

## **River Recreation Briefing**

**Prepared by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks for the Environmental Quality Council**

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Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks manages recreation on rivers, along with other partners, and is responsible for balancing public access, recreation demand, and ecological health (87-1-301, 87-1-303, 23-2-302, MCA; ARM 12.4.1, 12.11). This briefing paper provides an update on two important projects related to river recreation – the River Recreation Advisory Council and a study titled Quantifying Recreational Use of Montana Rivers.

### **RIVER RECREATION ADVISORY COUNCIL**

- FWP convened the River Recreation Advisory Council (RRAC) to develop a set of recommendations for managing river recreation in Montana. The RRAC consisted of 10 diverse members with different personal and professional experience with river recreation and from various geographic areas across the state.
- The RRAC met for a three-day workshop in fall of 2024 and used a Structured Decision-Making process. Following is a summary of the recommendations:
  - Develop a new Statewide River Recreation Management Plan with consistent guidance for managing rivers.
  - Create a data collection and monitoring system to support management decisions.
  - Establish an equitable, repeatable process and flowchart for when and how to launch river-specific planning efforts.
  - Increase FWP capacity to implement and administer river recreation management.
- The RRAC's recommendations were posted for public comment November 23 to December 23, 2024.
- Following the conclusion of the RRAC process, Parks and Outdoor Recreation (POR) staff conducted an internal department-wide inventory of river recreation efforts and solicited feedback from staff regarding needs and priorities related to the RRAC's recommendations.
- FWP is evaluating fiscal priorities and taking steps to implement some of the RRAC's recommendations.

### **QUANTIFYING RECREATIONAL USE OF MONTANA RIVERS**

- In 2024, FWP partnered with Montana State University to develop methods to estimate recreational use by different user groups on the Beaverhead, Big Hole, Madison, Ruby, and Upper Yellowstone (started in 2025) rivers.

- To estimate recreational use, the team is using stratified–random sampling and a creel-survey style design with four main components: on-site in-person interviews, postcard surveys, vehicle counts, and trail camera counts of people and watercraft along waterways, at fishing access sites, and other high-use locations.
- The team is currently refining the methodology to more efficiently process and review video and images, input data collected by creel surveys, and place, install, and program cameras along rivers.
- This study on quantifying recreational use is part of a larger, multi-year study on fish health funded through 2028. While the study on recreational use will not be completed for several years, there is data to inform methodology for an ongoing data collection and monitoring system on river recreation use.
- FWP and partners are seeking to apply the methods resulting from the study to design an ongoing data collection and monitoring system.