

Program Evaluation

State Parks Division

Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks



ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY COUNCIL

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Introduction

The Environmental Quality Council is required to evaluate programs within the Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (DFWP) pursuant to 75-1-324, MCA. That law requires in part that the EQC “review and appraise the various programs and activities of the state agencies, in the light of the policy set forth in 75-1-103, MCA, for the purpose of determining the extent to which the programs and activities are contributing to the achievement of the policy and make recommendations to the governor and the legislature with respect to the policy”.

The policy reads as follows:

The legislature, recognizing the profound impact of human activity on the interrelations of all components of the natural environment, particularly the profound influences of population growth, high-density urbanization, industrial expansion, resource exploitation, and new and expanding technological advances, recognizing the critical importance of restoring and maintaining environmental quality to the overall welfare and human development, and further recognizing that governmental regulation may unnecessarily restrict the use and enjoyment of private property, declares that it is the continuing policy of the state of Montana, in cooperation with the federal government, local governments, and other concerned public and private organizations, to use all practicable means and measures, including financial and technical assistance, in a manner calculated to foster and promote the general welfare, to create and maintain conditions under which humans and nature can coexist in productive harmony, to recognize the right to use and enjoy private property free of undue government regulation, and to fulfill the social, economic, and other requirements of present and future generations of Montanans.

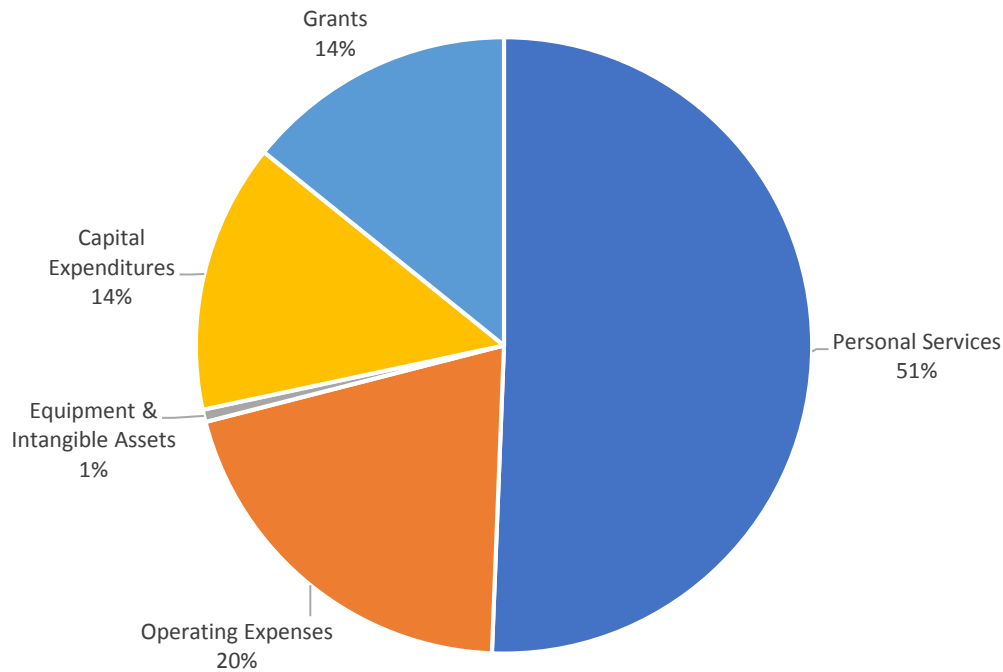
In June 2017, the EQC allocated 288 hours of staff time to evaluate the Parks Division at the DFWP, which manages Montana’s 55 state parks encompassing 46,538 acres and four outdoor recreation programs. The first section of this evaluation focuses on the administration of the state parks themselves. The second examines the outdoor recreation programs.

Financial Snapshot

The DFWP Parks Division spent \$12.48 million from all state and federal sources in Fiscal Year (FY) 2017, including appropriations made in House Bill 2, House Bill 5, and [15-65-121](#), MCA.¹

FWP Parks Division Expenditures, FY 2017

\$12.48 million



As shown above, personal services account for the majority of expenses (\$6.43 million). The Parks Division had 100.34 FTE in FY 2017 and paid for 4 FTE in the DFWP's Enforcement Division. Ninety-six percent of the FTE serve Montana's 55 state parks. The remainder (3.93 FTE) administer the Parks Division's four outdoor recreation programs (Land and Water Conservation Fund, Recreational Trails, Snowmobile, and Off-Highway Vehicle).

¹ The portion of the accommodations tax dedicated to state parks is statutorily appropriated.

State Parks

History

Questions about how to best manage Montana's state parks system have endured since the late 1930s when the first state park (Lewis and Clark Caverns) was established. The Legislature created the State Park Commission in 1939 and abolished it in 1953. The State Highway Commission took over then, followed by the Fish and Game Commission in 1965. In 2013, the Legislature created the State Parks and Recreation Board to oversee Montana's now 55 parks and the four outdoor recreation programs the Parks Division administers.

President Teddy Roosevelt spearheaded the conservation movement that sparked the first interest in a state parks system.² Advocates in Montana took early direction from the National Park Service and the National Conference on State Parks, established in 1921.³ Recreation managers, particularly at the federal level, felt the automobile and increasing American prosperity and leisure time made state-operated parks and recreation areas a necessary bridge between established municipal and federal recreation areas.⁴

There's little record of legislative support for a Montana park system during the 1920s, but it is not surprising as the national movement was predominantly focused on preserving scenic wonders for the "delight, inspiration and recreation" of those who wanted to escape crowded and noisy cities.⁵ In 1920s Montana, not a single paved road crossed the entirety of the state, which, while the third largest in the country, was home to less than 600,000 people. Montana also had two national parks and 17 million acres of public forest land.⁶

A 1929 bill supported by Kiwanis clubs throughout the state sought to create a state parks department in Montana. It easily passed the House but died in the Senate.⁷ Instead, a second bill that session (House Bill 277) designated the state forester as state park director and authorized the Board of Land Commissioners (Land Board) to establish state parks. However, the bill did not include an appropriation.

The Great Depression and lack of funding hit the state parks movement hard. President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal revitalized the effort with the creation of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). Supervised by the National Park Service, the CCC spent nearly \$300 million nationwide on improvement projects in state, county, and city parks.⁸

Between 1930 and 1940, 22 states established methods to acquire and administer state parks. In 1934, Montanans Incorporated, that era's version of a state chamber of commerce, established a State Recreation Committee at the urging of the state forester. The committee's efforts led Governor Frank Cooney to ask the federal government to develop public facilities at Lewis and Clark National Monument, also known as Morrison Cave.⁹

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² <http://stateparks.mt.gov/about-us/anniversary.html>

³ <http://stateparks.mt.gov/about-us/>

⁴ Conklin, David G., [The Long Road to Riches: The Development of Montana's State Park System](#), Montana Outdoors, 1978, page 2.

⁵ Ibid, page 3.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid, page 4.

