

FISH CREEK

Draft Recreation Strategy

September 2023



Montana Fish Wildlife & Parks:

Our Mission is...

Steward the fish, wildlife, parks, and recreational resources for the public, now and into the future.

Our Vision is...

Montana is a place where people have abundant opportunities to connect with the world-renowned fish, wildlife, and state parks resources that define our state, and where a responsive and relevant FWP has the resiliency and public support it needs to lead the way in making sure these resources remain an essential part of Montana's culture, economy, and high quality of life.

Our Core Beliefs are...

At the center of FWP's work are four core beliefs: balance, inclusion, integrity and opportunity

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Acknowledgements

Montana Fish Wildlife & Parks would like to thank the following groups and organizations for their thoughtful participation in the development of this Fish Creek Recreation strategy:

Forest Fire Lookout Association
Great Burn Conservation Alliance
Hellgate Hunters and Anglers
Iowa State University
Lolo National Forest
Mineral County Commissioners
Mountain Bike Missoula
Montana Trout Unlimited
National Wildlife Federation
Summit Independent Living
The University of Montana Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research
Western Montana Trail Riders Association

Montana Fish Wildlife & Parks would also like to thank members of the public and neighboring landowners who took time to attend scoping meetings, review the strategy and provide thoughtful and constructive insight and contributions regarding the future of the Fish Creek Drainage.

Definitions and Acronyms

ADA: Americans with Disability Act

CNREP: Center for Natural Resources & Environmental Policy of the University of Montana

Designated dispersed camping: camping outside of a designated campground in sites that are clearly marked with a tent sign.

Dispersed camping: camping anywhere outside of a designated campground.

DNRC: Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation

EA: Environmental Assessment

FAS: Fishing Access Site

FWP: Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks

ITRR: Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research at the University of Montana

Management Plan: A prescriptive planning tool used to guide management of public lands. Normally, there is only one land management agency managing the public lands in the management plan. Management plans are usually very specific and include a monitoring framework, with indicators and thresholds. In Montana, state park and other management plans generally are established through an environmental review under the Montana Environmental Policy Act.

OHV: An off-highway vehicle (OHV) is a self-propelled vehicle used for recreation on public roads, trails, easements, lakes, rivers, or streams. Street legal vehicles need to be trail ready.

PCT: Plum Creek Timber Company

Project Area: For the purposes of this recreation strategy, the Project Area refers to the contiguous area comprised of Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area, Fish Creek State Park and the State Trust Lands managed by DNRC that are spread throughout the Fish Creek drainage (see Map 1).

Recreation Strategy: A planning tool that describes the high-level objectives for recreation and general strategies to achieve desired conditions. It is less prescriptive than a management plan *See Management Plan definition, above). A strategy guides future planning efforts, of which

many would require an environmental assessment under the Montana Environmental Protection Act (MEPA). The duration for this Fish Creek Strategy is 10 years.

TNC: The Nature Conservancy

USFS: United States Forest Service

USFWS: United States Fish and Wildlife Service

WHPA: Wildlife Habitat Protection Area

WMA: Wildlife Management Area

Executive Summary

Context

Fish Creek is a productive trout stream in northwest Montana and a stronghold for Montana's native trout, including bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout, and wild populations of rainbow trout and brown trout. The area also hosts an estimated 57 mammal, 115 bird, five amphibian, and five reptile species. Some notable game species include moose, elk, black bear, mountain lions, and wolves.

In the past, the Fish Creek area experienced extensive logging and associated roadbuilding. Now, the area provides excellent wildlife habitat and numerous opportunities for recreation, including fishing, hunting, dispersed camping, hiking, biking, wildlife watching, and motorized recreation on gravel roads.

The Fish Creek drainage contains myriad state-managed public lands, including areas managed by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) that include Fish Creek State Park, Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area, and the Big Pine and Forks Fishing Access sites as well as trust lands managed by Montana's Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC). Altogether, the portion of the watershed that is managed by Montana state agencies (the Project Area) is more than 45,000 acres.

Through the development of a comprehensive recreation strategy for state-managed lands in the Fish Creek drainage, FWP and DNRC aim to effectively manage different types and intensities of recreational activities in the Fish Creek Area while preserving the natural resource values of the area.

FWP is actively welcoming comments on this Draft Fish Creek Recreation Strategy from Sept. 18-Oct. 20, 2023. Comment online: <https://fwp.mt.gov/conservation/fish-creek-watershed-recreation-planning>

Recreation Strategy Highlights

The following is a summary list of proposed management directions developed for state managed lands in the Fish Creek drainage after extensive stakeholder and public consultation. It lists specific activities to be undertaken and proposed phases for their completion.

Phase 1: Management actions with highest resource benefits and those actions that can be managed with existing resources.

Phase 2: Management actions that will require additional resources, including potential legislative appropriation, and/or additional planning processes (MEPA).

Phase 3: Longer-term management actions that require additional public engagement and planning that may also require completion of Phases 1 and 2.

Management Direction	How	Timeline
1. Redesign Dispersed Camping to Better Protect the Environment and Visitor Experience		
Allow dispersed camping in designated sites.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mark designated sites 	Phase 2
Better delineate existing dispersed campsites, place barriers to confine heavy impacts to specific areas. Remove and rehabilitate current dispersed sites that are too close to water and to other dispersed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delineate appropriate sites • Place barriers • Rehabilitate inappropriate sites 	Phase 1
Install portable vault toilets near clusters of dispersed campsites to better control human waste.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Install vault toilets (portable toilets may be used in lieu of permanent vault toilets) 	Phase 1
2. Enhance Existing Developed Camping Opportunities		
Increase the number of developed campsites at Big Pine and Forks Campgrounds.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draft Environmental Assessment for development • Secure additional resources 	Phase 2
Explore options for additional managerial site presence in the Fish Creek drainage. This could eventually include having staff stationed at Big Pine Campground that can oversee Big Pine and Forks Campgrounds, as well as the dispersed sites in the road corridor from I-90 to Forks.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some short-term options may be identified • Draft Environmental Assessment for development 	Phase 1 Phase 2
3. Rehabilitate and Maintain Williams Peak Lookout		
Rehabilitate and maintain Williams Peak Lookout.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage interested partnerships • Develop rehabilitation strategy and budget • Complete necessary MEPA on any actions 	Phase 1 Phase 2 Phase 2

Management Direction	How	Timeline
Explore options for improved access and future public use of Williams Peak Lookout.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public engagement to consider options. 	Phase 3
4. Provide a High-Quality Wade Fishing Experience and Protect Woody Debris		
FWP will recommend that the Fish and Wildlife Commission adopt a closure on recreational floating for the entire length of Fish Creek.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fish and Wildlife Commission process 	Phase 1
5. Explore Nonmotorized Recreational Opportunities Further		
Further explore the development of hiking and purpose-built biking trails.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Future public engagement process 	Phase 3
6. Preserve Motorized Recreational Opportunity		
Preserve at least three existing OHV loops south of I-90: Hay Creek Loop, Bear Point Loop and Williams Pass Loop.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue engaging private partners to support maintenance and management of OHV routes Erect signs at existing loops Maintain routes 	Phase 1
Establish designated parking area(s) for OHV users, where use indicates a need.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitor and evaluate OHV use and parking availability Identify potential for alleviating congestion and reducing resource impacts by developing parking area(s). 	Phase 3
7. Improve Visitor Experience Through Better Informational and Interpretive Signs		
Develop interpretive plan for the Project Area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interpretive plan 	Phase 1
Establish an information kiosk within 2 miles of Exit 66 on I-90.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop comprehensive sign package 	Phase 2
Erect additional informational signs at Big Pine and Forks Campgrounds.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop comprehensive sign package 	Phase 2
Appropriately sign all developed and designated dispersed campsites.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop comprehensive sign package 	Phase 2
Sign important road junctions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop comprehensive sign package 	Phase 2
Install interpretive signage at important locations, including Williams Peak.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop comprehensive sign package 	Phase 2
8. Improve Accessibility for Fish Creek Recreation		
Develop one or more ADA designated sites for camping at Big Pine and/or Forks Campgrounds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Included in draft Environmental Assessment 	Phase 1

Management Direction	How	Timeline
Maintain existing unimproved trails that facilitate stream access, and where appropriate, develop accessible fishing access points.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitor access and look for opportunities for managed parking and access. 	Phase 3
9. Improve Visitor Experience Through Consistent Regulations Across Agencies		
Finalize an agreement between FWP and DNRC to align recreation and visitor use regulations resulting in one set of regulations for all FWP and DNRC managed parcels of land in the Fish Creek drainage.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuing to collaborate with DNRC on administrative options. 	Phase 1
10. Enhance Safety and Enforcement		
Increase contact between FWP staff and visitors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain all-staff approach to area presence and coordination across divisions (Park and Outdoor Recreation, Maintenance, Wildlife, Fisheries, Enforcement) • Seek to increase managerial staff presence (site hosts) 	Phase 1 Phase 2
Improve public understanding and compliance with existing recreation rules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve informational and interpretive signs 	Phase 1

Interagency Coordination and Partnerships

Beyond the agreement between FWP and DNRC described in the 9th Management direction listed in the prior section, FWP will continue to coordinate with the Lolo National Forest and DNRC. Initial discussions include continued partnership through the Wildlife Habitat Improvement Project (WHIP) to manage weeds across boundaries and coordinating on forest management opportunities. Both FWP and DNRC are coordinating with the Lolo National Forest as cooperating agencies through the Forest Plan Amendment. There are ongoing efforts to coordinate with Mineral County Resource Coalition and partners on watershed level forest management and restoration opportunities across USFS and DNRC properties.

Several potential partnerships have been developed throughout this recreation strategy development process that could provide some level of assistance to FWP to implement the management directions listed above. They include the Forest Fire Lookout Association, Mountain Bike Missoula, Western Montana Trail Riders Association, Iowa State University, The University of Montana Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research, etc.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Project Area History and Description

The Fish Creek drainage and the area surrounding it is part of the aboriginal homeland of the Séliš (Salish), Qlispé (Pend d'Oreille), Nimiipuu (Nez Perce), Ksanka (Kootenai), and Schitsu'umsh (Coeur d'Alene) peoples. The people still maintain an important spiritual connection to the area, and many tribal peoples continue to hunt, fish, and gather throughout their aboriginal homelands.

In 1910, the largest wildfire in regional history sparked a movement that led to the creation of the modern U.S. Forest Service (USFS). The wildfire burned three million acres in northwestern Montana (including across the Fish Creek drainage), Idaho and Washington.

In the modern era, the forested landscape of the Fish Creek drainage offers a diversity of wildlife habitat recovering from an industrial past offering visitors a memorable natural experience in a secluded environment where recreation opportunities abound. Fish Creek State Park, the Fish Creek WMA, Big Pine and Forks Fishing Access Sites, and day-use sites on the Alberton Gorge are all managed by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks. A larger state-owned public land complex and several private inholdings surround these sites. Key agency partnerships and stakeholder collaboration has existed between FWP, DNRC, USFS, and private landowners for several years.

The Fish Creek watershed represents some of the best remaining habitat for bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout, both Montana Species of Greatest Conservation Need. Bull trout are also listed as "Threatened" under the Endangered Species Act. These are both exceptionally sensitive species, subject to strict catch-and-release fishing regulations (intentional fishing for bull trout is prohibited). The main stem of Fish Creek provides an intact migratory corridor and rearing area that is vital to native trout populations and the overall fish/aquatic community. Fish Creek is unique in that it supports the strongest fluvial (river migrant) runs of bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout in the western half of FWP's Region 2.

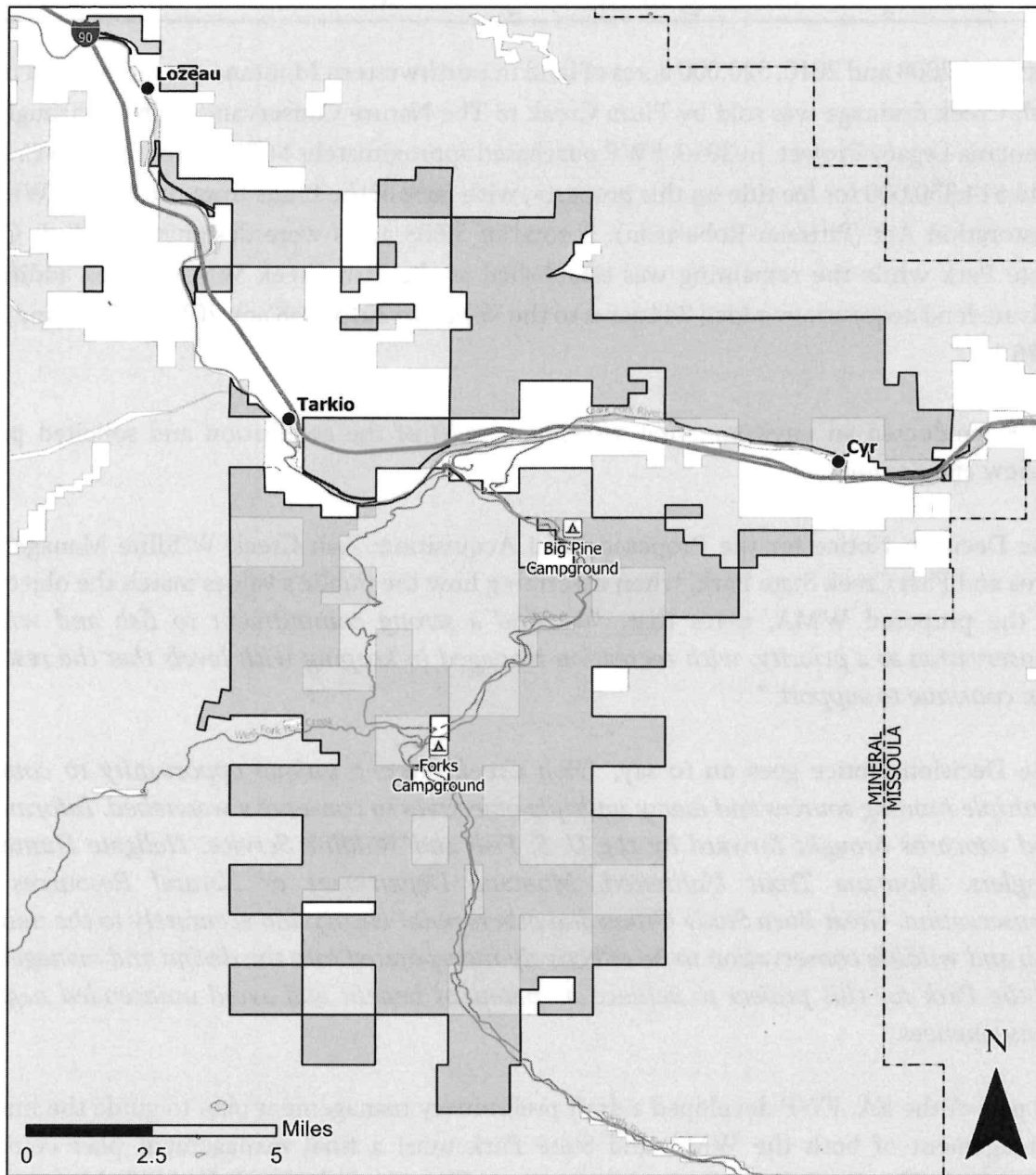
In addition to bull and westslope cutthroat trout, Fish Creek also supports wild populations of rainbow trout, brown trout, and mountain whitefish. Fish Creek supports more than 4,000 angler-days per year (Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, 2020) with most of those days occurring on the main stem of Fish Creek and lower portions of the West Fork of Fish Creek.








The area also supports a variety of habitats for wildlife including an estimated 57 mammal, 115 bird, five amphibian, and five reptile species. Some notable mammal species include moose, elk, white-tailed deer, mule deer, grizzly bear, black bear, mountain lions, beavers, and wolves. Importantly, the area serves as a key linkage zone for forest carnivores (grizzly bears, Canada lynx, wolverine, and others), providing connectivity between the Mission and Rattlesnake Wilderness Areas and through the Ninemile Divide to the Selway-Bitterroot Mountains. Riparian and upland habitats support a rich diversity of birds, small mammals, amphibians, and reptiles.

The area also provides hunter opportunity, with 1,104 hunters harvesting 86 animals (white-tailed deer, mule deer, and elk) passing through the Fish Creek check station on weekends during the general rifle season in 2022.

Key recreation activities in the Project Area include fishing, hunting, camping, hiking, wildlife watching, berry picking, horseback riding, motorized recreation, and mountain biking, and occasionally snowmobiling on open roads. The area also consists of a network of old logging roads, including a 70-mile series of roads that allow motorized use and others that are available for hiking and non-motorized use.

