge (CMR) that is managed for wildlife and fish in addition to wilderness values. In our view, the Hell Creek State Park serves as an excellent example of concentrating visitor use in a managed strategy such that the wildlife values of the CMR are preserved and protected. The concentration of visitors to the Park for fishing, hunting, and outdoor recreation provides the public with a developed camping and boating opportunity, which is the only one of its kind on the south side of CMR. The CMR is a highly valued National Wildlife Refuge both by the citizens of Montana and many nonresident visitors, and the Hell Creek State Park is one of a few locations that enables a diverse public to access the wildlands of CMR in a managed fashion. The Hell Creek State Park makes it possible for the public to enjoy the wild and scenic qualities of CMR. The development and maintenance of the existing infrastructure is necessary to accommodate an ever increasing number of visitors to this park annually and we support that within the confines of the 337 acre Park boundary. In addition, we also support the improvements at the site that consider the impacts and compatibility to the CMR Refuge management overall. We encourage the Montana State Parks to consider fully the impacts to fish and wildlife habitat from direct and indirect use of the Park visitors on the qualities of the CMR while undertaking these projects that are proposed. We have communicated with you about the needs to manage off-road vehicular activities by the public as an example and look forward to assisting the Park in developing alternatives for development that help educate visitors. Education regarding the proper and compatible use of the adjacent CMR lands via kiosks and park rangers will be needed to develop effective communication tools between the Park and its visitors as well. Continued and

successful coordination between all three agencies will ensure that the mission of all three agencies will be met while not impeding the missions of our partners as well. In that vein, we encourage continued collaboration on the development of roads, new camping sites, water developments and other infrastructure improvements to ensure that we meet the CMR's compatibility concerns as well. The Hell Creek State Park continues to be one of the more popular outdoor recreation opportunities in Garfield County, and we are pleased that the Montana State Parks is embarking on this planning process. The CMR Refuge has enjoyed a very productive working relationship with the USACE on planning and operations of recreational facilities that have been historically of mutual management concerns. We look forward to building a similar relationship with your agency as we collectively move forward with planning for Hell Creek State Park. Please feel free to contact us at any time to identify collaboration opportunities as well.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Matthew W.D. deRosier", written over a horizontal line. To the right of the signature is a small horizontal dash.

Matthew W.D. deRosier

Deputy Project Leader

Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge

CC: Paul Santavy, Project Leader, CMR

Bridget Nielsen Jordan Station Manager, CMR

Murphy, Maren

From: bthov13@uw.edu
Sent: Wednesday, November 25, 2015 2:12 PM
To: FWP Hell Creek Planning
Subject: Public Comment: Montana State Parks Seeks Public Comment On Hell Creek State Park Master Site/Management Plan -Comments due by Wednesday, November 25 at 5pm

Response from Dr. Gregory Wilson and the Wilson Lab, Department of Biology, University of Washington, Seattle, WA

As long time patrons of the Hell Creek State Park, we strongly support option #1. The Hell Creek State Park is clearly an important recreational and economic establishment, as it is a popular destination for both Montana residents and non-residents, provides financial support for the Montana State Park system, and brings visitors and business to the surrounding area. Moreover, the park hosts and directly supports many local organizations, such as the Walleyes Unlimited of Montana.

The park is also an important hub for scientific research. The Hell Creek area is famous for its preservation of fossils, and as a result has long been a significant study area for paleontologists, geologists, biologists, and scientists of other disciplines. Our colleagues have been visiting the park since the 1990s, and our research lab has been camping at the park every summer since 2007. In addition to our financial contributions, our presence at the park allows us to assist in the proper collection and management of local paleontological resources. These resources hold enormous scientific and educational value, and the future management of the Hell Creek State Park in accordance with option #1 is critical to the success of this endeavor.

Furthermore, the park allows us to continue and expand our local public outreach efforts. For the last six summers, our research team has hosted the Discoveries in Geosciences (DIG) Field School at the Hell Creek State Park. The DIG is a unique, non-profit professional development program that serves K-12 teachers across the nation. The program brings teachers into the field with our crew, where they are fully immersed in the research and get to collect and prospect for fossils themselves. The teachers then bring what they learned about paleontology, biology, and geology back to their students, allowing them to draw connections between the science they do in their classrooms with the real, active research we are conducting. Many teachers from all over the state of Montana have participated in the program, and our curriculum has reached hundreds of Montana students.

In addition to the DIG, our research team frequently interacts with families and other campers visiting the park. This past summer, for example, we hosted a ?Paleo Night,? where we invited members of the community to visit our camp for a presentation on our research and participate in educational paleontological activities. Option #1 plays a crucial role in allowing these public outreach efforts to continue.

This e-mail was generated from the 'Montana State Parks Seeks Public Comment On Hell Creek State Park Master Site/Management Plan -Comments due by Wednesday, November 25 at 5pm' Public Notice Web Page.