The First State Park

With a CCC company working on the caverns by late 1935 and the Department of Interior having invested more than \$21,000 to make them more publicly accessible, the Land Board passed a resolution in July 1936 establishing Morrison Cave, now known as Lewis and Clark Caverns, as the first state park in Montana. The board said the caverns were “rapidly becoming a great asset” as a strong attraction for tourists and a special opportunity for the study of geology.¹⁰



LEWIS AND CLARK CAVERNS

In 1939, the Legislature passed House Bill 80, creating a three-member State Park Commission to conserve “the scenic, historic, archaeologic, scientific, and recreational resources of the state” and provide “for their use and enjoyment...contributing to the cultural, recreational, and economic life of the people and their health”,¹¹ a mission that stands to this day.

The commission, tasked with determining which lands to acquire,¹² also had the power to collect fees, grant concessions, make and enforce rules, and accept federal aid. House Bill 80 also authorized the State Highway Department to build roads to the parks. However, an appropriation of \$17,000 included in another bill to fund the new park system did not pass.¹³

Revenue from Morrison Cave State Park was the commission’s only funding source. The price of admission in 1939 was 75 cents for adults and 25 cents for children. Nearly 4,000 people visited the park in 1941, but operations were suspended in 1943 when visits declined under wartime shortages and gasoline rationing.¹⁴ The site reopened in 1946 under the new name of Lewis and Clark Caverns State Park.

In 1947, the Legislature made its first appropriation for park purposes.¹⁵ The commission had five parks¹⁶ in northwest and southwest Montana under its belt and took on responsibility for park development and maintenance at eight sites around the state.¹⁷ The growth spurt, however, may have been too much for the current state park director and his bookkeeping to handle. The system quickly built a deficit of almost \$24,000.¹⁸

¹⁰ Minutes, Montana Board of Land Commissioners, July 29, 1936, page 8.

¹¹ [23-1-101, MCA](#).

¹² [23-1-102, MCA](#).

¹³ Conklin, David G., [The Long Road to Riches: The Development of Montana's State Park System](#), Montana Outdoors, 1978, page 4.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid, page 5.

¹⁶ Lewis and Clark Caverns, Bitterroot Lake, Lone Pine, Missouri Headwaters, and Yellow Bay

¹⁷ Goose Bay and Big Arm on Flathead Lake, Rock Creek and Hell Creek on Fort Peck Reservoir, Beaver Creek near Havre, Missouri Headwaters, Pictograph Cave, and Bridger Mountain

¹⁸ Conklin, David G., [The Long Road to Riches: The Development of Montana's State Park System](#), Montana Outdoors, 1978, page 5.

As a result of the deficit, several parks closed, development at others was postponed, and the state park director was “taken off the payroll”.¹⁹ With Senate Bill 14, the 1953 Legislature dissolved the State Parks Commission, transferring its responsibilities to the Highway Commission.

The Legislature appropriated about \$45,000 for the parks system that year and provided average yearly increases of less than \$10,000 for the next 12 years to cover inflation, pay raises, and basic maintenance. In spite of tight budgets, the Highway Commission accepted responsibility for 19 new parks.²⁰

The 1960s

The 1960s were a turning point for state parks in Montana and recreation throughout the country. A presidentially-appointed commission made recommendations for handling a predicted “recreation explosion”.²¹ The Montana Department of Fish and Game created a Division of Recreation and Lands Development to plan for and implement long-term management of department lands. Aware that soon-to-be available Land and Water Conservation Funds would only be given to ‘recreation’ agencies, Governor Tim Babcock designated Fish and Game as the agency responsible for recreation in Montana on April 1, 1964.²²

In 1965, the Legislature again contemplated the future of state parks as 12 parks were slated to be removed from the system and the Highway Commission made no effort to increase its budget.²³ Senator Arnold Rieder, chairman of the Senate Committee on Fish and Game, sought to transfer state parks to the Fish and Game Commission via Senate Bill 16. Rieder told the committee that Lieutenant Governor Ted James, formerly a highway commissioner, supported the transfer because the highway department never paid much attention to state parks.²⁴

State Game Warden Frank Dunkle expressed concern that Fish and Game money spent on state parks would jeopardize federal Pittman-Robertson and Dingell-Johnson funds. Dunkle said the Fish and Game Commission supported SB 16 as long as a separate appropriation was made for state parks.²⁵ Dunkle later told the House Fish and Game Committee that the Fish and Game Commission felt strongly about having recreational areas for recreation, not just hunting and fishing locations.²⁶

SB 16 ultimately passed and dedicated a one-percent share of the fuel tax for the creation, improvement, and maintenance of state parks where motor boating is allowed. The 1967 Legislature also passed another bill that redirected park fees to a parks specific account

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid, pages 5 and 6.

²² Ibid, page 6.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Minutes, Senate Committee on Fish and Game, January 18, 1965, page 1.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Minutes, House Fish and Game Committee, February 16, 1965, page 1.

after the 1963 Legislature opted to deposit the fees in the state general fund as part of a broad reorganization of the state treasury structure.²⁷

Administration of state parks remained under the Fish and Game Commission (renamed the Fish, Wildlife, and Parks Commission in 1991) for more than 40 years.

A Future in Flux

In 2001, a [Legislative Performance Audit](#) raised questions about the mission and future of the state parks program, its stagnant fee system, and its coordination with other historical and cultural sites and tourism and travel promotions. The audit identified other policy questions that needed to be addressed including long-term maintenance and replacement needs of aging infrastructure and a high reliance on volunteer staff.

At the suggestion of the audit, Governor Judy Martz convened a state parks “Futures Committee” in 2001 to make recommendations regarding changes in the park system. A similar committee convened in 1989 and provided guidelines for Park Division activities including development of a division-wide vision statement, site specific management plans, partnerships with private and local groups and other agencies, and reclassifying division lands.²⁸

But several changes occurred in the ensuing decade and Governor Martz wanted a fresh look. The Parks system shrank from 60 to 42 parks, largely through the transfer of sites to other public agencies, resident use was on the rise, and passage of the Primitive Parks Act (23-1-115 through 23-118, MCA) in 1993 eliminated entrance fees and curtailed development at 15 parks.²⁹

A review of the [second Futures Committee report](#) finds recommendations that remain relevant:³⁰

- To prevent unwarranted incremental development at state parks, the Parks Division should:
 - create a classification system for designating and managing state parks based on sound management and planning principles, levels of development, public use and desires, and park settings.
 - seek a balance within the parks system among types of parks (e.g. historical/cultural, natural, and recreational) and classifications of parks, based on the above bullet point.
 - manage parks designated as primitive parks within the intent of the Primitive Parks Act until management plans for each park and the classification system mentioned above are complete. The Legislature should then revisit the Primitive Parks Act.
- To reduce problems with understaffing and maximize the visitor experience, benefits to local communities, and collection of fees, the Parks Division should seek

²⁷ House Bill 22, 1963

²⁸ [Legislative Performance Audit OOP-13](#), State Parks Program, February 2001, S-3.

²⁹ [State Parks Futures Committee II Final Report and Recommendations](#), December 3, 2002, pages 1 and 2.