For the purposes of this recreation strategy the “Project Area” is defined as FWP lands and the State Trust lands managed by DNRC that are spread throughout the Fish Creek drainage (see Map 1). The Project Area does not include the day use sites on the Alberton Gorge, as the planning and management of those areas are covered by the Alberton Gorge Commercial Use permitting process.



- | | |
|--|---|
|  Campground |  Wildlife Management Area |
|  Road |  Montana State Trust Lands |
| |  Fish Creek State Park |
| |  US Forest Service |
| |  Private & other |



Map 1. Project Area

1.2 History of Planning in the Project Area

Between 2008 and 2010, 320,000 acres of land in northwestern Montana, including land in the Fish Creek drainage was sold by Plum Creek to The Nature Conservancy (TNC) through the Montana Legacy Project. In 2010, FWP purchased approximately 41,000 acres from TNC. FWP paid \$14,350,000 for fee title on this property, with 58% of the funds from the federal Wildlife Restoration Act (Pittman-Robertson). A total of 5,603 acres were designated as Fish Creek State Park while the remaining was established as the Fish Creek WMA. Three additional private land acquisitions added 744 acres to the WMA in 2015 (148 ac), 2016 (320 ac) and 2018 (276 ac).

FWP conducted an environmental assessment (EA) of the acquisition and solicited public review and comments.

The Decision Notice for the Proposed Land Acquisition: Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area and Fish Creek State Park, when describing how the public's values match the objectives of the proposed WMA, notes that, *"we find a strong commitment to fish and wildlife conservation as a priority, with recreation managed in keeping with levels that the resource can continue to support."*

The Decision Notice goes on to say, *"Fish Creek offers a unique opportunity to combine multiple funding sources and marry multiple objectives to conserve a watershed. Information and concerns brought forward by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Hellgate Hunters & Anglers, Montana Trout Unlimited, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Great Burn Study Group and others point clearly and accurately to the need for fish and wildlife conservation to be effectively incorporated into the design and management of the Park for this project to achieve its potential benefit and avoid unintended negative consequences."*

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. The Draft Preliminary Management Plan for Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area and Fish Creek State Park established that the 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; there are few if any amenities beyond a system of open and closed roads on existing roadbeds.

The Draft Management Plan also established that Fish Creek State Park, along with the adjacent Alberton Gorge, provides a large landscape 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 would attract new users/user-groups providing 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.

In September 2012, the public scoping began for the development of the Fish Creek State Park Draft Management Plan that was meant to supplant the draft preliminary management plan. The Fish Creek State Park Draft Management Plan was completed and released for public comments in December 2013. The extensive feedback from the public resulted in the plan not being implemented. The State Park has remained under the draft preliminary plan since that time.

1.3 A New Strategic Process

To revive the planning process and better respond to public concerns, a new strategic approach was initiated in June 2022. This new process encompasses a larger geographic area; it includes Fish Creek State Park, Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area, and the Big Pine and Forks Fishing Access Sites as well as some of the DNRC parcels that are scattered throughout the Fish Creek drainage (the Project Area). The latest planning effort focuses on recreation management and preservation of natural resources. Also, recognizing that aligning management approaches for FWP and DNRC will require a new agreement between these two state agencies, and that some proposed management actions will be subject to environmental assessment and additional public review as required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) prior to implementation, this planning document is identified as a *strategy*, rather than as a management plan.

With this strategy, FWP would like to ensure that the public's place alongside fish and wildlife on the Fish Creek landscape is well recognized, as it always has been, while congruently using

the tenets of recreation and habitat management tools for the perpetual conservation of the fish, wildlife and natural resources upon which such recreational opportunities depend. FWP aims to connect the public's enjoyment of these resources to the significance of the habitat for fish and wildlife, and to similarly foster an appreciation for the cultural and historic resources located in the area. In the long term, a desire for this strategy is to bring multiple funding sources and constituencies together to implement appropriate recreation management practices alongside conservation and stewardship at a scale that cannot be accomplished parcel by parcel.

Once finalized, the Fish Creek Recreation Strategy will replace the draft preliminary management plan and provide high-level guidance for the management of recreation in Fish Creek State Park, Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area, and Big Pine and Forks Fishing Access Sites. FWP will continue to work with DNRC and other external constituencies as this strategy is implemented.

1.4 Brief Description of the Project Area

1.4.1 Fish Creek State Park

Fish Creek State Park covers more than 5,600 acres within the Fish Creek Area, making it the largest state park in western Montana. Without recreational infrastructure, the park has outstanding opportunities for hiking, mountain biking, fishing, hunting, and wildlife viewing and is full of beautiful scenery and places to explore. The park offers direct access to Fish Creek in multiple locations and is home to the creek's confluence with the Clark Fork River in the Alberton Gorge, known for its premier whitewater rafting.

Although currently closed to the public, within the park there is a fire tower no longer in use that sits atop Williams Peak, offering expansive views. Even without climbing up to the fire tower, visitors can enjoy vistas of the surrounding Bitterroot Mountain range and the proposed Great Burn Wilderness, a vast and remote landscape filled with high mountain lakes, free-flowing streams, and three distinct ecosystems.

1.4.2 Fish Creek WMA

Fish Creek WMA is primarily dedicated to the protection and perpetuation of fish and wildlife resources. The WMA covers 35,317 acres that were historically commercial timberland. The property borders the Lolo National Forest (~ 140,000 acres), DNRC lands (~ 6,000 acres), and some private lands (< 2% of the drainage).

1.4.3 Big Pine and Forks Fishing Access Sites and Campgrounds

Big Pine FAS provides access to Fish Creek. There is day use parking, primitive camping, and a vault latrine on site. Big Pine FAS site is aptly named, as it features the largest known Ponderosa Pine tree in the state.

Forks FAS also provides access to Fish Creek. It provides day use parking, primitive camping, a vault latrine, and walk-in access for fishing. The site is located near the confluence of the West Fork of Fish Creek and Fish Creek, lending to the name of the site.

Both sites are heavily used.

1.4.4 The Alberton Gorge

The Alberton Gorge or “the Gorge,” is a 10-mile section of the Clark Fork River west of Alberton that extends from Cyr FAS to Tarkio FAS. It is a beautiful, steep-walled canyon section that is especially popular on hot summer days. With class II and III whitewater opportunities, beginners and experts alike appreciate it, and it offers plenty of swimming opportunities. The Gorge is popular with commercial and private boaters, anglers, and other recreationists. The primary access points at Cyr and Tarkio are typically crowded during the peak summer season. The only part of the Alberton Gorge that is part of the Project Area is the beach located at the confluence of Fish Creek and the Clark Fork River within Fish Creek State Park. This beach is used daily as a lunch spot by people on rafting trips and is heavily used by anglers. Some people that float the gorge meet at Fish Creek prior to their floating trips. Others camp the night before or after their floating trips at Fish Creek.

1.5 Regional Context

1.5.1 Mineral County

Mineral County is in western Montana and forms the boundary with Idaho along the Bitterroot Mountain range. Mineral County has a total area of 1,222 square miles or 782,067 acres (0.83% of Montana). According to the most recent statistics available from the US Bureau of Census, the estimated population of Mineral County was 5,058 in 2022. The population density is 3.7 inhabitants per square mile. The racial makeup of the county was 93.6% white, 2.0% American Indian, 3.4% Hispanic or Latino, 0.8% Asian, 0.5% Black or African American, and 3.1% from two or more races. The largest city in the county is Superior which also serves as the county seat with a population of approximately 830 in the 2020 census (United State

Census Bureau, 2022). Since the 2010 census, Mineral County has seen a 9.59% population growth rate, the 16th highest in Montana (World Population Review, 2023).

91% of the land area in Mineral County is located on public lands. 82% of that land is managed by the USFS, 5% are managed by FWP and 3% are managed by DNRC as Montana State Trust Lands. 9% of lands are privately owned (United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service, 2020).

While Mineral County has a rich tradition of farming/ranching, mining, and timber harvesting that have formed the basic economic structure, there is an increased interest in recreational use by county and out-of-state residents. Mineral County's vision statement includes:

Mineral County residents enjoy a healthy Montana lifestyle based around the beauty, use and enjoyment of our rugged mountains, forests, rivers, and lakes. We take pride in the quality of and access to natural resources and amenities, making this a great place to live and to visit. We are committed to sustainable resource use and management, which forms the foundation of our livelihoods, recreation, custom and culture (Anon., 2016, p. 3)

This pattern of land ownership and tax base implications are a major issue for Mineral County residents. National forests are owned by the federal government. The management priorities and goals are often very different on a national scale than on the local scale. When much of the land in an area is not used to generate economic activity, it impacts the entire area through the lack of direct and indirect employment (Anon., 2016, p. 15).

1.5.2 Missoula County

Missoula County is located at the west-central edge of Montana sharing its borders with six counties in Montana along with two counties in the state of Idaho. A lot of the recreational use in Fish Creek is coming from Missoula County. Missoula County is characterized by having five large valleys with two major rivers winding through several mountain ranges, many of which help form the surrounding county boundaries. The Clark Fork River, which is a tributary of the Columbia River, runs through the heart of Missoula County flowing from southeast at the Powell County line to the northwest towards Mineral County.

Missoula County has a total area of 2,614 miles or 1,673,518 acres (1.78% of Montana). According to the most recent statistics from the US Bureau of Census, the estimated population of Missoula County is 121,041, the second largest county in Montana. The population density is 45.5 persons per square mile. The racial makeup of the county was 91.3% white, 3.8%

Hispanic and Latino, 2.8% American Indian, 1.9% Asian, .6% Black or African American, and 3.3% two or more races present (United States Census Bureau, 2022).

62% of land in Missoula County is publicly owned, with 52% of the land managed by the USFS, 6% managed by DNRC as Montana State Trust Lands, 2% managed by FWP, and 1% managed by the US Bureau of Land Management. 18% of lands in Missoula County are privately owned (United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service, 2020).

In the rural areas of Missoula County, farming/ranching, mining, timber harvesting, tourism, and recreation form the core of the economic structure. The leading industries in the city of Missoula include healthcare and education. Since the 2010 census, Missoula County has seen a population growth of 10.26%, the 14th highest growth rate for all counties in Montana (World Population Review, 2023). We expect Missoula County to continue to grow and add additional use pressure to Fish Creek.

1.5.3 Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation

The Project Area is located in the traditional home of the people that are now part of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes include the Salish, the Pend d'Oreille and the Kootenai people. Of the approximately 7,753 enrolled tribal members, about 5,000 live on or near the Flathead Reservation. The reservation comprises over 1.2 million acres, with its southern boundary located approximately 30 miles northeast of the project area. Archaeological sites in the Fish Creek area indicate Indigenous ancestors have been camping, hunting, fishing and gathering there for thousands of years. The traditional seasonal round of the Salish and Pend d'Oreille began with digging the roots of bitterroot and camas in the spring and early summer, traveling east across the Rockies to hunt bison during the summer, and hunting species like elk, deer and mountain sheep in the fall. The Salish and Pend d'Oreille were famously skilled fishermen, using a variety of hooks, nets, weirs and other methods to catch fish throughout the year. In the Fish Creek area, people fished, gathered plants for food, tools and medicine, and likely hunted, as well. The Clark Fork drainage contained a well-known traditional trail that many used as part of their route to the Buffalo each year.

Among the many points of interest on the Flathead Reservation managed by the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes are The Three Chiefs Cultural Center, the Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness, and the National Bison Range that moved from federal government management to trust ownership by CSKT on December 27, 2020. Other recreation lands not managed by CSKT include Ninepipe National Wildlife Refuge (USFWS) and State Wildlife Management Area (FWP) and Flathead Lake State Park managed by FWP.

1.5.4 Recreation Opportunities and Trends in Western Montana

Western Montana offers a wide range of recreational activities and opportunities, making it a popular destination for outdoor enthusiasts. The region is known for its vast wilderness areas, national forests, and pristine lakes and rivers, wildlife, and rural character.

In 2022, 12.5 million nonresident visitors traveled to Montana, spending an estimated 5.82 billion dollars. Nearly 44,000 jobs in Montana are supported by tourism (ITRR, 2023) and outdoor recreation accounted for 4.4% of Montana's GDP, greater than any other state except Hawaii (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2022).

35% of surveyed nonresident visitors traveled to Glacier Country (Northwestern Montana), and 9% visited a Montana state park during their trip. Common recreational activities for surveyed nonresident visitors in 2022 included scenic driving (47%), day hiking (42%), wildlife watching (29%), nature photography (26%), and car/RV camping (26%). Nonresident visitors to Montana commonly travel from Washington State, Idaho, North Dakota, California, Wyoming, and Alberta (ITRR, 2023). The majority of nonresident visitors (79%) have visited Montana previously and more than half of these visitors visited new public lands when returning to Montana (ITRR, 2023), indicating that while visitors may be drawn to Montana for the national parks, they are seeking additional opportunities on public lands which can include state parks and other lands managed by FWP.

Montana residents are also recreating widely across the state. More than half (59%) of surveyed Montana residents said they had camped in the state over the past year, with public land campgrounds being the most used (44%), followed by dispersed camping on public land (22%) (ITRR, 2021).

Recreational use has been increasing across Montana. In 2022, more than 3 million people visited Montana state parks (Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks), which is 51.5% more than ten years ago. Visitation at Glacier National Park grew 34.5% in that same timeframe (Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks).

Some of the main features of the regional recreation context in western Montana include:

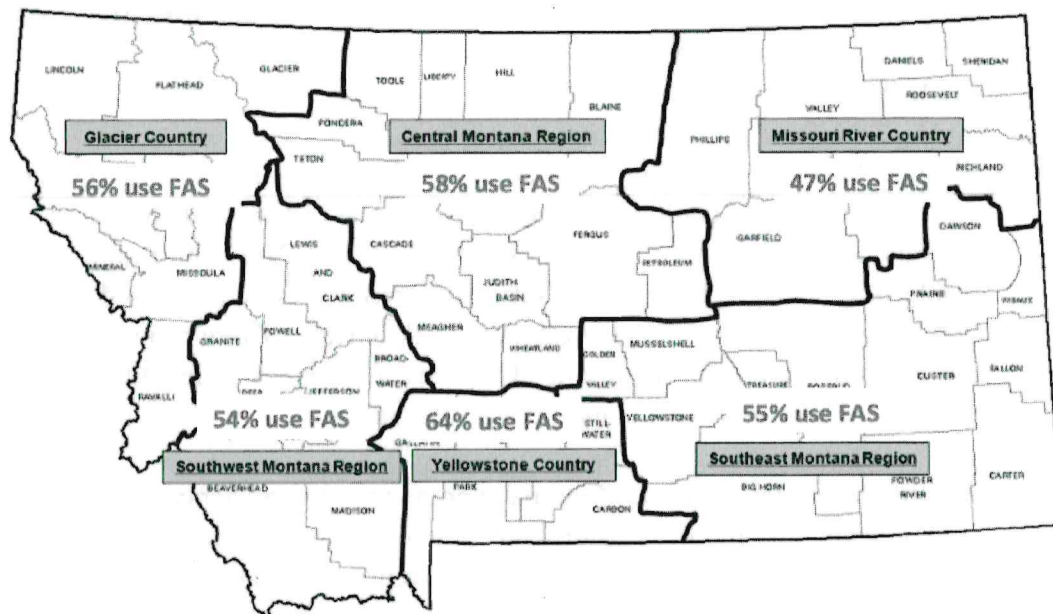
1. **National Parks and Forests:** Western Montana is home to several national parks and forests, including Glacier National Park, Lolo National Forest including the Mission Mountains and Rattlesnake Wildernesses and the Great Burn Wilderness Study Area. These areas offer numerous opportunities for hiking, camping, fishing, hunting, floating, wildlife viewing, mountain biking, and motorized recreation. Glacier National Park has had approximately 3 million visitors each year, mainly over a short

summer season and a growing shoulder season. The park has implemented multiple visitor use management measures including ticketed entry that has controlled how many visitors can arrive daily and during certain times of the day. This pilot study might have implications for visitors and local residents shifting use to other public lands in western Montana.