³⁰ Ibid, pages 5 through 10.

volunteers and financial sponsors from outside groups, encourage commercial and entrepreneurial opportunities to provide visitor services in appropriate parks, seek resources for paid seasonal staff to supervise volunteers, and continue to develop partnerships with other agencies and organizations to share information, expertise, and staff, as appropriate.

At the time, the committee recognized that with no increase in revenues and no new capital improvements the Parks Division would be operating with a deficit in 2006. The committee acknowledged finding additional funding in the current budget cycle would be difficult, but presented several strategies for increasing revenue. One of these was a resident light motor vehicle registration fee, which the Legislature took up and passed in 2003.³¹ Other strategies discussed included:

- Increasing various user fees
- A one-mill levy dedicated to state parks
- A tax on rental cars
- Increasing the motorboat decal fee
- Imposing a boat launch fee
- Creating a fee decal for non-motorized boats
- Creating a parks trust
- Levying a land conversion tax
- Increasing the severance tax on natural gas production, specifically coal bed methane
- Increasing the accommodations tax

In spite of the \$4 light motor vehicle registration fee, a structural imbalance in late 2009 led the Legislative Finance Committee to take another look at funding for state parks. A resulting report offered several legislative decision points for consideration. Two were acted upon by the 2011 Legislature. The first increased the light motor vehicle registration fee from \$4 to \$6.³² The second revised the Primitive Parks Act, removing six parks from and adding one park to the list.³³

The Legislature did not act on the following decision points:

- Allowing the DFWP to transfer parks lands to other governmental entities for community use
- defining the parks system
- evaluating land arrangements between state agencies
- determining the role for historical parks

³¹ [Senate Bill 336](#), 2003

³² [House Bill 370](#), 2011, increased the light motor vehicle registration fee from \$4 to \$6 with \$5.37 of the fee supporting state parks, 25 cents supporting fishing access sites, and 38 cents supporting state-owned facilities at Virginia and Nevada Cities. As originally passed in 2003, the \$4 fee dedicated \$3.50 to state parks and 25 cents each to fishing access sites and Virginia and Nevada Cities.

³³ [Senate Bill 43](#), 2011

Another bill proposed in 2011 sought to move state parks out of the DFWP and create a separate board attached to the Department of Commerce to oversee them. [House Bill 628](#) failed, but the Legislature passed [House Joint Resolution 32](#), which led the EQC to study the park system in the 2011-2012 interim.

The study looked at ways to improve the management, recognition, and coordination of state parks and outdoor recreation and heritage resource programs operated by the state, including state-owned facilities at Virginia and Nevada Cities.

In the end, the EQC found that while integrating the administration of these programs might be desirable due to natural alliances between their missions, operations, and resource needs, it was not the appropriate time to do so. Instead, the EQC recommended creating a separate board at the DFWP to oversee state parks and the other recreational programs administered by the Parks Division because controversial wildlife issues dominated the attention of the department and the Fish, Wildlife, and Parks Commission.³⁴

Since its inception in 2013, the five member State Parks and Recreation Board has:

- (December 2014) adopted the [Montana State Parks and Recreation Strategic Plan for 2015-2020](#), which brands the park system as “Significant, Relevant, Accessible” and promises to deliver on service, safety, stewardship, and sustainability. The plan identifies the following five goals:
 - Manage significant, relevant, and accessible parks and programs in a manner consistent with available resources.
 - Develop diversified and sustainable funding.
 - Enrich the visitor experience for all.
 - Foster strategic partnerships and an engaged constituency with visitors and key stakeholders.
 - Heighten awareness and recognition for the state parks brand.
- (August 2015) adopted a [policy for the acquisition and/or transfer of interests in lands](#). The policy states that:
 - land or interest in land proposed for inclusion in the parks system must meet the criteria for significance, relevance, and accessibility as defined in the 2015-2020 strategic plan. If a project for new park lands is advanced, necessary improvements, management needs, their anticipated costs, and funding sources must be determined.
 - the transfer of land or interests in land in the park system may be appropriate when lands are not utilized for the primary mission of state parks, do not meet the criteria for significance, relevance, and accessibility, are managed by other governmental entities, may be better managed by another entity, or are currently undeveloped.

The board [updated the policy](#) in February 2017 to clarify that the board did not intend to close any existing state parks or recreational or historic areas. The board said it would do everything it could within budgetary constraints to keep

³⁴ Stockwell, Hope, [HJR 32: A Study of State Parks, Outdoor Recreation, and Heritage Resource Programs](#), October 2012, pages 3 and 4.

those opportunities and experiences available to as many people as possible. The policy is scheduled for review in February 2020.

- (December 2015) adopted a [policy for classification and prioritization of park resources](#), including staff, funding, and capital development, which is scheduled for review December in 2018. The policy put each park in one of four classes with Class 1 sites being the most significant, relevant, and accessible. Management approaches for each class are described in the graph on the following page.
 - Class 1A includes Bannack, Flathead Lake, Lewis and Clark Caverns, and Makoshika.
 - Class 1B includes Chief Plenty Coups, Cooney, First Peoples Buffalo Jump, Giant Springs, Missouri Headwaters, Pictograph Cave, Smith River, Thompson Chain of Lakes/Logan, Tongue River Reservoir, and Travers' Rest.
 - Class 2 includes Fish Creek, Madison Buffalo Jump, Medicine Rocks, Milltown, Rosebud Battlefield, and Sluice Boxes.
 - Class 3 includes Beavertail Hill, Black Sandy, Brush Lake, Frenchtown Pond, Hell Creek, Lake Elmo, Lake Mary Ronan, Lone Pine, Placid Lake, Salmon Lake, Spring Meadow, Thompson Falls, and Whitefish Lake/Les Mason.
 - Class 4 includes Ackley Lake, Anaconda Stack, Beaverhead Rock, Clarks Lookout, Council Grove, Elkhorn, Fort Owen, Granite, Lost Creek, Marias River, Painted Rocks, Pirogue Island, Prairie Dog Town, Tower Rock, and Yellowstone River.

In late 2016, the DFWP terminated for undisclosed reasons the Parks Division administrator who worked with the Board on developing these policies. That and an unexplained \$11.5 million ending funding balance in the parks accounts made state parks a hot topic in the 2017 Legislature.

Sponsors introduced two bills aimed at giving state parks autonomy from the DFWP. [House Bill 454](#) sought again to move the State Parks and Recreation Board to the Department of Commerce while [House Bill 324](#) wanted to administratively attached the State Parks and Recreation Board to the DFWP, thus removing it from the DFWP Director's purview but still allowing access to DFWP's central services (HR, legal, etc.). HB 454 died on the House Floor, but the Legislature passed HB 324.

Governor Steve Bullock vetoed the bill, saying in a [letter to the House Speaker and Senate President](#) that it was not an effective way to manage state parks or provide the necessary results and accountability. Bullock also said HB 324 would exacerbate the park system's financial challenges, in which yearly expenditures are expected to outpace revenues.

Instead, Bullock committed to launching a "Parks in Focus" initiative, akin to the past Parks Futures Committees, to address the financial, operational, and cultural challenges facing state parks. Parks in Focus members have yet to be determined, but the governor appointed four new members to the State Parks and Recreation Board on August 22, 2017.

In a [memo](#) dated the same day, the governor asked DFWP Director Martha Williams to report back to him in 45 days with a collaborative vision for Parks in Focus and recommendations for its members.

MONTANA STATE PARKS
MANAGEMENT APPROACHES

CLASS 2

OPPORTUNITY
FOR GROWTH

Growth and investment as opportunities arise
Improve relevance and accessibility
Focused planning and partnership efforts

CLASS 1

FOCUS
RESOURCES

Class 1A best meets brand promise

- Prioritize funding and operations
- Focus reallocation of resources to these sites first

Continued investment in Class 1B

CLASS 4

ALTERNATIVE
MANAGEMENT

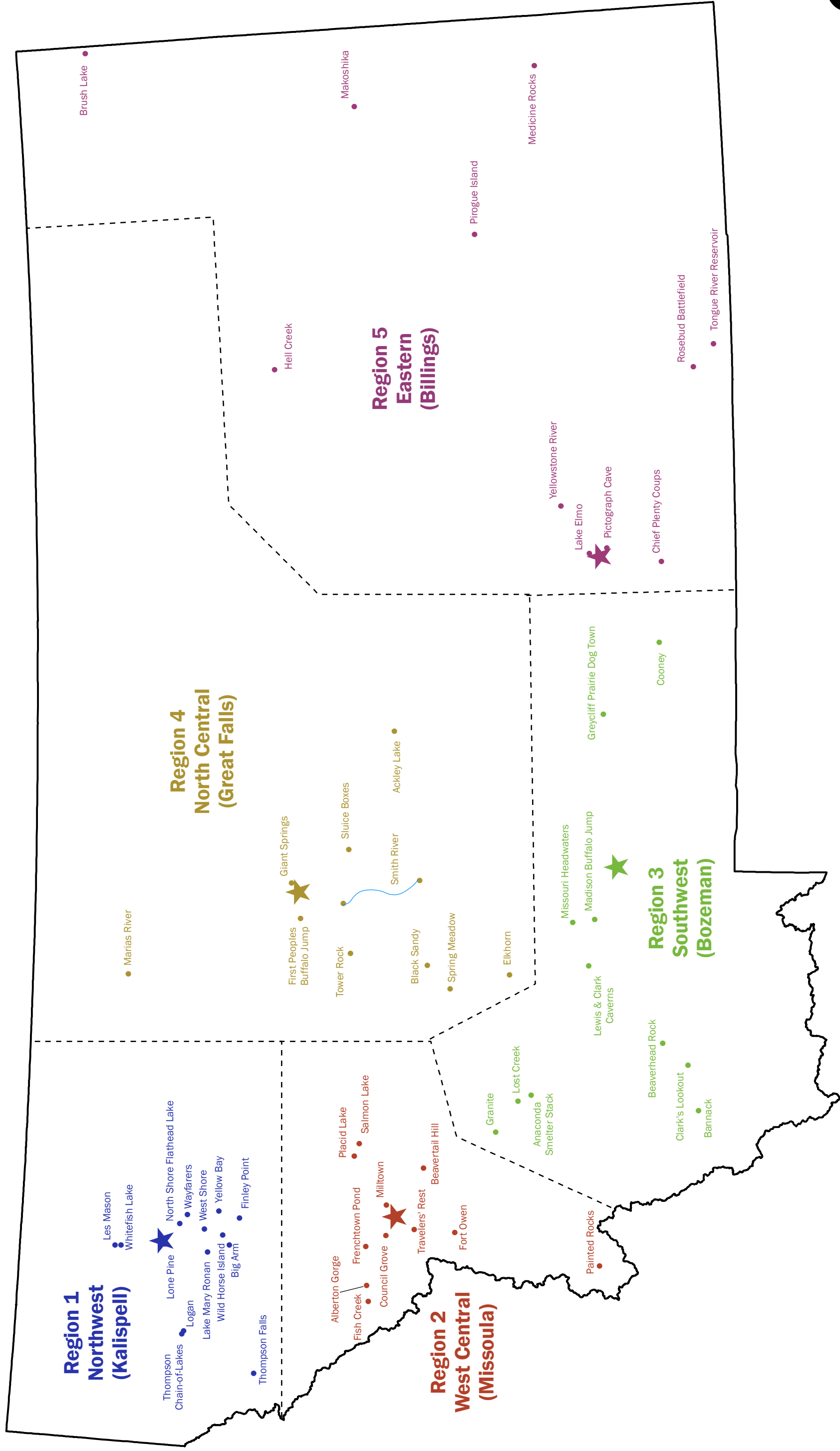
Re-evaluate current management approaches
Seek partnerships or consider potential transfer to other public managers
Where possible reallocate resources to more significant sites

CLASS 3

CLARIFY EXPECTATIONS
& MANAGEMENT

Evaluate funding and operations as appropriate
Maintain relevance and accessibility
Clarify long-term vision of sites
Seek partnerships or alternative management where appropriate

Montana State Parks Administrative Regions



Note: This is only a simplified representation of the regional "boundaries."

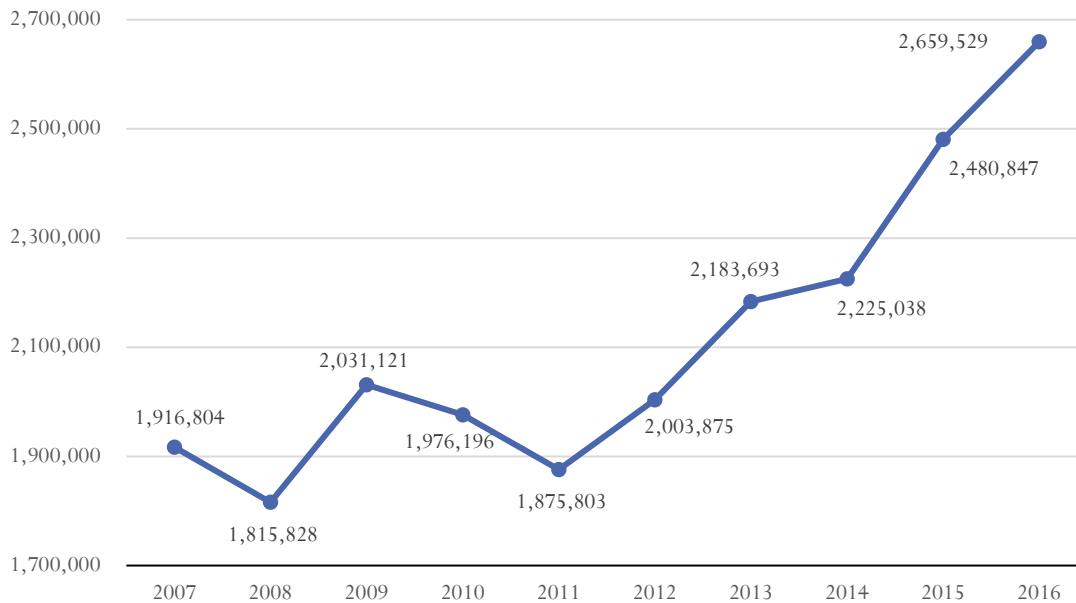
State Parks Today

Milltown, formerly contaminated by extensive mining waste that built up behind a dam at the confluence of the Clark Fork and Blackfoot Rivers, is poised to become Montana's 55th state park. Under restoration and development for several years in conjunction with the Natural Resource Damage Program, the Parks Division expects Milltown to officially become a state park later this year as construction of the park's improvements concludes.