2. **Water Sports:** Western Montana boasts a variety of waterways, including the Clark Fork River, Flathead River, Bitterroot River, Blackfoot River, and Flathead Lake. These waterways provide excellent opportunities for boating, kayaking, canoeing, rafting, and fishing. The Flathead River system is a designated Wild and Scenic River and is adjacent to Glacier National Park, national forests, and wilderness areas. This river system is undergoing a comprehensive federal management planning process and is being monitored for private and outfitter use. There is high demand for various recreational use on the rivers and lakes in western Montana, which requires a coordinated effort across jurisdictions and communities.
3. **Winter Sports:** Western Montana is a popular destination for winter sports enthusiasts, with several ski resorts in the area, including Whitefish Mountain Resort, Montana Snowbowl, and Lost Trail Powder Mountain. Western Montana also has thousands of miles of groomed nordic cross-country ski trails, and snowmobile trails. Snowshoeing is also a popular activity in the region. Many communities (i.e., Seeley Lake, Whitefish, Missoula, Lolo) have expanded opportunities for winter activities on state and USFS lands.
4. **Hiking:** Western Montana has an extensive network of trails, including the Continental Divide Trail, which runs through the region, and the Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail that begins in Glacier National Park. The Proposed Great Burn Wilderness managed by the Lolo National Forest is located south and west of the Fish Creek drainage and has an extensive network of trails. These trails offer scenic views and challenging terrain for hiking. There are also extensive local trail networks that provide connectivity within and between communities.
5. **Wildlife Viewing:** Western Montana is home to a diverse array of wildlife, including grizzly bears, elk, moose, bighorn sheep, and hundreds of nongame animals such as songbirds and amphibians. Visitors can explore the many forested areas and lush riparian bottoms to observe these animals in their natural habitat.
6. **Motorized Recreation:** Western Montana has numerous areas that are well suited and/or specifically designated for motorized recreation. Scenic driving is common across much of the state and is popular with out of state visitors. Off highway vehicle

use, including ATV's and side-by sides are common on many state and USFS lands across the region, including across the Lolo National Forest surrounding the Fish Creek Area.

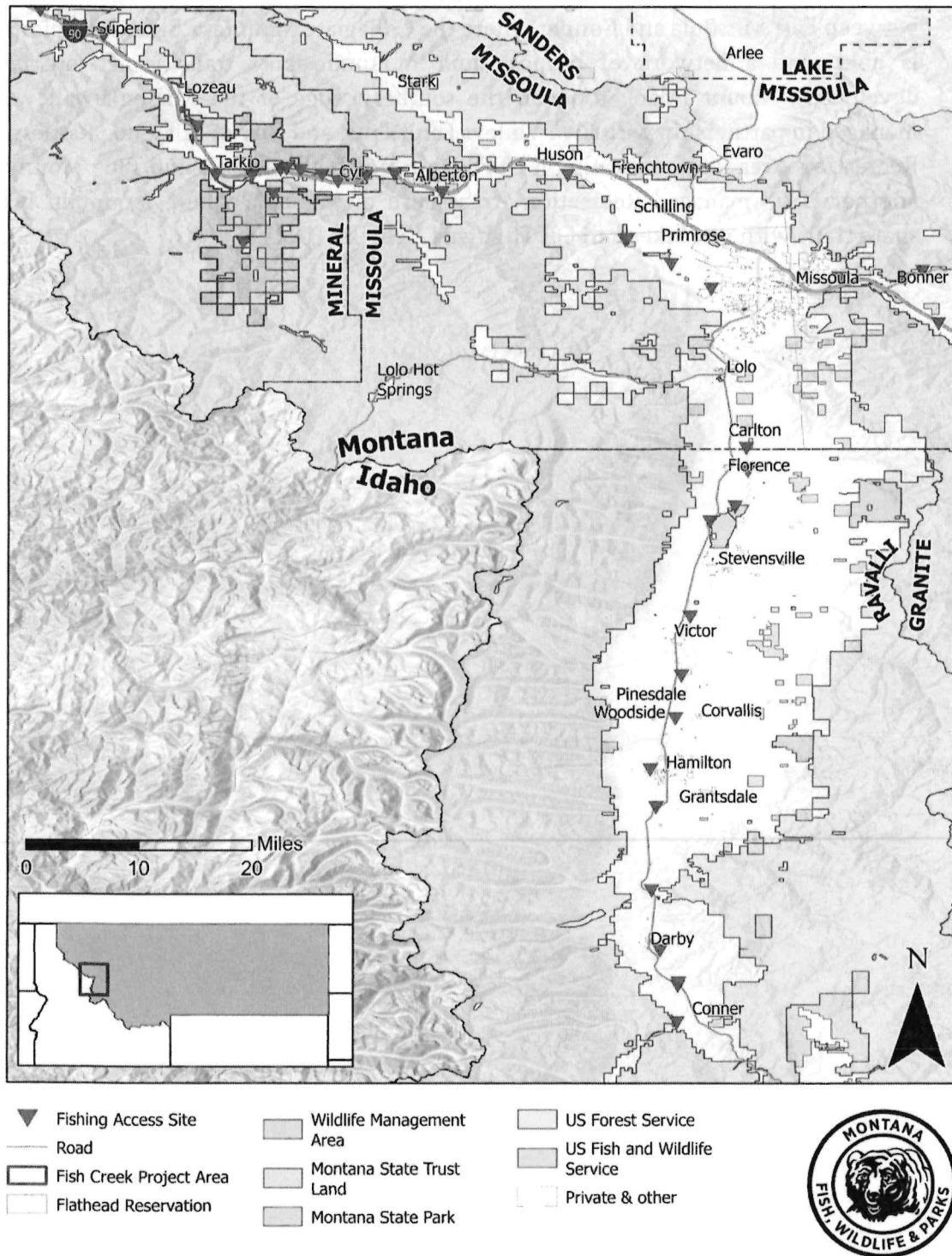
7. **Hunting:** Western Montana has a range of hunting opportunities on public land. Hunttable species include deer, elk, antelope, moose, bighorn sheep, mountain goat, bison, black bear, mountain lion, wolves, turkey and some upland birds, goose, ducks, and some migratory birds. All hunters must obtain the appropriate licenses for the species they are hunting, and for some species, a permit, in order to hunt.
8. **Fishing:** Western Montana has several world-famous fishing streams and rivers. They include the Bitterroot River, Blackfoot River, and Clark Fork River. Western Montana rivers host many of Montana's native trout, including bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout, and wild populations of rainbow trout and brown trout. Flathead Lake is home to lake trout, rainbow trout, bull trout, northern pike, yellow perch, whitefish, bass, and kokanee salmon. All fishermen, 12 years old or older must have a valid fishing license. Fishing Access Sites are used throughout the state by residents (see Map 3) and Montana residents strongly agreed that access to Montana's public lands and waterways is something they value and have pride for their state (ITRR, 2018).



Map 2. Fishing Access Site Use by Region of Residence (ITRR, 2018)

9. **Mountain biking:** Mountain bikers have near limitless opportunities for biking on dirt roads, but purpose-built trail systems with berms and one-way sections are not as

common in Western Montana. Some notable riding areas include Marshall Mountain between East Missoula and Bonner where the Collegiate Mountain Bike Championship is held (and a network of purpose-built mountain bike trails is actively being developed), Mount Dean Stone on the southern edge of the Missoula valley and managed in partnership with Five Valleys Land Trust and City of Missoula, Rattlesnake Recreation Area located mostly on USFS lands north of Missoula and Blue Mountain, another USFS managed Recreation Area south of Missoula where mountain bikers share trails with dirt bikes and Off Highway Vehicles (OHVs).



Map 3. Regional recreation context

1.5.5 ADA Accessibility for Outdoor Recreation in Western Montana

Recreationists with disabilities have some opportunities to explore wildlands in Western Montana. Some examples on FWP lands are:

1. The Frenchtown Pond Loop is a 1.3-mile accessible trail that circles Frenchtown Pond, in the Frenchtown Pond State Park, and an all-abilities kayak launch has recently been added.
2. Travelers' Rest State Park Trail is a 1.7-mile ADA accessible interpretive loop that showcases a camping site where the Lewis and Clark expedition rested before and after their journey across the Bitterroot mountains to and from the Pacific Ocean more than 200 years ago. The site is also a traditional camping site of the Salish tribe.
3. Milltown State Park has accessible trails at the Confluence and Gateway areas and the Overlook.

There are currently no ADA accessible amenities in the Project Area.

1.5.6 About the Clark Fork River

The Clark Fork, or the Clark Fork of the Columbia River, named after Captain William Clark, who with Meriwether Lewis led the expedition to the west in 1804, is approximately 310 miles long. By volume, the Clark Fork is the largest river in Montana. It drains an extensive region of the Rocky Mountains in western Montana and northern Idaho in the watershed of the Columbia River. The Clark Fork watershed covers 14 million acres and supports 350,000 people through its extensive 28,000 miles of rivers and streams (Clark Fork Coalition, n.d.)

One of the most popular whitewater opportunities in Western Montana can be found on the Clark Fork River through the Alberton Gorge upstream of the confluence of Fish Creek and the Clark Fork. Several commercial outfitters offer half and full-day rafting trips through the 12-mile stretch of rapids that flows through Alberton Gorge, with Class II-III rapids. Some boating groups meet at Fish Creek State Park before embarking on their whitewater trip, and others camp there before or after their trip. The Clark Fork River also flows through several communities including Missoula (the second largest city in Montana). The river has experienced great restoration efforts through the removal of Milltown dam. With the creation of Milltown State Park, it is now one of the most popular rivers for locals to do short floats on tubes into town or multi-day trips that encompass the confluence with Blackfoot and Bitterroot Rivers.

The upper Clark Fork River and its tributaries (including Fish Creek) have also been the focus of hundreds of fisheries and aquatic enhancement projects over the past three decades. The Western Montana aquatic restoration program is a nationally renowned public-private collaboration that includes efforts such as Milltown Dam removal, Upper Clark Fork River Superfund site remediation, Blackfoot River restoration and the removal of Rattlesnake Creek Dam. Because of its high native fish values and importance for the fishery, Fish Creek has also been a focus area for aquatic restoration in the middle Clark Fork River basin where > \$1 Million has been invested by FWP and its partners since 2000.

1.5.7 USFS and other lands in the region

The project area is surrounded by Lolo National Forest. USFS lands within and surrounding the Fish Creek watershed are part of the Ninemile Ranger district. Clearwater Crossing, a trailhead and campground on USFS lands within the Fish Creek watershed, is a popular trailhead and provides access to the Great Burn Area, a proposed wilderness area. Lolo Pass, south of Fish Creek on the Idaho/Montana border, can be accessed from the Fish Creek watershed via Fish Creek Road for much of the year and provides a range of recreation opportunities depending on the season.

1.5.8 Current Lolo National Forest planning efforts

The Lolo National Forest, which surrounds state lands in the Fish Creek Area, is currently in the process of revising its forest management plan, which guides the overall management of the Forest. Every National Forest is required to update its forest management plan periodically to ensure that each plan provides for the sustainability of ecosystems and resources; meets the need for forest restoration and conservation, watershed protection, and species diversity and conservation; and assists the Agency in providing a sustainable flow of benefits, services, and uses of NFS lands that provide jobs and contribute to the economic and social sustainability of communities. Each National Forest is also required to ensure public participation in both the development and review of plans.

The Lolo National Forest began its latest forest plan revision process in 2022 and is currently hosting a range of engagement activities to include the public and agency partners in the development of a proposed forest plan. The revision process will continue throughout the next several years. A complete timeline for this process, as well as information about the process, engagement opportunities, and comments periods can be found on the Lolo National Forest's website at:

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/lolo/landmanagement/planning/?cid=fseprd993646>.

2. Recreation Planning Framework

The framework used for this recreation planning process is the **Interagency Visitor Use Management Framework**, (IVUMC, 2016). It was developed by several federal agencies to align their recreation management and planning processes. This included the Bureau of Land Management, USFS, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, National Park Service, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The framework has four elements; Build the Foundation, Define Visitor Use Management Direction, Identify Management Strategies, and Implement, Monitor, Evaluate and Adjust (see Figure 1).

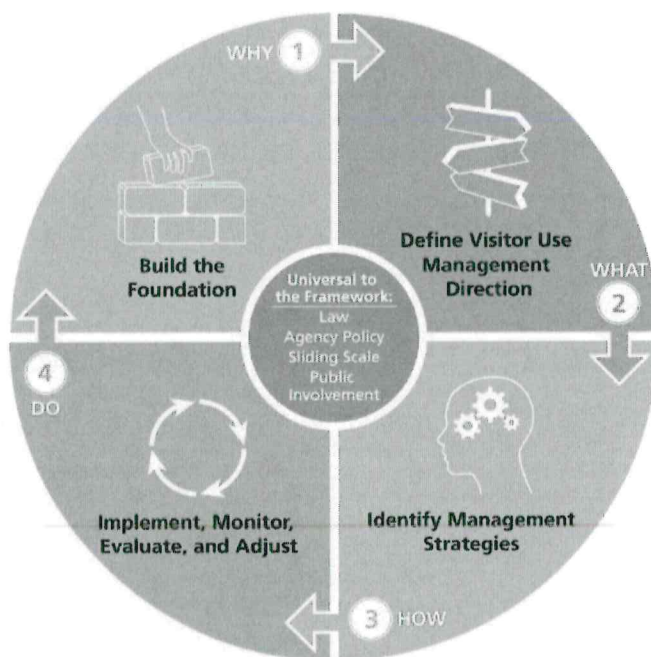


Figure 1. Interagency Visitor Use Management Framework

The framework requires considerable stakeholder engagement throughout the process; but particularly in Elements 2 and 3. A full description of the process and outcomes for stakeholder engagement are described in the sections that follow.

3. Planning Process

3.1 Scope of the strategy

In 2013, FWP created a State Park Draft Management Plan for Fish Creek State Park that was met with concerns from several interests during the public comment period. Common comments included concerns around potential increases in development, the need to manage impacts from potential increases in recreational use, and interest in developing additional recreation opportunities for some uses (e.g., motorized recreation). Some elements of the draft plan were carried forward, while others were not enacted in response to feedback from the public. Following major increases in recreational use over the past several years, FWP is establishing a new recreation management framework for the Fish Creek drainage.

In recognition of the previous planning processes' shortcomings and the complex mosaic of ownership within the drainage, FWP is taking a more holistic approach to better include perspectives from all user groups and partner agencies interested in recreational use management of the watershed. The area of interest includes Fish Creek State Park, Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area, the Big Pine and Forks Fishing Access Sites in the Fish Creek drainage, and School Trust lands managed by the DNRC (the Project Area). While USFS lands are not included in this planning process, USFS managed lands border the planning area. The USFS was consulted as a stakeholder.

FWP is looking to establish the contours of a recreation monitoring and evaluation program that can offer a clear way to think about effectively managing different types and intensities of recreational activities in a given space or site throughout the year. The agency seeks to strike the best balance between providing recreational opportunity and protecting and conserving the natural resources that opportunity relies upon. A clear set of indicators that are quantitative and qualitative in nature are desired. Integrating resource needs and values is important in this planning process. Such an emphasis also supports one of the key goals mentioned in the 2020-24 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan, otherwise known as SCORP, which underscores the need for comprehensive recreation planning efforts in Montana (Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, 2020).

The Fish Creek Draft Recreation Strategy provides high-level guidance for recreation management, and all associated operations including public safety, facilities and services, interpretation and education, and natural and cultural resource management in the state-managed lands in the Project Area.

3.2 Outside the scope of the strategy

This strategy is not a management plan, nor a master site plan for development. The strategy assumes that for FWP and DNRC to align the management of their lands in terms of recreation, MOUs and/or other agreements must be established between the two state agencies.

This strategy also assumes that certain management actions suggested in the strategy, including improvements and development projects, will be subject to environmental assessment and additional public review as required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) prior to implementation, as well as legislative appropriation.

The following are identified as outside the scope of this strategy:

- Developing the agreement between FWP and DNRC about aligning management restrictions
- Management of river recreational use of the Clark Fork River through the Alberton Gorge. This is covered by the Alberton Gorge Commercial Use permitting process.
- Hunting, trapping, and fishing regulations adopted by the Fish and Wildlife Commission.
- Management of the Fish Creek Road (USFS)
- Management of USFS, county, or private lands

3.3 Management Authorities

The area under consideration for this recreation strategy includes Fish Creek State Park and Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area, Big Pine and Forks Fishing Access Sites managed by Montana FWP and several parcels of land managed by DNRC. In developing the strategy, the planning team considers various statutes, rules, and policies of FWP and the Fish and Wildlife Commission and the State Parks and Recreation Board that apply to the management of the watershed.

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 (2020-2021)
- Montana 2019-2024 SCORP
- Montana Antiquities Act (22-3-401 et seq, MCA)
- 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)
- Wildlife Habitat Acquisition Rules (ARM 12.9.508 through 12.9.511)

4. Engagement with Stakeholders and the Public

The next two sections of this recreation strategy describe the main methods of engaging with stakeholders and the public in the development of this strategy. The section on stakeholders describes the lengthy process of interviews and meetings with stakeholder groups and the results of that work. The second section describes the engagement with the public through a public survey and public meetings. The suggestions about the future of Fish Creek recreation that resulted from the engagement and presented in these two sections are not always consistent. While some groups and individuals would like Fish Creek recreation to remain the same or decrease in the future, others advocate for an increase in recreational development to support the needs of specific recreational groups.

4.1 Engagement with Stakeholders

In the Summer of 2022, FWP initiated a planning process to create a comprehensive roadmap for recreation management in the Fish Creek Area. The Center for Natural Resources & Environmental Policy (CNREP) at the University of Montana and Global Park Solutions were contracted to conduct a stakeholder outreach and engagement process aimed at better understanding the range of interests and perspectives regarding recreation management in the Fish Creek Area.

From July to December 2022, CNREP and Global Park Solutions conducted stakeholder interviews, hosted two exploratory stakeholder mapping workshops, and held one stakeholder site visit in the Fish Creek Area. In total, the project team conducted over 40 conversations with stakeholders representing diverse perspectives including hunters, anglers, hikers, floaters, mountain bikers, motorized recreation users, local landowners, local businesses, local outfitters, Mineral County Commissioners, State and Federal agencies, conservation groups, wildlife interests, and access advocates. Conversations with stakeholders explored a diversity of interests, concerns, and recommendations regarding recreation management in the Fish Creek Area. Throughout, people highlighted their experiences and connection to Fish Creek, their care for the area's resources, and their desire for the area's resources to be well managed and sustained into the future.

While conversations with stakeholders revealed diverse values and interests, several common principles regarding recreation management in the Fish Creek Area emerged across nearly

every discussion. Common principles for managing recreation in the Fish Creek Area, as identified by most stakeholders interviewed, included:

Responsible stewardship

Nearly all stakeholders interviewed expressed their interest in land management agencies, including FWP, responsibly stewarding the resources of the Fish Creek Area for future generations. Most stakeholders highlighted the importance of proactively managing the area to protect wildlife, fisheries, and other natural resources. Most stakeholders also underscored the need to steward recreational assets in the area, such as well-maintained roads, campgrounds, and fishing access sites.

Provide diverse opportunities for recreation

Almost all Stakeholders interviewed welcomed a spectrum of recreation opportunities for diverse users within the Fish Creek Area. Most stakeholders agreed that more “developed” recreation opportunities (developed campsites, open roads, toilets, etc.,) are appropriate closer to the I-90 corridor, while areas further up the drainage and closer to the Great Burn Area are more appropriate for “primitive” recreation (dispersed camping, limited development of recreation amenities). While stakeholders varied in their acceptance of different forms of recreational use, nearly all stakeholders interviewed underscored the need to maintain access to public lands for diverse users.

Balance recreational use with wildlife management

While nearly all stakeholders interviewed agreed that it is important to provide recreational access to the Fish Creek Area for a diversity of users, most interests also voiced concern that too much recreational pressure could negatively impact fishery health and wildlife in the drainage. While many stakeholder groups – especially mountain bikers, some campers, and motorized recreation users – would like to see expanded recreation opportunities, stakeholders acknowledged the importance of balancing recreational use with protecting wildlife and fisheries health.

Coordinate across agencies

Many stakeholders and every agency interviewed highlighted their interest in seeing effective coordination between FWP, DNRC, and the USFS around recreation and resource management in the Fish Creek Area. Many stakeholders felt that issues like the maintenance of Fish Creek Road, emergency response, and managing dispersed camping could only be addressed through inter-agency coordination.

Provide a seamless visitor experience

Nearly all stakeholders interviewed agreed that visitors should not be burdened with understanding boundaries between land management agencies (FWP, DNRC, USFS) and the different regulations associated with each agency. Instead, many stakeholders suggested clearer signage, education, and coordination around rules across agencies to enhance the visitor experience and making responsible recreation in the drainage easier for users.

Be transparent and inclusive

Many stakeholders interviewed underscored the importance of clear, transparent communication from FWP explaining why certain management decisions could be made and if any existing gaps in data may need to be filled to inform management decisions. Many stakeholders also underscored the importance of including diverse interests in the planning and implementation of recreation management in the drainage. Several organizations are willing to provide resources and volunteer time to develop recreation opportunities, steward natural resources, and support responsible recreation in the area.

4.1.1 Stakeholder Interests and Concerns

In addition to the broader management principles identified by stakeholders and noted above, interviewed stakeholders shared specific interests and concerns regarding recreation management in the Fish Creek Area.

It is important to note that stakeholders from similar interest groups did not always share the same views on the issues included below. For example, anglers varied widely in their views regarding the impacts of recreation on fishery health in the drainage; some shared that they are often the only ones fishing the creek and feel the fishery is healthy, while others felt the creek is overfished and degraded. *It is also important to note that most stakeholders engage in multiple kinds of recreation and represent multiple recreational interests.* For example, several motorized recreation interests also hunt, fish, and camp in the area throughout the year.

The following section seeks to represent these nuances within and across interest groups as best as possible, highlighting common and divergent specific interests and concerns mentioned by stakeholders throughout conversations.

4.1.1.1 Safety, Enforcement, and Access

Many stakeholders underscored the need to provide a safe recreational experience for users, ensure that rules regarding recreational use in the drainage are being enforced, and ensure that recreational opportunities are accessible for a diversity of users. The following considerations

were top priorities for many interests, especially those living in the Fish Creek Area and Mineral County. *No interviewed stakeholders voiced opposition to the specific interests and concerns listed in this section.*

Road Safety and Maintenance

Nearly all stakeholders expressed concern for road safety and maintenance along the main road corridor (Fish Creek Road). Concerns include excessive vehicle speeds, vehicles parking in hazardous locations, erosion into the creek, improper or inadequate grading (washboard), and inconsistent maintenance. Most stakeholders expressed the need for speed limit signs and proper enforcement. In addition, several stakeholders suggested applying stabilization and dust control treatments during maintenance to reduce impacts on fishery health.

There was also confusion among some stakeholders regarding which agency is responsible for road maintenance. Several stakeholders acknowledged that road maintenance is the responsibility of the USFS, as the main road is a USFS Road, and were appreciative of maintenance conducted by the Ninemile Ranger District in 2022.

Increased FWP Presence

Most stakeholders cited a lack of FWP presence and/or enforcement of rules within the drainage as a major concern. Stakeholders representing diverse interests attributed significant resource impacts and safety concerns to this lack of presence, including poor camping etiquette, the spread of dispersed camping, disregard of fishing and hunting regulations, speeding along the road, and illegal motorized recreation in certain areas.

Many stakeholders suggested that hiring a campground host for the Big Pine and/or Forks Fishing Access Sites to increase FWP presence could help to mitigate many of the resource impacts listed above. Several stakeholders also suggested increasing the number of FWP staff that regularly visit Fish Creek and hiring seasonal staff to enforce rules and educate the public on responsible recreation during times of heavy recreational use.

Enforcement

Although an increased FWP presence may address specific issues for some, many stakeholders also highlighted the need to increase enforcement of fishing and hunting regulations, address speeding along the road, and limit illegal activities and recreational use in the drainage. Several stakeholders suggested that FWP should work together with DNRC and the USFS to collectively increase enforcement in the Fish Creek Area, given that each agency currently has limited or no ability to enforce rules across jurisdictions they do not manage. Mineral County residents and government officials were especially concerned that the current level of FWP

enforcement in the drainage is inadequate and place a burden on local law enforcement and emergency responders, who are under-resourced and spread thin across a large service area.

Many user groups were also concerned that FWP might limit recreational opportunities due to poor behavior from a few users that could otherwise be avoided with proper enforcement. For example, many stakeholders interested in motorized recreation underscored their ethic of responsible use and their frustration that roads may have been closed due to irresponsible off-road use from a few users. Anglers expressed similar concerns around a few users fishing without a license or exceeding daily catch limits to the detriment of fishery health. Several stakeholders felt that increased enforcement measures by FWP could limit illegal use by irresponsible users and maintain access for responsible users.

It is important to note that when asked, nearly all stakeholders interviewed mentioned that they see few if any, conflicts between users in the drainage that may necessitate intervention from law enforcement. Many stakeholders did express concerns about the potential for increased conflict between users, however, as recreational use expands for multiple forms of recreation in the area. In addition, many stakeholders also expressed concern about the increasing number of out-of-state visitors recreating in the area without the knowledge of, or regard for, the rules and regulations around recreation in Montana.

Improved Signage and Clarity of Rules

Inadequate signage and unclear rules were a concern among most stakeholders. Many stakeholders were unclear about which rules applied to different areas of the drainage and suggested improved signage as an opportunity to increase responsible recreation, improve wildlife habitat, to protect important fisheries, to ensure the investment of hunter license dollars, etc. in the drainage. Stakeholders suggested increasing signage clearly indicating speed limits, rules and regulations (seasonal area closures and fishing, hunting, trapping, and motorized recreation rules, among others), "Leave No Trace" principles (pack-it-in, pack-it-out), land designation and jurisdiction (FWP, DNRC, etc.), and interpretation of the area (such as educational or cultural opportunities).

A few stakeholders suggested creating "portal" signs at the main entrances of the Fish Creek Area, with comprehensive and easy-to-read information about the drainage and how to recreate responsibly in the area. Suggestions included installing signage that notifies the public of the existence of Fish Creek State Park and park amenities, promotes safe, responsible use of the park, provides road and route information, and informs visitors of fire conditions and any restrictions. Creating these portals and including signage about winter road conditions could also potentially prevent some winter drivers from traveling the Fish Creek drainage in vehicles ill-equipped to deal with the snow and ice. A few stakeholders also suggested that FWP should work with DNRC and the USFS to improve signage and clarity around rules in the drainage.

Access

Several stakeholders underscored the need to provide access to users with a range of abilities and health conditions. When possible, several stakeholders suggested ensuring that recreational amenities including campsites, toilets, trails, and fishing access sites that are accessible by users of varying abilities, including wheelchair users. Clear signage at trailheads and campgrounds can support access for individuals who are less familiar with the area, less experienced, or have particular amenity needs based on their ability and health status (e.g., a wheelchair accessible trail). To ensure access for diverse users, these stakeholders also suggested that campsites, toilets, parking areas, and other recreational amenities such as trails be designed or adapted to support wheelchair and handcycle access to the extent possible.

Several stakeholders also highlighted that some forms of recreation, such as camping and motorized recreation, provide access for users with a range of abilities. These stakeholders encouraged FWP to consider this dynamic when making decisions that limit or expand recreation opportunities.

4.1.1.2 Camping and Associated Impacts

Nearly all stakeholders expressed concern regarding the impact of dispersed camping in the Fish Creek Area. Impacts of concern include the spread of camping into new areas, new sites being developed in unsuitable locations (on top of sensitive habitat, too close to the creek, obstruction of creek access sites, etc.), and inadequate disposal of trash and human waste.

While stakeholders largely agreed that increased dispersed camping is negatively impacting the area's resources and amenities, views varied widely on how to best address this challenge.

Managing Dispersed Camping

Most stakeholders agreed that dispersed camping is negatively impacting natural resources and the visitor experience in the drainage, especially between the Big Pine and Forks fishing access sites along the Fish Creek Road. Most stakeholders are especially concerned with the expanded footprint of dispersed camping, the proliferation of trash and human waste, and habitat degradation along the creek where dispersed camping occurs.

Stakeholders provided several recommendations for managing dispersed camping, including “hardening” sites by placing boulders and other obstacles to strategically limit and concentrate dispersed camping, creating clearly defined or “designated” dispersed camping sites with signs, tent footprints, and parking locations where dispersed camping is already occurring (similar to

Rock Creek), and increasing developed campsite capacity to shift use away from dispersed campsites.

Several stakeholders also acknowledged that many people come to the Fish Creek Area to be away from other campers, and value dispersed camping opportunities over developed camping. Several stakeholders felt that installing toilets near dispersed sites was more critical than designated dispersed campsites if the primary goal is to alleviate the spread of human waste in the area.

Given that dispersed camping is occurring on DNRC, FWP, and USFS land, several stakeholders underscored the need for the agencies to work together and align their management strategies around addressing the issue.

Increasing Designated, Developed Campsite Capacity

When asked, few interviewed stakeholders opposed increasing the number of campsites at the Big Pine and Forks Fishing Access Sites. Many Mineral County residents would especially like to see more designated, developed camping opportunities established in the area – especially those that accommodate RVs and camping trailers – to attract more tourism revenue for the county and local businesses. Several stakeholders suggested increasing capacity at the Big Pine Fishing Access Sites to accommodate RVs and trailers and/or creating a new campground at Fishing Access Sites along the I-90 corridor. A few stakeholders also suggested providing electricity and water at the Big Pine Campground or creating a campground at Healan Camp, which already has electrical service. A few stakeholders also suggested developing additional camping opportunities at Thompson Creek and Surveyor Creek.

Stakeholders were divided over how increasing designated, developed campsite capacity would affect the level of recreational use in the drainage. Several stakeholders doubted that increasing the capacity of developed camping would alleviate dispersed camping impacts and would instead invite new users and increase use and pressure on the drainage. Others felt that increasing developed camping opportunities would concentrate use away from dispersed camping, reducing impacts on natural resources and the visitor experience.

A few stakeholders feel that any expansion of camping infrastructure, whether developed or dispersed, would increase recreational use and consequent impacts on the area's natural resources. Some stakeholders suggested that if the number of sites is increased at Big Pine and Forks FAS, there should be a reduction in the number of designated dispersed sites to keep the number of campers at the same level as current use. A few stakeholders suggested that existing camping opportunities at Big Pine FAS and Forks FAS were sufficient and that no increases in the number of campsites or campgrounds should occur to limit increases in recreational use and consequent impacts on wildlife and fishery health.

Toilets

Many stakeholders shared concerns regarding the proliferation of human waste throughout the drainage. Most interests felt that Fish Creek would benefit from installing more vault toilets at developed campsites, dispersed camping areas, and commonly trafficked locations throughout the drainage. Trash disposal is also a concern. In areas where toilets and/or trash disposal are not suitable, stakeholders recommended that recreationists be encouraged to pack it in and pack it out through signage, education, and increased enforcement by FWP staff.

4.1.1.3 Protection of Wildlife Habitat and Fishery Health

Most stakeholders highlighted their interest in prioritizing the protection of wildlife habitat over recreation use in the Fish Creek drainage. Support for protecting ungulate and fish populations is of particular interest to all stakeholders interviewed.

Hunting and Wildlife Populations

Most hunting interests, wildlife advocates, and conservation groups would like to see expanded deer and elk populations and feel that FWP should prioritize wildlife protection when managing the drainage, especially within the Wildlife Management Area (WMA) managed by FWP. These stakeholders largely opposed motorized recreation farther up the drainage (upstream of the Forks Fishing Access Site) and emphasized that management should prioritize the protection of wildlife habitat over recreational use and adhere to the area's origin as a WMA. When asked, nearly all stakeholders acknowledged the importance of protecting elk, deer, and other wildlife in the drainage when managing recreation, especially within the WMA.

These stakeholders also highlighted the importance of protecting winter range for elk, deer, and other wildlife through seasonal closures and limiting motorized recreation in key times and areas. At least one stakeholder voiced concern for new muzzle loading and shed hunting occurring in the winter and the impacts these activities have on wildlife during a critical time for winter survival, suggesting that winter closures or additional restrictions would be helpful. A few stakeholders suggested shortening hunting season so that it begins after the deer and elk rut, to protect ungulate populations. Several stakeholders also expressed concerns that expanded wolf populations have reduced elk and deer populations in the area.

A few stakeholders highlighted the importance of the Fish Creek area as a key corridor to connect wildlife habitat across the broader region – especially for wolf, grizzly bear, elk, and mountain lion populations.

Fishery Health

Most stakeholders expressed their appreciation for the fishing opportunities in the Fish Creek Area and the importance of maintaining fishery healthy in the drainage. Many interests also underscored the importance of Fish Creek for regional fishery health (cutthroat and bull trout populations, especially) and the need to prioritize the protection of the fishery when managing recreation in the drainage.

Most fishing interests voiced concerns about anglers not adhering to state laws, including fishing without a license, taking the incorrect species, taking more than the daily limit, removing woody debris, or cutting down limbs for better fishing access. Fishing interests almost unanimously voiced the need for increased enforcement of fishing regulations and installing of signage throughout the drainage with fishing rules and regulations. In addition, most interests underscored the importance of reducing impacts on fishery health through effective road maintenance to prevent erosion, limiting development and camping along the creek and in riparian areas, and monitoring the impacts of recreation on fish populations. One interest suggested making the stretch of Fish Creek that flows through the Lolo National Forest an eligible Wild and Scenic River to protect water quality and the fishery's health. A few stakeholders opposed any Wild and Scenic River designation on stretches of Fish Creek or the Clark Fork River in the Alberton Gorge.