Visitation

Montana's state parks saw a record 2.65 million visitors in 2016, up 7% overall from the previous year and 33% since 2012. While peak season use (May to September) increased 26% since 2012, shoulder season use increased 62%. State Parks staff believe this is due primarily to warmer weather allowing visitors to get into parks, especially water-based parks and those that offer camping, earlier in the year.

State Parks Visitation, 2007-2016



The park system's north central region had the highest number of visits overall in 2016 and Giant Springs State Park in Great Falls was the most visited in the state. Visitation at Giant Springs also was the highest of any park in the last decade.³⁵

Annual Visitation by Region, 2016

Region	Total Visits	Change since 2015
North Central (Great Falls)	724,681	0%
Northwest (Kalispell)	705,703	+9%
Eastern (Billings)	451,674	+10%
Southwest (Bozeman)	440,018	+9%
West Central (Missoula)	290,539	+17%

Most Visited Parks, 2016

	Total Visits
Giant Springs	428,930
Flathead Lake	313,033
Cooney	190,715
Lake Elmo	183,287
Thompson Chain of Lakes/Logan	137,507

While visitation increased at most state parks in 2016, some saw declines as detailed in the chart on the next page.

B. 2016 Annual Visitation Estimates by Total Visits

January - December: 2,659,529 visits

Region	Park	2016 Total Visits	2015 Total Visits	2015-2016 % Change
4	Giant Springs	428,930	419,799	2%
1	Flathead Lake	313,033	281,011	11%
1	Big Arm	42,783	40,512	6%
1	Finley Point	29,171	26,676	9%
1	Wayfarers	158,961	137,278	16%
1	West Shore	35,456	36,400	-3%
1	Wild Horse Island	20,316	16,742	21%
1	Yellow Bay	26,346	23,222	13%
3	Cooney	190,715	184,780	3%
5	Lake Elmo	183,287	172,195	6%
1	TCL/Logan	137,507	125,819	9%
1	Thompson Chain of Lakes	107,484	96,131	12%
1	Logan	30,023	29,688	1%
4	Spring Meadow Lake	137,303	171,995	-20%
1	Whitefish Lake/Les Mason	111,403	119,195	-7%
1	Whitefish Lake	80,338	84,849	-5%
1	Les Mason	31,065	34,346	-10%
1	Lone Pine	103,998	87,572	19%
5	Makoshika	100,623	78,608	28%
3	Lewis & Clark Caverns	82,415	77,071	7%
5	Tongue River Reservoir	74,790	52,138	43%
2	Frenchtown Pond	68,904	49,733	39%
3	Bannack	63,852	45,825	39%
4	Black Sandy	57,265	53,651	7%
2	Placid Lake	57,119	45,251	26%
5	Pictograph Cave	54,057	66,065	-18%
2	Salmon Lake	51,631	54,719	-6%
4	Ackley Lake	41,829	32,682	28%
3	Missouri Headwaters	38,401	32,807	17%
2	Travelers' Rest	37,390	31,900	17%
2	Council Grove	34,611	31,556	10%
5	Hell Creek	26,355	23,700	11%
1	Lake Mary Ronan	25,309	19,917	27%
4	Sluice Boxes	22,971	20,996	9%
2	Beavertail Hill	21,411	18,926	13%
4	First Peoples Buffalo Jump	20,280	16,038	26%
5	Medicine Rocks	19,664	16,864	17%
3	Madison Buffalo Jump	15,770	11,706	35%
1	Thompson Falls	14,453	14,893	-3%
3	Anaconda Smoke Stack	14,121	10,875	30%
3	Prairie Dog Town	14,047	16,850	-17%
5	Chief Plenty Coups	13,982	18,455	-24%
3	Lost Creek	12,426	15,301	-19%
4	Tower Rock	11,496	7,128	61%
2	Painted Rocks	11,384	10,128	12%
3	Clark's Lookout	8,271	8,101	2%
5	Pirogue Island	7,954	6,523	22%
5	Brush Lake	7,417	9,271	-20%
5	Yellowstone River	5,658	4,192	35%
2	Fish Creek	5,481	4,353	26%
5	Rosebud Battlefield	4,801	3,663	31%
4	Smith River	4,607	4,289	7%
2	Fort Owen	2,608	2,479	5%

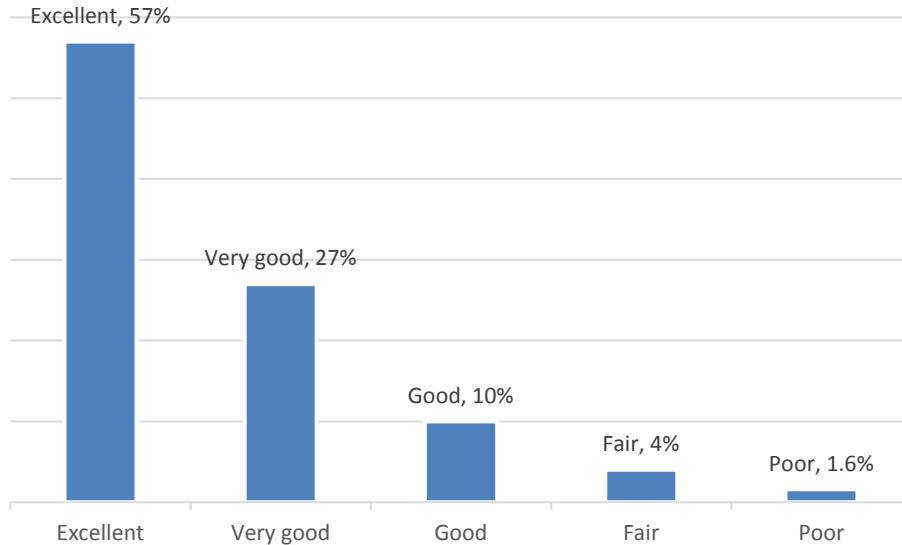
Visitation is not reported for North Shore, Elkhorn, Granite, Beaverhead Rock, or Marias River.

The Parks Division implemented campsite reservations at 20 of its parks in 2011. During FY 2017, there were approximately 23,500 reservation transactions including initial reservations and subsequent modifications/cancellations. This resulted in the collection of approximately \$210,000 in transaction fees, exceeding the system's \$185,000 cost in FY 2017.