Floating Fish Creek

A few stakeholders were concerned that increased floating of Fish Creek, via raft or kayak, will lead some individuals to continue to remove woody debris to create safer float conditions, consequently destroying critical fish habitat along Fish Creek and disrupting natural processes that lead to the exceptionally wildlife-rich riparian areas along the Fish Creek valley bottom. A few fishing advocates suggested closing Fish Creek to floating in response to this concern.

When asked, most stakeholders interviewed did not view woody debris removal by floaters as a significant concern in Fish Creek or were unaware of the issue. No stakeholders cited that they had seen woody debris being removed in Fish Creek. Some stakeholders noted the conflict between wade fishing and floating that can have a negative impact on the traditional wade-fishing experience on Fish Creek, as wade fishing is currently the predominant recreational activity along lower Fish Creek. They pointed to Rock Creek and the West Fork of the Bitterroot River as examples where managers did not proactively address user conflicts prior to float fishing becoming firmly established, making it more difficult to protect resources through the implementation of recreational floating and fishing restrictions.

Some stakeholders opposed float restrictions until they became necessary and favored more data and/or monitoring to stay ahead of any problems. Floating interests voiced that there

exists significant nuance between types of floaters, and this should be accounted for when considering floating restrictions. These nuances include private vs. commercial use, watercraft size, and user type (fishing vs. other recreational boaters). A few stakeholders suggested a ban on woody debris removal instead of punishing floaters via a float restriction, for what they feel is not yet an issue in the Fish Creek Area.

Floating Alberton Gorge

Few stakeholders expressed concern that floating the Alberton Gorge by commercial outfitters, or individual rafters/boaters is detrimental to fishery health in the area. However, stakeholders who expressed concerns about floating the Alberton Gorge highlighted impacts from recreational use and angling pressure at the confluence of Fish Creek and the Clark Fork River. For these interests, seasonal closures on fishing at and around the confluence and efforts to promote responsible recreation could be used to minimize impact and promote fishery health.

4.1.2 Potential Future Recreation Opportunities Suggested by Stakeholders

Many stakeholders identified opportunities to expand recreational opportunities in the future. Most stakeholders also acknowledged that too much recreational pressure, through expanded use and/or insufficient management, could degrade both fish and wildlife habitat and the visitor experience.

Mineral County Nature Based Economy

Several stakeholders based in Mineral County highlighted their interest in increasing recreational use in the area to generate economic benefits and revenue for Mineral County and area residents. With over 90% of land in Mineral County managed by state or federal agencies, the county has limited opportunities to generate revenue through its tax base. The county is also largely reliant on timber and natural resources for economic stability. For these reasons, many stakeholders from Mineral County underscored the need to increase recreation across the county to bring in revenue and support the local economy. Many stakeholders from Mineral County also acknowledged that they want to ensure recreational access – especially camping – is maintained for locals as new and out-of-state users increasingly come to the area to recreate.

Williams Peak Lookout Renovation

Several stakeholders expressed interest in rehabilitating the Williams Peak Lookout and making it regularly accessible to the public. Some stakeholders suggested having the option to rent the tower for overnight use, creating a new revenue stream for FWP while enhancing

recreational opportunities within Fish Creek State Park. Several stakeholders also suggested having a volunteer stay at the tower for the summer season and allowing any member of the public to visit the tower while that volunteer is present. Several stakeholders expressed frustration that the road to the lookout is inaccessible via vehicle and suggested opening the road to make the tower and Williams Peak accessible to diverse users of varying abilities.

Motorized Recreation Opportunities

Motorized recreation interests widely supported the creation of additional motorized recreation opportunities in the Fish Creek Area. Mineral County residents and local businesses especially highlighted motorized recreation as potential economic drivers for the county. These interests would like to see increased options for loop roads that accommodate all-terrain vehicle (ATV) users (as well as other recreational users), a day-use staging area with parking for trailers, and bathrooms. Several specific loops were suggested during stakeholder conversations, all on existing open, closed, and/or seasonally gated roads. One motorized recreation group expressed interest in sharing grant funding and/or leveraging the state-wide ATV Summer Trail Pass funds to support the development and maintenance of motorized recreation infrastructure in the Fish Creek Area. No interviewed stakeholders suggested building new roads.

Stakeholders highlighted that motorized recreation in Fish Creek primarily occurs from June through October, suggesting compatibility with winter wildlife area closures. In addition, stakeholders suggested that little motorized recreation occurs in the Fish Creek Area in the winter, given the limited snow and poor snowmobiling opportunities. Several stakeholders also underscored the importance of distinguishing between different vehicle types when managing motorized recreation. For example, ATVs are generally no wider than 50 inches, while side-by-side vehicles are often wider than 50 inches, necessitating wider trails or roads.

Many interest groups – including conservation groups, anglers, wildlife advocates, and local hunting interests – expressed concern that increased motorized recreation access and activity in the area could negatively impact and threaten wildlife populations and fishery health. Many stakeholders were especially concerned that motorized recreation in important winter habitat could further strain the area’s already sensitive elk and deer populations. While these interests largely opposed the idea of introducing more motorized recreation opportunities to the area, many stakeholders felt motorized recreation is often appropriate if:

- Motorized recreation is limited to designated areas closer to the drainage’s north end (near I-90), in Fish Creek State Park, and on existing open roads;
- Motorized recreation occurs outside of times and areas key for elk and deer populations’ winter survival and other wildlife populations’ health; and
- Motorized recreation is strictly enforced and does not occur on closed roads or off-road.

It is important to note that several motorized recreation interests highlighted that they also value wildlife populations in the area, engage in other forms of recreation such as hunting, and acknowledge the need to balance any potentially expanded motorized recreation opportunities with the protection of wildlife populations in the area. Multiple motorized recreation interests contacted expressed support for new seasonal road closures during winter and the permanent closure of some roads in exchange for maintaining existing motorized routes. Several motorized interests highlighted the importance of areas designated for non-motorized recreation, including inventoried roadless areas in the Fish Creek drainage and north of the I-90 corridor. Some motorized recreation interests favored expanding motorized recreation opportunities in areas with limited impacts on wildlife, wildlife habitat, and fishery health.

Purpose-built Mountain Bike Trails

Stakeholders from the mountain biking community would like to see ‘purpose-built’ trails (berms and smooth, one-way trails) designed for mountain biking, developed in the drainage. These interests indicated Fish Creek State Park, in particular, as a good location to develop such trails. Existing roadbeds could be used as a starting point to develop purpose-built mountain bike trails. For several interests, a benchmark of 20 miles of purpose-built mountain biking trails was suggested as being needed to provide diverse opportunities and make the area worth the visit for bikers with a range of abilities and interests.

Several conservation groups, hunting interests, and wildlife advocates expressed similar concerns regarding impacts on wildlife around new mountain bike trails as they did with expanded motorized recreation opportunities. In addition, a few interests were concerned about potential conflicts between mountain bikers and equestrian groups, though they felt that this concern could be addressed by designating a specific zone for mountain biking and specific trails for equestrians.

Zipline

One stakeholder suggested creating a Zipline that would run from Fish Creek State Park, east to west or over Fish Creek Road, to increase visitation in the area and economic benefits to Mineral County.

Limiting Recreational Development

Several stakeholders are concerned that expanded recreation opportunities and development will make Fish Creek a “recreation destination,” causing increased degradation to wildlife, fishery health, and the visitor experience. At least one stakeholder from nearly all user groups suggested limiting the development of recreation amenities to stymie growth in recreational

use across parts of the Fish Creek Area. For these interests, any new recreational opportunities or amenity development could tarnish the experience for existing users who feel that Fish Creek is “undiscovered” and still a great location for solitude while recreating.

While many stakeholders from diverse user groups agreed with the idea of limiting recreational development, several suggested that trends indicate that recreational use will increase regardless, and that recreation needs to be proactively managed to guide use and concentrate impact away from sensitive wildlife and fishery habitat.

4.1.3 Additional Management Actions Suggested by Stakeholders

Many stakeholders representing diverse interests also suggested additional management actions that FWP could undertake in the Fish Creek Area that may impact but are not specific to managing recreation.

Forest Health and Vegetation Management

Multiple stakeholders highlighted the need to better manage vegetation and forest health in the Fish Creek Area. These stakeholders suggested commercial and noncommercial treatments to improve forest health and wildlife habitat, make the forest more resistant and resilient to the effects of fire, improve firefighter and public safety, improve the effectiveness of first responders, and begin restoring historical forest conditions across the landscape, including on FWP lands. A few stakeholders suggested conducting prescribed fire treatments on FWP lands in the drainage to improve wildlife habitat and reduce wildfire risk. Many stakeholders also underscored the need for weed management, especially with increased recreational use in the area, and a few praised current interagency efforts in the area to control the spread of noxious weeds.

Interagency Coordination

Most interests highlighted both the challenge and need for improved interagency coordination when managing public lands in the Fish Creek Area. Many stakeholders suggested that FWP, DNRC, and USFS should increase their efforts to work together to manage recreation, infrastructure (including road maintenance and access, camping areas, and trails), forest health, vegetation, wildlife, and fishery health in the Fish Creek Area. Specific recommendations for enhanced coordination included FWP working with DNRC staff through the Good Neighbor Authority to manage forest health in the area, as well as working with USFS staff to access Great American Outdoors Act and Infrastructure Investment and

Jobs Act funding to support recreation management and infrastructure maintenance in the area. While many stakeholders expressed appreciation for FWP's close coordination with DNRC thus far in the planning process, multiple stakeholders expressed a need for increased USFS staff involvement going forward given the overlapping ways in which recreation management on state and federal lands in the Fish Creek Area impact one another.

Although many stakeholders called for greater interagency coordination, a few urged all agencies involved to set reasonable expectations around the level of coordination that can be achieved given diverse authorities and management priorities across FWP, DNRC, and USFS. For example, while one stakeholder appreciated DNRC's interest in better managing recreation on School Trust lands, they also underscored that the primary objective of managing those lands is to maximize trust revenue, and that it may not be possible to prioritize or provide recreation opportunities on some School Trust lands in the area.

Partnerships

Several stakeholders from multiple recreation user groups indicated their interest in supporting FWP in managing recreation in the Fish Creek Area through volunteer hours, grants, and participation in planning processes and environmental monitoring. These stakeholders also underscored the role that they could play in promoting safe, responsible recreation and addressing conflicts between recreational users in the area. Many stakeholders also highlighted the importance of working with private landowners in the area, Iowa State University's Rod and Connie French Conservation Camp located within the Fish Creek Drainage, and local county officials and emergency responders when managing recreation in the Fish Creek Area. For many stakeholders, recreation management on any public lands in the Fish Creek Area will only be successful if done in partnership with a range of stakeholders and partner agencies.

4.2 Engagement With the Public

Public involvement and input are critical to the planning process to help FWP identify issues, address challenges, and develop goals, objectives, and actions for the long-term management and sustainable recreation of the Fish Creek Area. A concerted effort was made to offer ample opportunities for the public as well as stakeholder groups (see section above) to provide input at various stages of the planning process. The input received from the previous Fish Creek State Park planning process was consulted as a starting point for this recreation planning process.

4.2.1 Public Survey

The public was invited to share their interests regarding recreation in the Fish Creek Area via a public survey made available online on October 20th, 2022. A notification about the survey was posted on the Fish Creek State Park website at: <https://fwp.mt.gov/conservation/fish-creek-watershed-recreation-planning> on October 20th, 2022. Emails were also sent to all stakeholders that participated in the stakeholder workshops and site visit alerting them to the survey and asking them to share the survey web page address with their networks. The survey was available for the public to submit responses online until December 20, 2022.

A total of 691 responses to the survey were recorded, with 83% of respondents fully completing the survey and 17% partially completing the survey. The following are the high-level results of the survey:

Visitation. Survey respondents shared a range of information regarding their visitation to the Fish Creek Area, including:

- 64% reported visiting the Fish Creek Area within the last six months
- 50% indicated that they visit the Fish Creek Area one to five times per year.
- 44% of respondents indicate they most often visit the Fish Creek Area during the Summer, while 31% indicate they most often visit in the Fall

Type of Recreational Use. Most respondents indicated that they enjoy multiple forms of recreation in the Fish Creek Area. Respondents indicated that they enjoy the following recreational activities in the Fish Creek Area:

- 65% of respondents enjoy fishing
- 62% enjoy camping
- 44% enjoy hiking
- 30% enjoy wildlife watching
- 29% enjoy floating the Alberton Gorge

Current Levels of Use. 51% of survey respondents indicated that the current level of visitor use in the Fish Creek area is just about right, while 39% are concerned with the current level of visitor use in the area.

Camping. Most survey respondents indicated that the level of camping areas in Fish Creek is about right:

- 56% of respondents indicated that the level of developed, designated campsites is “about right”
- 50% of respondents indicated that the level of dispersed, undesignated campsites is “about right”

Many respondents also indicated that they feel there are too many or too few camping opportunities in the Fish Creek area:

- 36% of respondents indicated that the level of developed/designated areas in Fish Creek is “too little”
- 37% of respondents indicated that there are “too many” dispersed/undesigned camping areas in Fish Creek

Recreation Amenities. Survey respondents were also asked about trails, roads, and potential additional recreation amenities:

- 46% of respondents were satisfied with the current amount of developed non-motorized trails
- 70% were satisfied with the number of developed roads open to public use
- 44% of respondents indicated that there is “not enough” developed non-motorized trails in the drainage
- Respondents were split on their satisfaction regarding the number of developed motorized trails, with 43% indicating the amount was “about right” and 41% indicating that there are “too many” developed motorized trails in the drainage.

Potential Management Actions. When asked about potential specific management actions that had been mentioned by stakeholders previously in the planning process, responses indicated that:

- 82% of survey respondents would support a float closure on Fish Creek to prevent the removal of woody debris that is critical for fish habitat
- 61% of respondents would support additional seasonal closures in areas to protect winter range for wildlife in the Wildlife Management Area
- 48% of respondents would support closing additional roads beyond what are currently closed

The full survey results are presented in Appendix A, available as a separate document.

4.2.2 Public Meetings

Three public meetings were held in late February and early March of 2023 in Missoula (2/28), online via Zoom (3/1), and in Superior (3/2), to share proposed elements and management directions to potentially include in this Draft Strategy and get public feedback on the proposed management directions. At the meetings, FWP, CNREP, and Global Park Solutions provided background information on the Fish Creek Area, recreation trends, and the planning process. Particular attention was paid to feedback and input offered by stakeholders and the public

throughout the process prior to the meetings, and more than half of each meeting was reserved for public questions and comments.

Over 120 people participated across the three meetings, and more than 100 comments or questions were submitted by members of the public during and after the meetings.

While the focus of participants' comments and questions varied, common comments shared across the meetings included:

- Nearly unanimous support for closing Fish Creek to recreational floating;
- Widespread interest in rehabilitating the Williams Peak Lookout and making it accessible to the public;
- Concerns around increasing recreational use and an interest in ensuring this strategy adequately mitigates the impacts of recreation on natural resources and the visitor experience;
- Support for increasing access for people with disabilities at Fishing Access Sites, campgrounds, Williams Peak Lookout, and other recreational amenities in the drainage;
- Support for increasing safety and enforcement of rules and regulations in the Fish Creek Area through enhanced signage, increased FWP presence, and coordination across land management agencies; and
- Offerings from various recreational user groups to partner with FWP to support recreation management, including through volunteer hours and funding campaigns.

While many of the comments shared at the meetings were consistent with those provided earlier in the planning process, public meeting participants offered additional clarity and perspectives around many interests and concerns, including those listed above.

A summary of all three public meetings, including a complete record of the questions and comments submitted during the meetings, can be found on FWP's website: <https://fwp.mt.gov/conservation/fish-creek-watershed-recreation-planning>.

5. Desired Conditions

Developing desired conditions is an important step in defining management direction and is a fundamental step to answering the question: What are we trying to achieve? Desired conditions are statements of aspiration that describe what conditions, outcomes, and opportunities are to be achieved and maintained in the future (IVUMC, 2016). The desired condition statements are not prescriptive about management actions. Management actions can be found in the section of this strategy that follows, Recreation Management Direction.

The Project Area is a diverse landscape that includes roads, the creek bottom, ridges, and mountain tops. These different settings provide vastly different visitor experiences. The desired conditions to be attained for the entire watershed are therefore not uniform across the landscape. Instead, the area has been segmented into five different zones. For each zone, desired conditions related to recreation are described according to visitor experience, management, recreation use and amenities, and biodiversity.

The Fish Creek drainage has been divided into the following five zones (see Map 4):

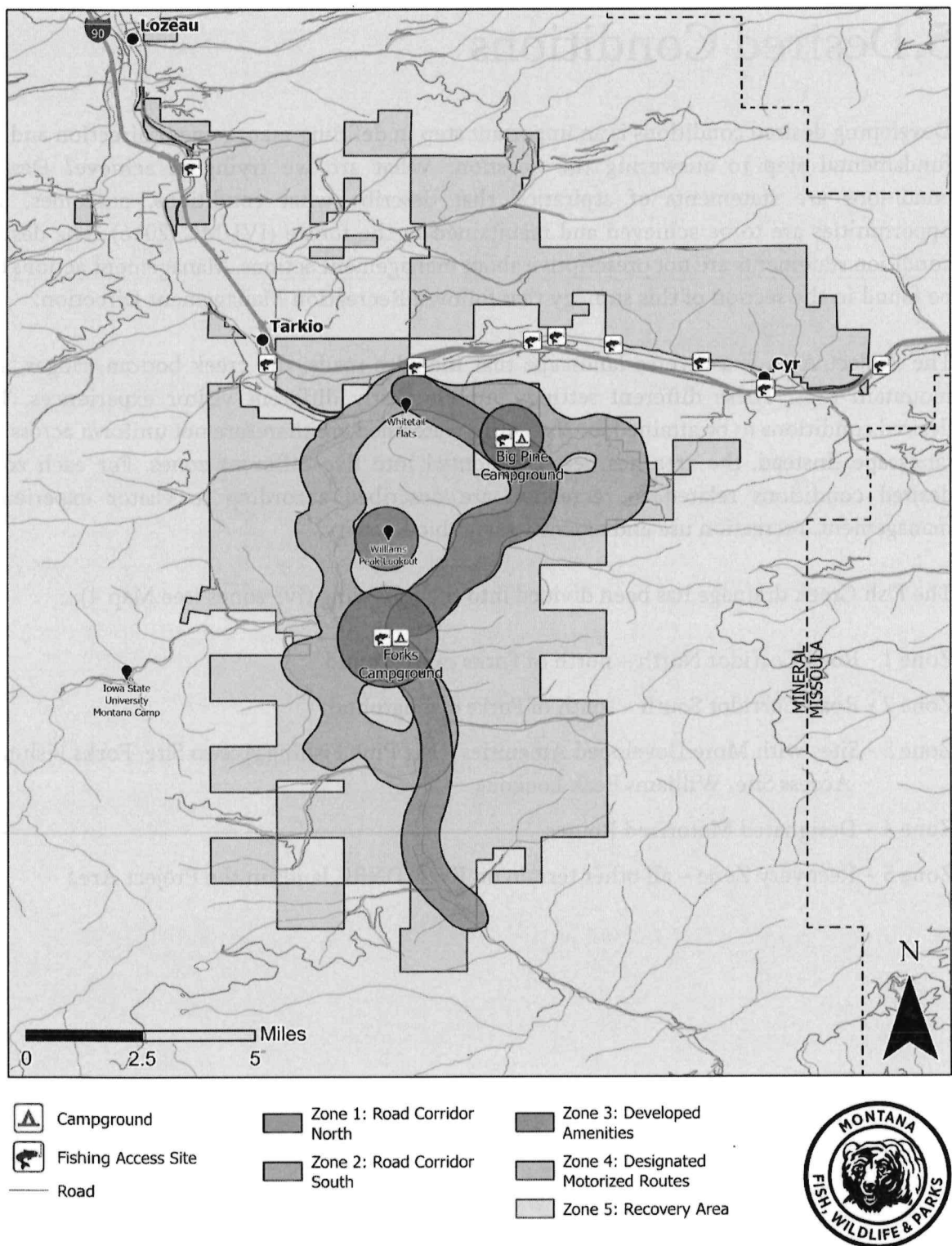
Zone 1 - Road Corridor North – north of Forks campground

Zone 2 - Road Corridor South – south of Forks campground

Zone 3 - Sites with More Developed Amenities - Big Pine Fishing Access Site, Forks Fishing Access Site, Williams Peak Lookout

Zone 4 – Designated Motorized Routes

Zone 5 – Recovery Zone – all other terrain on FWP/DNRC lands in the Project Area



Map 4. Project Area Recreation Zones

5.1 Zone 1 - Road Corridor North

Description

This zone encompasses 7.9 miles of both the road and riparian corridor starting from the Fish Creek Exit on I-90 to the Forks Fishing Access Site. The area serves as a primary transportation corridor for public access and use to the Fish Creek watershed. Steep canyon walls and limited flat areas in valley bottom concentrates use from both the public and wildlife. This zone includes areas managed by FWP and DNRC.

Visitor Experience

Visitors connect with nature in ways that cause them to reflect, learn, and appreciate. While predominantly natural with evidence of human development and impacts subservient to the natural environment, more developed recreation amenities exist to minimize impacts of visitation on the environment. Visitors will hear more vehicles on this stretch of road than in other zones, including OHVs, as approximately 3 miles of this zone overlaps with the Hay Creek motorized recreation loop.

Management

Onsite management is apparent and more visible than in other Fish Creek zones to ensure resource protection, public safety, and minimize visitor conflict. Signage, clearly defining appropriate and inappropriate use, is more apparent in this zone to better orient visitors as they arrive. Designated zones confine motorized use and wood cutting to specific areas. To minimize conflicts between different types of recreation, recreation uses are separated by location when possible.

Recreation Use and Amenities

Primary recreation uses include fishing, dispersed camping, wildlife watching, scenic driving, OHV use, and hiking. Fishing access opportunities are more abundant in the North Corridor than in surrounding areas and this region sees the highest levels of fishing pressure. To provide a more rustic and remote camping experience, there is an abundance of more concentrated dispersed camping areas in this region than can be found in the more remote South Corridor and in other areas of the Fish Creek drainage. Day and overnight use are concentrated to sections of the corridor considered to be stable, with certain sensitive riparian sections seeing substantial use. This zone also overlaps with approximately 3 miles of the Hay Creek motorized recreation loop.

Biodiversity

As critical habitat for native fish and a primary migration corridor for wildlife, wildlife populations thrive, but ungulates may be less visible during high visitation times of the year (July-August). The riparian area along Fish Creek in this zone is exceptionally productive and diverse relative to other tributary streams to the Clark Fork River downstream of Huson. The riparian corridor provides habitat for dozens of nongame species including a wide variety of songbirds, raptors, small mammals, and herpetofauna, many of which are classified as Species of Concern. Streams are free flowing with well-developed riparian vegetation and largely intact streambanks, recreation activities in the river result in minimal deterioration of trout habitat. Plant communities retain natural integrity with the presence of weeds confined to small, localized spots that can be readily treated.

5.2 Zone 2 - Road Corridor South

Description

This zone encompasses the road and riparian corridor beginning at Forks Campground approximately 10 miles from the Fish Creek exit on Interstate 90 and continues 7.3 miles to the southern boundary of the Wildlife Management Area. It includes areas managed by FWP and DNRC.

Visitor experience

Visitors connect with nature in ways that cause them to reflect, learn, and appreciate. The zone is predominately natural with evidence of human development and impacts subservient to the natural environment. Visitors have abundant opportunity to connect with nature through natural soundscapes and views of largely undeveloped landscapes. The area feels remote, and interaction between visitors is less frequent than in the Road Corridor North. As this zone overlaps approximately 2 miles of the Bear Point motorized recreation loop, the sight and sounds of motorized recreation will be evident during high-use periods.

Management

Onsite management is apparent to ensure resource protection, public safety, and minimize visitor conflict, though it is less visible than in the Road Corridor North. Signage, though minimal in keeping with the remoteness of the area, clearly defines appropriate and inappropriate use. Designated zones confine motorized use to specific areas. To minimize conflicts between different types of recreation, recreation uses are separated by location when possible.

Recreation Use and Amenities

Primary recreation uses include dispersed camping, fishing, wildlife watching, hiking, and some OHV use. Recreation use and visitation is lower, and infrastructure is less developed compared to the Road Corridor North.

Biodiversity

As critical habitat for native fish and a primary migration corridor for wildlife, wildlife populations thrive, but ungulates may be less visible during high visitation times of the year (July-August). Though more narrow and less shaped by large wood and a migrating stream channel, the riparian area along Fish Creek in this zone is still larger and more diverse than other tributary streams to the Clark Fork River downstream of Huson. The riparian corridor provides habitat for dozens of nongame species including a wide variety of songbirds, raptors, small mammals, and herpetofauna, many of which are classified as Species of Concern. Streams are free flowing with well-developed riparian vegetation and largely intact streambanks, recreation activities in the river result in minimal deterioration of trout habitat. Plant communities retain natural integrity with the presence of weeds confined to small, localized spots that can be readily treated.

5.3 Zone 3 - Sites with More Developed Amenities

Description

The sites in this zone include Big Pine Campground, Forks Campground, and Williams Peak Lookout, all managed by FWP.

Visitor Experience

Visitors connect with nature in ways that cause them to reflect, learn, and appreciate. While campers will be concentrated, visitors can most often expect opportunity for quiet enjoyment without large groups of people. Ample opportunities exist to educate the public on Fish Creek's ecology, rules and regulations, history, and recovery process.

While more developed than other sites in the Fish Creek drainage, these areas provide what can best be described as a lightly developed recreation experience. While they are situated in a natural environment, these sites have more developed amenities than other areas in the Fish Creek drainage and the setting may therefore feel less natural. As the use in these areas is more

concentrated than in other areas of the Fish Creek drainage, they may also provide less solitude during times of high use.

Management

Onsite management is apparent to ensure resource protection, public safety, and minimize visitor conflict. Signage clearly defines appropriate and inappropriate use. More developed camping opportunities are available here to better manage impacts from visitors. To minimize conflicts between different types of recreation, recreation uses are separated by location when possible. There is regular managerial presence to ensure rules are followed, facilities are well maintained, monitoring and protection of resources, adequate public safety, and minimal visitor conflict.

Recreation Use and Amenities

Primary recreation uses in these areas include camping in designated sites, fishing, hiking, and OHV use and biking on gravel roads. Camping areas are clearly delineated with signs and include basic amenities such as gravel camp sites, vault latrines, fire rings, and picnic tables. Water is not provided. Potential for ADA and electrified camp sites exists at Big Pine FAS.

Biodiversity

Camping infrastructure and amenities are confined to small areas of 3-5 acres each and therefore have a limited impact on wildlife habitat and connectivity. Streams are free flowing with well-developed riparian vegetation and largely intact streambanks. Stream access and developed sites are designed to protect riparian vegetation and promote healthy streambanks. Recreation activities in the river result in minimal deterioration of trout habitat. Plant communities retain natural integrity with the presence of weeds confined to small, localized spots that can be readily treated.

5.4 Zone 4 – Designated Motorized Routes

Description

This zone includes the Hay Creek, Bear Point, and Williams Pass motorized recreation loops, managed by FWP and DNRC. This zone includes only the road corridors, not the stream beds that pass next to and under the motorized recreation loops.

Visitor experience

OHV users in these three motorized recreation loops connect with nature and experience the sense of adventure and exploration as they navigate challenging terrain and dozens of miles of dirt roads that rise high above the valley bottom across previously harvested forested areas that are now regrowing.

Recreation Use and Amenities

Primary recreation uses in these loops include OHV use in the two more technical loops, and highway vehicles on the longer, less technical loop. A future amenity may include a parking lot.

Management

Managers work closely with OHV groups to ensure compliance with regulations on roads and conduct education campaigns among OHV users. Monitoring of impacts from OHV use is important in this zone as well as enforcement and weed management. Management of wildlife requires seasonal closures for ungulates.

Biodiversity

OHV routes cross through several habitat types, allowing users the potential to experience the breadth of wildlife species that use the Fish Creek Area. All of the proposed motorized recreation loops are shared with wildlife who cross and travel down the roads, as well as breed and forage in nearby habitat patches. Disturbance to wildlife during sensitive times of the year is minimized through seasonal closures on the Hay Creek and Bear Point motorized recreation loops.

5.5 Zone 5 – Recovery zone

Description

The forested areas in this zone are in varying stages of succession following fires and a long history of commercial timber harvest. Zone 5 includes all other areas of the drainage not encompassed by the previous zones, including any trails, roads, prior restoration sites, and undeveloped areas in the Project Area. It includes areas managed by FWP as well as those managed by DNRC. This zone is primarily governed by natural processes with little to no new human development (e.g., infrastructure, roads, or trails). This zone is managed by FWP and DNRC.

Visitor experience

Visitors to this zone are witness to the natural succession of ecosystems that in the past has seen extensive logging and wildfire. The emphasis is on solitude and exposure to natural processes.

Recreation Use and Amenities

A diversity of recreational opportunities is available, though primarily includes hunting and fishing, with an emphasis on opportunities for solitude and dispersed use. Other recreation uses include hiking and biking on gravel roads. No recreation amenities exist except for designated dispersed camping sites and associated campfire rings.

Management

Management activities emphasize a return to historical forest conditions that are resilient to large-scale disturbances such as wildfire and drought. Management activities promote more natural forest community succession include using natural regrowth, weed management, and road reclamation. Stream and riparian management activities emphasize a return to historical conditions with particular attention paid to maintaining active floodplains and woody debris input into streams while minimizing sedimentation from roads, trails, and campsites. Management emphasizes natural regrowth with little to no new human development (e.g., infrastructure, roads, trails). Management presence is less frequent than in other zones. Interpretive wayside signs highlight ecological recovery. Road signage is relatively rare and mainly consists of road names and numbers and designated dispersed campsite signs.

Biodiversity

Wildlife habitat and fisheries are paramount. Streams are free flowing with well-developed riparian vegetation and largely intact streambanks. Recreation activities in the river result in minimal deterioration of trout habitat. Recreation activities on land will not inhibit large scale landscape connectivity, migration corridors, watershed integrity, big game winter range, and sensitive species. Plant communities retain natural integrity with the presence of weeds confined to small, localized spots that can be readily treated.

6. Recreation Strategy Principles

The following recreation strategy principles were derived from the extensive stakeholder, public engagement and internal dialogue among FWP and DNRC staff. The principles offer some higher-level guidance on the recreation management direction described in the following section. These principles are consistent with the management responsibilities of FWP and the acquisition intent for the Fish Creek Properties.

1. The primary management objective in the Project Area is to protect the natural and cultural resources, ecosystems, and wildlife. Management allows certain types of recreation and requires FWP to monitor environmental conditions to determine when changes in or limits to recreational opportunity are required to prevent resource degradation.
2. The level of developed recreation amenities will decrease the further one travels from Interstate 90 travelling up the Fish Creek drainage.
3. The overall level of recreation development in the Project Area will remain “Rustic”. This aligns with the Montana State Park Classification System and service level for Fish Creek State Park (Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, 2021).
4. Visitors to the Project Area should not have to navigate different regulations from different state agencies. To the extent possible, regulations should align to provide a seamless visitor experience.
5. When feasible, recreation uses will be separated to prevent conflict.
6. Any additional recreational development suggested by this strategy would be developed by following contemporary Best Management Practices, including public engagement through MEPA and associated environmental review.
7. Any additional recreational development would require the necessary allocated financial and personnel resources to assure professional management and rule enforcement.
8. Recreation development will be guided by the Zones listed above but will also be guided at a smaller scale at individual sites based on potential site-specific natural resource values and possible impacts.

7. Recreation Management Direction

The following sections, aligned with the Recreation Strategy Principles, describe specific strategies and management actions to protect the natural and cultural environment and visitor experience. Implementation of many of the management actions listed here are subject to FWP having sufficient staffing and funding to conduct operations and site development/rehabilitation. Additional staffing and funding are subject to legislative approval. Most projects would require an environmental assessment and additional public review as required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) prior to implementation.

7.1 Redesign Dispersed Camping to Better Protect the Environment and Visitor Experience

Background

Many recreationists prefer dispersed camping with fewer amenities and generally more privacy compared to camping in developed areas. This type of recreation comes with a different set of impacts to the landscape and other users.

Soil erosion, garbage, and human waste have increased in the Fish Creek drainage as dispersed camping has increased, including new pioneered campsites. The majority of these dispersed campsites are concentrated along Fish Creek, adjacent to the main Fish Creek Road, and between the more developed Big Pine and Forks FAS. These biophysical impacts also impact visitor experience and stream and riparian area health, as many new sites have been pioneered into riparian vegetation and close to the immediate stream banks. Campsites directly adjacent to streams negatively impact riparian health and cause significant erosion, thus negatively impacting fisheries health. Also, many new, unofficial dispersed sites have been created directly adjacent to existing sites which impact some visitors' desire for solitude.

Management Direction

Redesigning dispersed camping includes the following management actions:

- a. Designating where dispersed camping is allowed.
- b. Better delineate existing dispersed campsites and place barriers to confine heavy impacts to specific areas.
- c. Close and rehabilitate dispersed sites that are too close to water and to other dispersed sites.

- d. Install portable vault toilets near clusters of dispersed campsites to better control human waste.