Reservations made online or through a call center accounted for approximately 86% of all of the state parks' camping stays in FY 2017. Of visitors completing a post-stay survey, more than 75% rated their reservation experience as excellent or very good.

Regarding their overall visit, 57% of those completing the survey said it was excellent, nearly 27% said very good, 10% said good, 4% said fair, and 1.6% said poor. Of those who rated their overall visit as poor, some of the reasons given were perceived mismanagement of a reservation, weather conditions, latrine conditions, cost versus available amenities, behavior of other park users, nearby train activity, poor staff communication, small campsites or poorly described campsites, poor signage, access road conditions, and park maintenance issues.

**Rating of Overall State Park Visit
by Campsite Reservation Survey Respondents**
January - July 2017



Good Neighbor Policy

The Legislature enacted the Good Neighbor Policy in 1999 via House Bill No. 314. The policy aims for state parks to have no impact upon adjoining private and public lands from noxious weeds, trespass, litter, noise and light pollution, streambank erosion, and loss of privacy.

The policy also requires the DFWP to place maintenance as a priority over additional development at state parks. Maintenance is defined in [23-1-127, MCA](#), as:

- placing, cleaning, and stocking of latrines;
- garbage and litter removal;
- fence installation and repair;
- weed control;
- implementation of safety and health measures required by law to protect the public;
- upkeep of established trails, roads, parking areas, boat docks, and similar facilities existing in state parks on October 1, 1999;
- in-kind replacement of existing facilities, including electric lines or facilities, or replacement of those existing facilities with facilities that have less impact on the state park;
- erosion control and streambank stabilization;
- erection of barriers necessary to preserve riparian vegetation and habitat;
- minimal signage necessary to inform users of appropriate state park use and applicable regulations and of historical, natural, cultural, geographical, and geological features in the area;
- measures necessary to ensure compliance with the federal Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990, when applicable;
- planting of native trees, grasses, and shrubs for habitat stabilization and privacy shielding;
- installation of fire rings, picnic tables, and trash collection facilities; and
- other necessary activities and expenditures consistent with the good neighbor policy and limits on camping in riparian areas and use of OHVs enacted in 23-1-128, MCA, including new trails, new boat ramps, and necessary new access roads into and within the state park or fishing access site.

The Parks Division spent a total of \$1.36 million on maintenance of state parks in FY 2017 plus an additional \$154,000 specifically on weed management. The portion of the accommodations tax set aside for state parks funded almost all of that maintenance (\$1.2 million) and 30% of the weed management.

Any development at state parks beyond maintenance must be approved by the Legislature.³⁶ In FY 2017, the Parks Division spent nearly \$1.3 million in capital projects approved by the Legislature. The projects included road improvements, fencing, campsite upgrades, electrification projects, dust control, latrine replacement, kiosks, and signage, among others.

³⁶ [23-1-126\(4\), MCA](#)

Development is further limited in state parks designated by the Legislature as primitive.³⁸ The 1993 Legislature made the first such designations in House Bill 314, partly in response to a budget crisis. The park system faced a projected \$900,000 deficit resulting from an array of financial setbacks including the payout of staff compensatory time, cuts to general fund monies, an overpayment of the motorboat fuel tax by the Department of Revenue that had to be repaid, and low waters on the Smith River in 1992 that affected fee collections.³⁹

An exhibit presented by the bill's sponsor, Rep. Bob Raney, laid out three policy options. The first two -- closing and selling parks -- carried financial implications for sites acquired with federal funds. With the Primitive Parks Act, the Legislature chose a version of the third option: reduce spending on low priority parks that had no or minimal development or budget.⁴⁰ The estimated long-term savings of a "developmental freeze" at these sites was \$6 million.⁴¹

The exhibit acknowledged a challenging dichotomy in the attitudes of Montanans. Half of residents wanted primitive facilities and seemed "not to support better quality" facilities, while the other half wanted "much better facilities", as did nonresident visitors.⁴²

The 1993 Legislature heavily debated which parks should be deemed primitive before passing the final version of HB 314 -- removing, for instance, Frenchtown, Thompson Chain of Lakes, and West Shore and adding Madison Buffalo Jump and Natural Bridge. Legislators amended the list again in 1995 and 2011. Below is a comparison of the designations over time.

Primitive Parks, 1993

Ackley Lake
Beaverhead Rock
Council Grove
Deadman's Basin
Lambeth (Lake Mary Ronan)
Lost Creek
Madison Buffalo Jump
Medicine Rocks
Missouri Headwaters
Natural Bridge
Painted Rocks
Pirogue Island
Sluice Boxes
Thompson Falls
Wild Horse Island

Primitive Parks, 1995

Ackley Lake
Beaverhead Rock
Big Pine Mgmnt area (FAS)
Council Grove
Deadman's Basin
~~Lambeth (Lake Mary Ronan)~~
Lost Creek
Madison Buffalo Jump
Medicine Rocks
Missouri Headwaters
Natural Bridge
Painted Rocks
Pirogue Island
Sluice Boxes
Thompson Falls
Wild Horse Island

Primitive Parks, 2011

~~Ackley Lake~~
Beaverhead Rock
Big Pine Mgmnt area (FAS)
Council Grove
~~Deadman's Basin~~
~~Lost Creek~~
Madison Buffalo Jump
Medicine Rocks
Missouri Headwaters
~~Natural Bridge~~
~~Painted Rocks~~
Pirogue Island
Sluice Boxes
~~Thompson Falls~~
Tower Rock
Wild Horse Island

³⁸ [23-1-116, MCA](#)

³⁹ Minutes, House Fish & Game Committee, February 9, 1993, exhibit 4.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Minutes, House Fish & Game Committee, February 9, 1993, exhibit 8.

⁴² Minutes, House Fish & Game Committee, February 9, 1993, exhibit 4.

Of the ten sites now designated as primitive, one is currently managed as a fishing access site by the DFWP's Fisheries Division. Big Pine Management Area is located on Fish Creek.

In 1995, Rep. Raney proposed including Big Pine in the second iteration of the primitive parks list so that there would still be 15 such sites after Lambeth (Lake Mary Ronan) was removed to allow for needed improvements there. Some legislators contended Montana could make do with just 14 primitive parks, but Big Pine's selling points were its eight primitive camping sites, popularity with anglers and wedding parties, and the fact that it is home to the biggest ponderosa pine in the state.⁴³

The only developments allowed at primitive parks are:

- necessary improvements required to meet minimum sanitation standards;
- improvements necessary to ensure the safe public use of boat ramps and docks;
- addition of gravel to existing unpaved roads and the resurfacing of paved roads when necessary to ensure safe public access;
- establishment of new trails or improvement of trails;
- any measures required for land management, including forestry;
- installation of minimal signage indicating that the park is a designated primitive park in which development has been limited and encouraging the public to help in maintaining the park's primitive character by packing out trash; and
- development of camp host pads that include a septic vault and electrical service.⁴⁴

Forestry Program

The 2009 Legislature passed [House Bill 42](#), requiring the DFWP to address fire mitigation, pine beetle infestation, and wildlife habitat enhancement on all of its lands including state parks. With a priority on treating forest lands larger than 50 acres, the bill requires any revenue to be reinvested in future projects.

In 2011, the Legislature added a provision in [House Bill 619](#) requiring the DFWP to calculate an annual sustainable yield⁴⁵ on its forested lands. The calculation found that about 151,000 DFWP acres have potential commercial forest value with 37.7% available for harvest. State parks had 6,344 of the harvestable acres. More than half are within Fish Creek and Thompson Chain of Lakes.⁴⁶

The State Parks and Recreation Board and the Fish and Wildlife Commission must adopt a forest management plan based on that yield. The DFWP prepared a single programmatic plan to provide consistent direction and guidance for developing property-specific management plans, implementing projects, and identifying priorities.

⁴³ Minutes, House Fish & Game Committee, March 23, 1995, pages 6 and 7.

⁴⁴ The 2011 Legislature authorized host pads via [Senate Bill 43](#).

⁴⁵ [87-1-622, MCA](#), defines "annual sustainable yield" as the quantity of timber that can be harvested each year, taking into account the ability of forested lands to generate replacement tree growth and any applicable state and federal laws pertaining to wildlife, recreation, maintenance of watersheds, and water quality standards that protect fisheries and aquatic life.

⁴⁶ Mason, Bruce & Girard, Inc., [State of Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks 2013 Forest Inventory and Sustained Yield Calculation](#), December 31, 2013, pages vi-viii.

The Commission recently approved putting the [draft plan](#) out for public comment through September 18. Final consideration of the plan is tentatively scheduled for early 2018.

Heritage Resource Program

Montana's state park system manages more National Historic Landmarks (seven) than any other state park system west of the Mississippi River, apart from California. The system includes 20 heritage properties (see sidebar); the state established 15 with the primary purpose of preserving their cultural resource values.⁴⁸

The Parks Division hired its first heritage resources program specialist in 2007. The program is responsible for complying with the State Antiquities Act in all 55 parks, artifact collection and database management and oversight, site stewardship, protection and resource management, staff training, and public outreach and interpretation.

In February 2017, the Parks Division published its [Heritage Resources Strategic Plan](#) for 2017-2024 to help better integrate heritage resource management and preservation within park operations, and to expand the knowledge and appreciation of the diversity of significant resources within the parks.

The objectives of the plan are to:

- evaluate strengths, challenges, and critical resource needs of the heritage resource program and its existing capacity;
- identify best practices in heritage resource management to achieve maximum effectiveness; and
- develop direction for balanced management priorities across the park system and recommendations for improving statewide coordination and management.

MONTANA STATE PARKS HERITAGE PROPERTIES

Anaconda Smoke Stack

Bannack

Beaverhead Rock

Chief Plenty Coups

Clark's Lookout

Council Grove

Elkhorn

First Peoples Buffalo
Jump

Fort Owen

Giant Springs

Granite

Madison Buffalo Jump

Makoshika

Medicine Rocks

Milltown

Missouri Headwaters

Pictograph Cave

Rosebud Battlefield

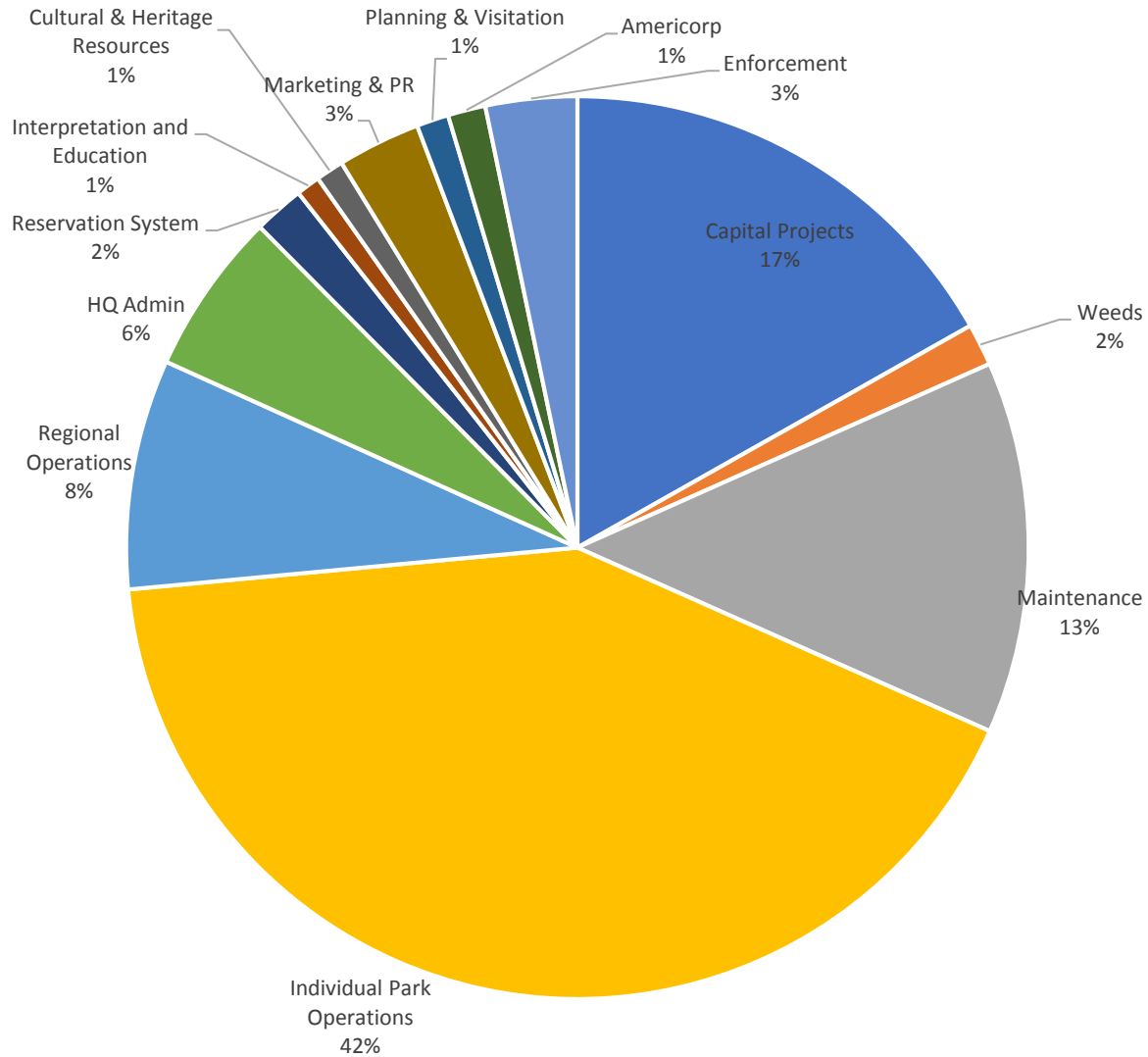
Tower Rock

Travelers' Rest

Financial Overview

Operation and administration of state parks accounted for nearly 82% of the Parks Division's total expenditures in FY 2017. A chart breaking down these \$10.2 million in expenditures is below.