7.2 Enhance Existing Developed Camping Opportunities

Background

The present number of available developed campsites in the Project Area does not meet the demand during the peak season. During peak seasons, campers seeking campsites find that the developed sites are full, as are many of the dispersed sites. Currently, developed sites exist at the Big Pine and Forks Campgrounds. These developed sites offer the best opportunity to protect resources from damage associated with camping as there are more controls available to managers.

Currently, staff presence in the Project Area is suboptimal to protect resources and provide visitor services during peak visitation.

Management Direction

To better manage the impacts associated with camping, existing developed camping opportunities will be increased. These increases are likely to be offset by decreases in dispersed sites as some sites are removed and rehabilitated. The Williams Peak Lookout may also provide additional opportunities to diversify camping opportunities in the Fish Creek drainage.

Better managing the impacts from camping includes the following management actions:-

- a. Increase the number of developed campsites at Big Pine and Forks Campgrounds.
- b. Explore options for additional managerial site presence in the Fish Creek drainage. This could eventually include having staff stationed at Big Pine Campground that can oversee Big Pine and Forks Campgrounds, as well as the dispersed sites in the road corridor from I-90 to Forks.

7.3 Rehabilitate and Maintain Williams Peak Lookout

Background

The Williams Peak fire lookout was originally established in 1934 and subsequently replaced with the existing tower in 1977. The existing tower was first built in 1969 on Little Joe Mountain and moved to Williams Peak. A structural assessment of the lookout was completed in 2010 and it was deemed unsafe for use.

Current Situation

Currently, the road to Williams Peak Lookout is closed to motorized vehicles. The road is very steep and rutted and poses challenges for many vehicles without high clearance 4-wheel drive. The lookout is currently locked and closed to visitors. Visitors can currently bike, hike, and ride horses 1.7 miles on the dirt road to the top of William's Peak for the excellent views.

Management Direction

The long-term use and access to the Williams Peak Lookout will be further explored by FWP. Adding recreational opportunities at the Williams Peak Lookout includes the following management activities:

- a. Rehabilitate and maintain the lookout. Develop partnerships with local, regional, and national organizations to inform/assist with the work. Interior access to the Lookout provides a unique experience for visitors.
- b. Improve the road to Williams Peak provides greater access to the top of the mountain and the Lookout.

7.4 Provide a High-Quality Wade Fishing Experience and Protect Woody Debris

Background

As a small stream, Fish Creek and its tributaries have a long tradition of providing excellent opportunities for wade fishing. One of the classic recreational conflicts for experienced shore/wade anglers is with recreational floaters. Scientific literature notes that when anglers fishing from the bank, or while wading, encounter recreational floaters in areas where their presence is new or infrequent, they may view this as an invasion of privacy (Graefe, et al., 1984) or a loss of solitude (Kainzinger, et al., 2015). Recreational floating and float-fishing in Fish Creek is a relatively new phenomenon.

In addition to the potential conflict between recreation floating and wade-fishing, the impacts of recreational floaters on stream morphology is also well recognized in the scientific literature (Krejčí & Máčka, 2012), (Schafft, et al., 2021). Large woody debris accumulation is an essential component of aquatic ecosystems and has a major influence on fish carrying capacity (Pierce, et al., 2015) (White, et al., 2011). Large woody debris is also an essential component of maintaining active floodplains that lead to diverse and productive riparian areas and floodplain features essential to a wide range of Montana's game and nongame wildlife.

Debris enters streams and rivers when trees are blown down by wind, toppled over by natural channel migration, or uprooted during flood events. The debris and sediment are then

transported downstream. Large woody debris provides stability in a river system by capturing, retaining, and sorting sediment. It adds roughness to floodplains which slows down flood flows, captures fine sediment, and provides habitat for new growth of woody vegetation. Intact large wood ultimately collects more debris, increasing overhead cover pool frequency, and overall habitat complexity. Over time, debris degrades, providing organic material and nutrients, essential ingredients for the growth and propagation of riparian vegetation and aquatic organisms. It accumulates on gravel bars and streambanks, slowing stream flow and creating pools that help increase streambank stability. These pools provide shelter for fish, insects, and other aquatic life.

Loss of woody debris can degrade riparian and instream habitat essential for the support of fish and wildlife populations (Meehan, 1991), (Bilby, 1984), (Roni, et al., 2008). It can also increase erosion during seasonal high water and future flood events, resulting in degradation of otherwise healthy, thriving aquatic ecosystems.

As recreational floating becomes more established on rivers and streams, some floaters are inclined to remove large woody debris that block their passage. Also, as recreational floating becomes mainstream practice, it can be more difficult for agencies to implement changes.

Current Situation

Recreational floating of Fish Creek is relatively new, having only been observed regularly in the past 5-7 years. As a small creek, Fish Creek is most navigable during periods of runoff in spring and early summer by relatively small rafts and inflatable boats. Recreation floating has not yet become a well-established practice on Fish Creek.

Management Direction

Given the nascent use of Fish Creek for recreational floating and to prevent ecological damage to wildlife and fisheries, FWP will recommend that the Fish and Wildlife Commission adopt a closure on recreational floating for the entire length of Fish Creek.

7.5 Explore Nonmotorized Recreational Opportunities Further

Background

Both hikers and bikers often prefer to use trails that are designed (purpose-built) for their activity. Mountain bikers prefer trails with berms and smooth, one-way trails. Hikers prefer single-track trails. It is sometimes necessary to separate biking from hiking, horseback riding, and other forms of slower moving recreation for safety reasons.

Developing new trails in wildlife habitat can have negative impacts on wildlife, as recreationists can startle wildlife, forcing them to burn extra energy, experience stress, and move out of areas with resources essential for their survival. This is particularly impactful on ungulates during calving season and the winter and on migratory birds and raptors in spring and early summer.

Current Situation

Currently, there are no dedicated and maintained single-track hiker or biker trails in the Fish Creek drainage. However, both hikers and bikers do use the many hundreds of miles of unimproved roads for recreation.

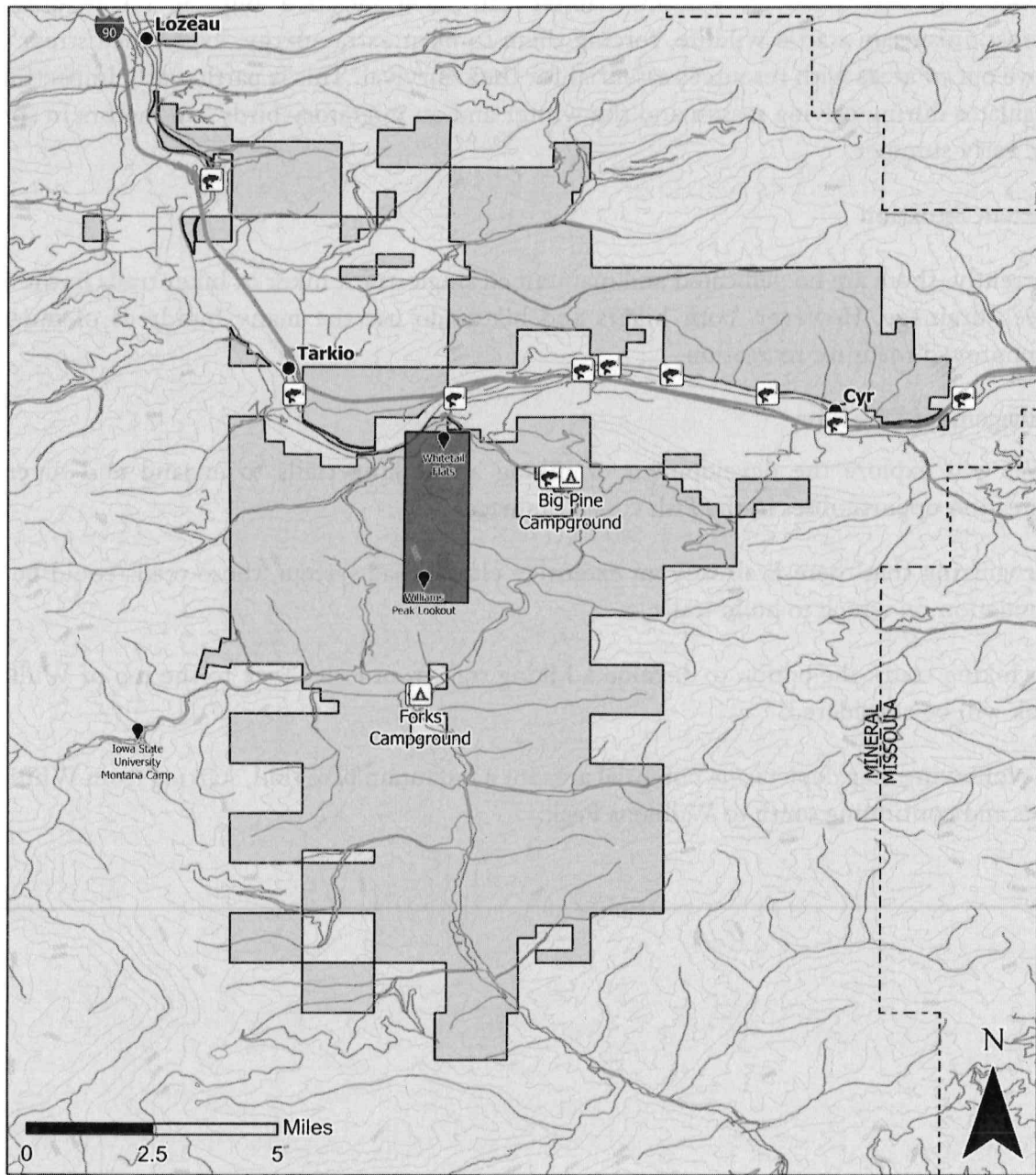
Management Direction






FWP will explore the development of hiking and biking trails to expand and diversify recreation opportunities in the Fish Creek drainage.

Recognizing that there is already an extensive closed road system, those roads could be the foundation on which to build trails.

For hiking trails, the option to develop a hiking trail from Fish Creek to the top of Williams Peak will be considered.

The following map depicts one potential area for a mountain bike trail, starting from Whitetail Flats and continuing south to Williams Peak.



- | | |
|---|---|
|  Campground |  Fish Creek Project Area |
|  Fishing Access Site |  Area considered for possible mountain bike trails |
|  Road | |



Map 5. Area considered for possible mountain bike trails

7.6 Preserve Motorized Recreational Opportunity

Background

OHV users often prefer circular routes that begin and end at the same point for:

1. Convenience.
2. Variety: Loop trails often offer a variety of terrain and scenery, which can make the ride more interesting and engaging. Riders may encounter different types of terrain, such as hills, valleys, and rocky sections, which can be challenging and fun to navigate.
3. Group Riding: Loop trails are ideal for group riding as they allow for riders to easily stay together as they follow the same route. It can also provide a sense of security knowing that the group will end up back at the starting point.

Current Situation

Currently, there are approximately 100 miles of dirt roads in the Fish Creek drainage available for OHV use. These roads are subject to seasonal closures to protect winter range for wildlife, and many roads would continue to be closed in the future as the recovery process in the Fish Creek drainage continues. Three areas south of I-90 that include dirt roads that form loops are currently used by OHV users. The two technical loops include Hay Creek Loop - approximately 13.82 miles long, and Bear Point Loop - approximately 13.07 miles long. The Williams Pass Loop is non-technical on improved dirt roads and is approximately 16.52 miles long. Map 6 shows all three OHV loops, followed by descriptions and maps for each loop.

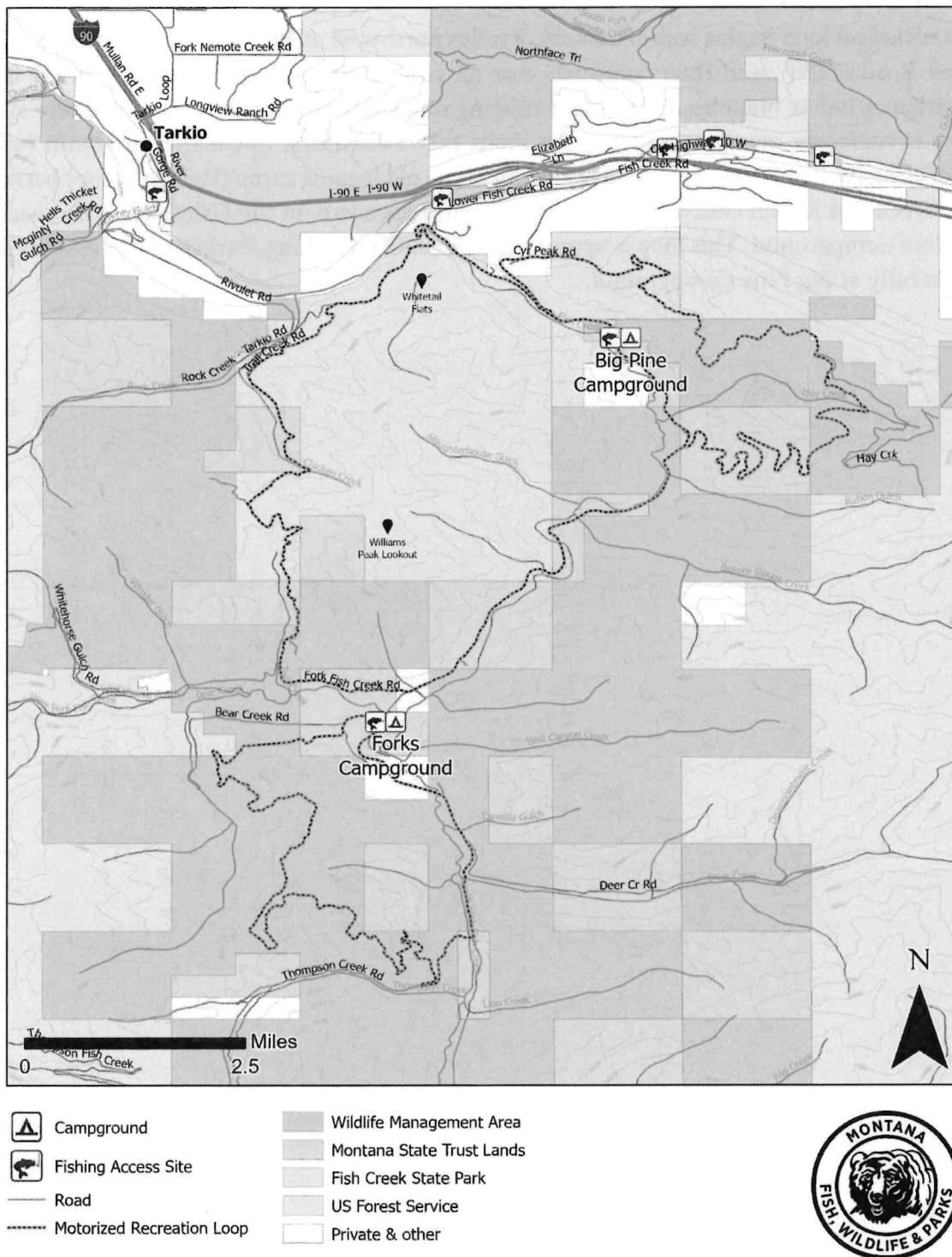
Management Direction

To better protect natural resources and the visitor experience for OHV users, management actions include:

- Retain the Hay Creek, Bear Point and Williams Pass OHV loops south of I-90.
- Monitor and evaluate OHV use and parking availability. Identify potential for alleviating congestion and reducing resource impacts by developing strategically placed parking area(s).

Develop educational messages about safe and responsible OHV use and place near the beginning of loop routes and in designated parking areas.

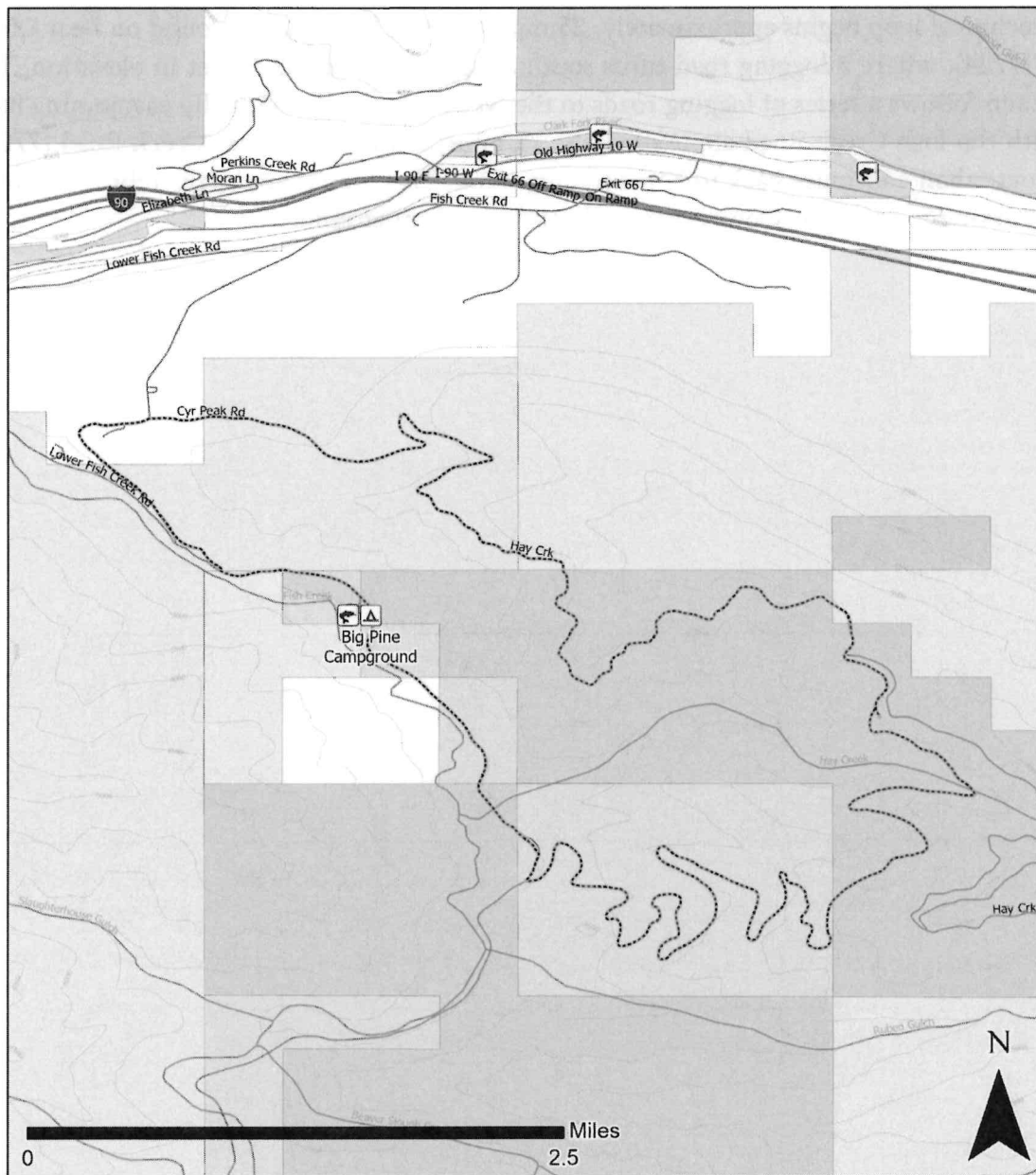
- Manage weeds to reduce resource impacts.
- Monitor and enforce lawful use to prevent pioneering of new routes.
- Collaborate with user groups to support management and monitoring.



Map 6. Three proposed OHV loops

1. Hay Creek Loop:

This technical loop begins approximately .5 miles northwest of Big Pine Campground on Fish Creek Road (7785), and then continues east on road 4230 until approximately 4,960 ft. in elevation, when it branches to the right moving in a southeasterly direction. The rest of the route is currently on unmarked logging roads that switchback down the mountain before connecting back to Fish Creek Road just south of the old logging camp (Helean Camp) between Hay Creek and Ruben Gulch. The route then continues north on the Fish Creek Road back to Big Pine Campground. This loop is approximately 13.82 miles long. Parking to access this loop is generally at Big Pine Campground.



- | | |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Campground | Wildlife Management Area |
| Fishing Access Site | Montana State Trust Lands |
| Road | Fish Creek State Park |
| Hay Creek Motorized Recreation Loop | US Forest Service |
| | Private & other |



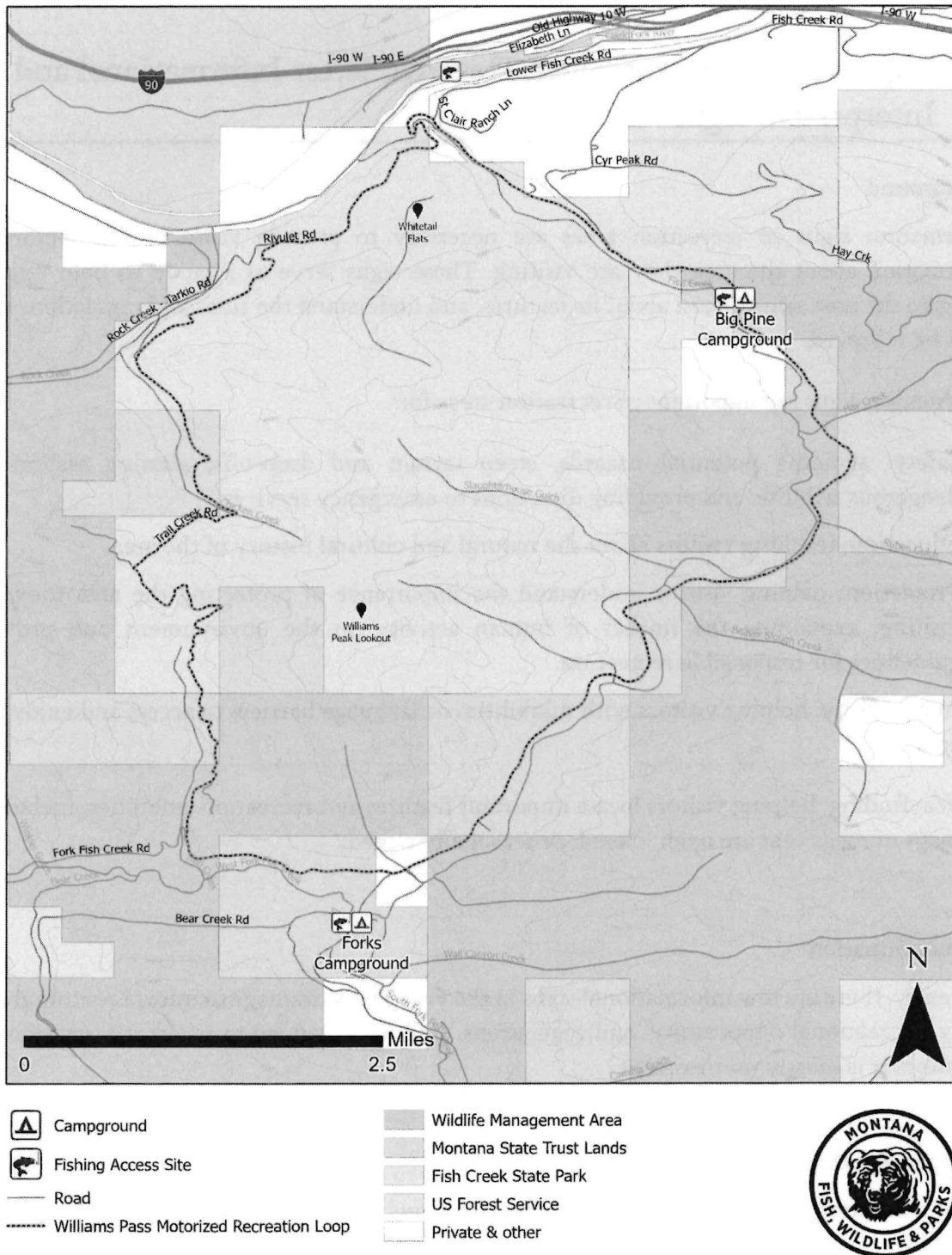
Map 7. Proposed Hay Creek OHV loop

2. Bear Point Loop:

This technical loop begins approximately .25 miles west of Forks Campground on Bear Creek Road (7724), where a logging road turns south at approximately 3220 feet in elevation. The loop then follows a series of logging roads to the west, south and eventually east joining back up with the Fish Creek Road approximately .75 miles south of the Deer Creek Road (7704). The route then continues back to Forks Campground. This loop is approximately 13.07 miles long. Parking to access this loop is generally at Forks Campground.

3. Williams Pass Loop:

This less technical loop generally follows the main roads through the Fish Creek drainage south of Interstate 90. OHV users usually park and begin this route at either Big Pine Campground or at Whitetail Flats (spur 3125, east of Road 344 and the confluence of Fish Creek and the Clark Fork River). Starting from Whitetail Flats, the route goes south on Rd. 344, then turns left (south) on Rd. 341, goes over Williams Pass, then joins West Fork Fish Creek Road (7750) 1.25 miles west of Forks Campground. The loop then joins the main Fish Creek Road (343, and continues north back to Big Pine Campground, or further north back to Whitetail Flats. This loop is approximately 16.52 miles long.



Map 9. Proposed Williams Pass OHV loop

7.7 Improve Visitor Experience Through Better Informational and Interpretive Signs

Background

Information signs in recreation areas are necessary to provide visitors with important information about the area they are visiting. These signs serve as a guide to help visitors navigate the area safely, learn about its features, and understand the rules and regulations that must be followed.

Information signs are important in recreation areas for:

1. **Safety:** avoiding potential hazards, steep terrain and drop-offs, alerting visitors to dangerous wildlife, and providing directions to emergency services.
2. **Education:** teaching visitors about the natural and cultural history of the area.
3. **Protection:** helping visitors understand the importance of protecting the area they are visiting, explaining the impact of human activity on the environment and provide guidelines for responsible recreation.
4. **Accessibility:** helping visitors with disabilities or language barriers to access and enjoy the area.
5. **Wayfinding:** helping visitors locate important features and recreation amenities, including maps of roads that are open, closed, or seasonally closed.

Current Situation

Currently, there are few informational signs in the Fish Creek drainage to inform visitors about safety, recreational opportunity, and regulations. Cellular coverage to access information on the internet is mostly non-existent.

Management Direction

Better informing visitors about their visit to Fish Creek includes the following management activities:

- Create an interpretive plan for key messages, the size and materials for signs, and their locations.

- Establish an information kiosk within 2 miles of Exit 66 on I-90 that lists all regulations, safety warnings about road travel during snowy conditions and other inclement weather, etc.
- Erect additional informational signs at Big Pine and Forks Campgrounds, designated dispersed campsites, and important road junctions. Install interpretive signage at important locations, including Williams Peak, and important habitats and restoration sites.

7.8 Improve Accessibility For Fish Creek Recreation

Background

According to the US Census Bureau, approximately 40.6 million, or 12.6% noninstitutionalized people in the USA have some sort of disability (US Census Bureau, 2020). The overall population in the USA is also aging. By the year 2030, more than 80 million people will be 65 or older. As the population ages, there is a greater likelihood of impairments that could hinder access to recreational opportunities (Zeller, et al., 2012).

Accessibility features in outdoor recreation areas are essential to ensure that all people can enjoy the great outdoors, promote physical activity, and improve overall health and well-being. Accessibility also fosters inclusion and independence, while providing economic benefits to local communities.

Current Situation

Recreation amenities in the Fish Creek drainage do not currently include features that allow for accessibility by individuals with disabilities.

Management Direction

- Develop one or more ADA designated sites at Big Pine and/or Forks Campgrounds.
- Develop accessible fishing access points where appropriate.

7.9 Improve Visitor Experience Through Consistent Regulations Across Agencies

Background

State public lands in the Project Area are managed by FWP and DNRC.

Current Situation

Visitors to the Project Area are currently subject to two sets of regulations that can change multiple times over the course of a few miles of travel, resulting in confusion for visitors, inefficient use of management resources, and the potential for natural and cultural resource damage.

Management Direction

FWP and DNRC are working to align and create one set of public use regulations in the Fish Creek drainage to improve the visitor experience and compliance with regulations.

7.10 Enhance Safety and Enforcement

Background

An important part of the visitor experience in Fish Creek is visitor safety. Visitors want to feel safe when they visit public lands and have an expectation that when they call to report a violation that their call will be responded to in a timely manner. Historically, common calls from the public from the Fish Creek area include anglers fishing when Fish Creek is closed to fishing, illegal off-road use, and hunting violations.

Current Situation

Fish Creek is part of the Hellgate District of FWP's Parks and Outdoor Recreation (POR) Division. This district stretches along the Clark Fork River from Milltown State Park east of Missoula to St. Regis. Under the current structure, this district has two year-round and three seasonal positions managing 4 state parks, approximately 15 FAS, and the Alberton Gorge Special Recreation Permit system in addition to the Fish Creek complex. Historically, FWP recreation staff have made weekly or twice weekly patrols into Fish Creek with an eye to managing camping at the two FAS sites and dispersed camping along the creek. The addition of a seasonal position in 2023 to manage use at Alberton Gorge access sites allowed for a near daily presence in Fish Creek. Maintenance staff make an additional two trips per week into the area with a focus on cleaning latrines and minor maintenance at the campgrounds.

Fish Creek is part of FWP's larger Mineral County Warden District. However, Missoula area wardens assist in the Fish Creek Drainage routinely. Fish Creek is a priority area that wardens proactively patrol at a minimum of once per week to check for compliance with fishing and hunting regulations, contact users camping on both FWP and DNRC lands, and address any

resource violations. In addition, wardens also respond to the Fish Creek area routinely in response to calls for service from the public regarding violations they encounter while recreating in the area.

Management Direction

Effective messaging, public interaction, and public education will be critical to the success of the final strategy. FWP is committed to continuing its current level of staffing in the Fish Creek drainage. Additional staffing is subject to legislative consideration or reconfiguration of existing resources. FWP will monitor the outcomes of better signage, consistent rules, and the increased recreation staff presence in 2023 when determining future staffing configurations.

8. Monitoring

Background

Monitoring is an essential part of managing recreation and visitor use. It allows managers to receive feedback on resource conditions and visitor experience to ensure that strategies and management actions are effective. Monitoring includes routinely gathering information and observational data to assess the status of specific resource conditions and visitor experiences (IVUMC, 2019).

Monitoring includes the selection of indicators to track trends in resource and visitor experience conditions. Establishing thresholds allows managers to know when resources and/or visitor experiences are in an unacceptable condition so that management actions can be taken to improve conditions (IVUMC, 2016).

Both motorized and non-motorized recreation pose risks to wildlife. Elk, in particular, are especially sensitive to human disturbance. In Oregon, researchers found that elk move away from all types of recreation, to include (in descending order of disturbance) ATVs, bicycles, hikers, and horseback riders (Wisdom, et al., 2018). Technology is also rapidly changing, and people are finding new ways to enjoy the outdoors. GPS and other mapping technology is making it easier for people to go farther and get deeper into places that used to be less accessible.

Existing fishing pressure and potential fishery impacts are concentrated at the mouth and on the lower portion of main stem Fish Creek (Zone 1). Despite protective fishing regulations (e.g., artificial lures only and seasonal closure) and predominantly catch-and-release practices, increasing angling pressure is a concern for migratory native trout populations (particularly bull trout) staging and seasonally concentrated in these areas. These populations and key aspects of angling use and compliance will continue to be monitored to ensure protection and continued recovery of migratory native trout populations.

Current monitoring efforts in the Fish Creek Drainage

- Aerial elk survey (every 1-2 years)
- White-tailed deer ground survey (every 1-2 years)
- Weed treatment monitoring (WHIP project)
- Hunter game check station (Oct-Nov annually)
- Fisher and wolverine camera monitoring (every 5 years)
- Photo point vegetation monitoring (every 5-7 years)
- Main Stem Fish Creek Fish Population Estimates (Snorkel Estimates)

- Evaluation of Migratory Bull Trout Escapement and Spawning Activity (Redd Counts – every 1-2 years)
- Bull Trout Genetic Monitoring in Fish Cr Tributaries (Genetic Diversity & Abundance – every 5-10 years)
- Evaluation & Monitoring of Fish Species Composition in Tributaries (Electrofishing – continuous)
- W. Cutthroat Trout Genetic Monitoring in Fish Creek Tributaries (Non-hybridized WCT – continuous)
- Evaluation of Large Wood Placement and Function in Main Stem Fish Creek (Habitat Quality - ongoing)
- Mountain Lake Surveys and Fish Population Monitoring (prescription and sampling intensity varies among lakes)
- Beaver Activity Surveys via aerial imagery (every 5 years).

Future monitoring efforts

FWP is committed to using the best science to manage recreation in the Fish Creek watershed responsibly and to ensure the long-term persistence and integrity of fish and wildlife populations. Through baseline monitoring of fish and wildlife populations, habitat, and recreation use, FWP will build long term datasets to help identify and monitor trends and to help inform management decisions for the preservation of resources. FWP is planning to start long-term habitat monitoring in the watershed in summer 2023 with a goal to monitor changing conditions across different habitats (riparian, upland) and disturbances (commercial logging, fires, and recreation use). FWP will continue to monitor angling pressure on migratory native trout populations (particularly bull trout) to ensure their protection and continued recovery.

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