State Parks Expenditures, FY 2017
\$10.2 million



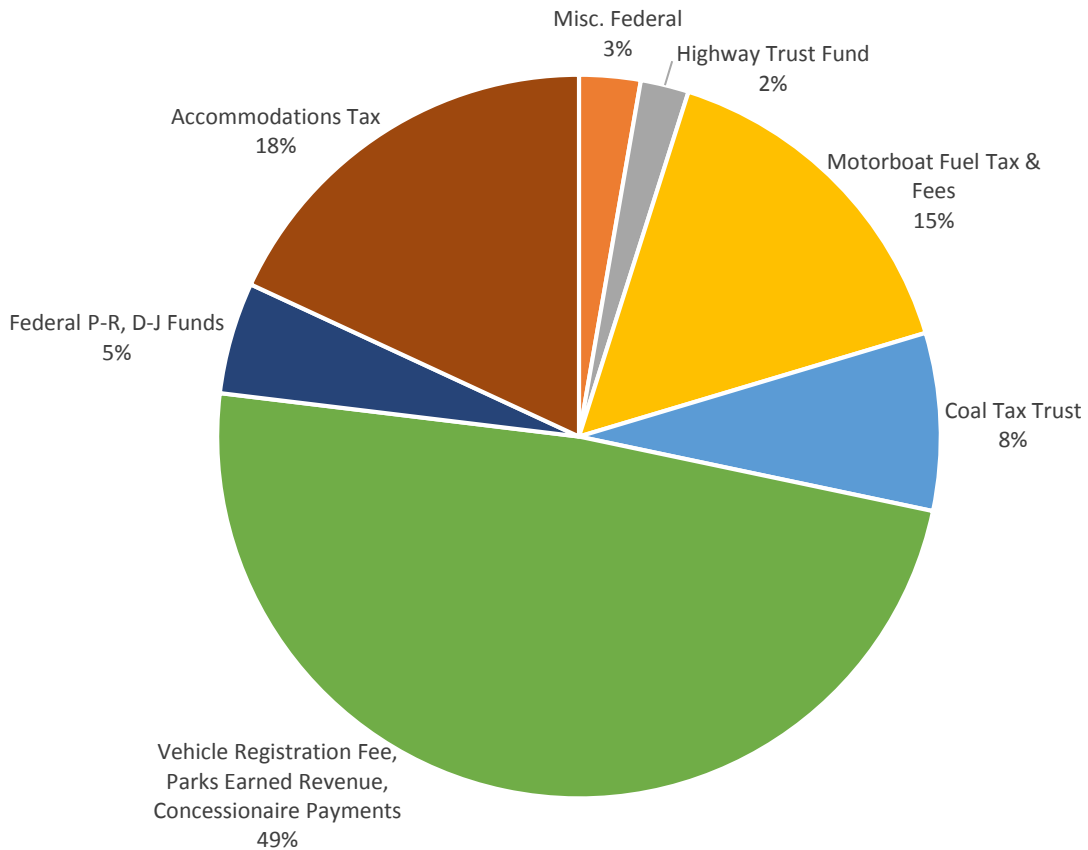
The operation of individual parks accounts for 42% of the expenditures with 78.5% of that (\$3.35 million) spent on personal services. Just over 65% of the FTE serving state parks work in individual parks.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ These figures do not include the 4 enforcement FTE paid for by the Parks Division.

As shown below, nearly half of the funding for state parks (\$4.95 million) comes from the light motor vehicle registration fee dedicated to state parks, user fees, and concessionaire payments.

State Parks Funding Sources, FY 2017

\$10.2 million



The light motor vehicle registration fee was enacted in [Senate Bill 336](#) by the 2003 Legislature. The registration fee replaced day-use fees paid by Montana residents to access state parks. Those who do not use state parks can opt not to pay the now \$6 fee.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Currently, pursuant to [61-3-321\(19\)](#), MCA, \$5.37 of the fee supports state parks, 25 cents supports fishing access sites, and 38 cents goes to state-owned facilities at Virginia and Nevada Cities. As originally passed in 2003, the then \$4 fee dedicated \$3.50 to state parks and 25 cents each to fishing access sites and Virginia and Nevada Cities.

As shown below, 16 state parks have annual expenditures exceeding \$100,000.

State Parks With Expenditures > \$100,000

	State Park, FY 2017	Expenditures	FTE	Region
1	Lewis and Clark Caverns	\$ 419,759.38	7.88	3
2	Flathead Lake	\$ 319,087.74	5.43	1
3	Tongue River	\$ 284,033.26	3.37	5
4	Bannack	\$ 264,467.90	3.73	3
5	Hell Creek	\$ 229,149.60	2.99	5
6	First Peoples	\$ 202,636.60	3.42	4
7	Cooney	\$ 183,954.39	1.95	3
8	Makoshika	\$ 167,647.64	2.57	5
9	Pictograph Cave	\$ 166,931.64	2.6	5
10	Smith River	\$ 163,284.72	1.65	4
11	Missouri Headwaters	\$ 135,648.24	2.17	3
12	Travelers Rest	\$ 132,322.38	1.53	2
13	Chief Plenty Coups	\$ 124,777.41	2.11	5
14	Black Sandy	\$ 118,121.47	1.68	4
15	Lake Elmo	\$ 116,668.46	2	5
16	Lone Pine	\$ 108,511.46	1.47	1

A peer analysis⁵¹ conducted in conjunction with development of the 2015-2020 strategic plan found that Montana state parks were at 64% of the peer states’ funding levels and 68% of the peer states’ field staff levels.⁵²

In addition, Montana state parks have significant infrastructure needs. Facility condition inventories conducted in 2015 identified almost \$23 million in infrastructure repairs and upgrades needed at 34 parks.⁵³

Common issues and observations at the visited sites included:

- septic maintenance schedules that are less frequent than industry standards;
- noncompliant and/or dangerous electrical additions/repairs;
- garbage canisters, ice machines, maintenance equipment, materials storage, staff personal property, and other behind-the-scenes features that are visible or accessible to the public;
- gravity-fed drain fields serving beyond the typical 20-year design life cycle with no plans for replacement;
- lack of handicap accessible infrastructure;
- fish station solid waste and wastewater disposal problems;

⁵¹ The analysis compared Montana state parks to those in North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming, and Idaho.

⁵² [Final Peer Analysis Report for Montana State Parks](#), 2015, pages 4 and 5.

⁵³ [Montana Heritage Resources Strategic Plan](#), 2017-2024, page 7.

- infrequent paint maintenance and other building envelope deterioration;
- numerous pumps in operation well past serviceable lives with no backups or replacements on hand;
- deteriorated comfort stations;
- wood shake roofs at, nearing, or past serviceable life;
- “small” in-house construction projects not built to aesthetic or International Building Code longevity standards (e.g., additions, decks, entries, ramps, shelters); and
- ventilation and ADA-compliance issues in comfort stations.

The 2017 Legislature approved major infrastructure spending for state parks in House Bill 5 for the coming biennium:

- \$2.2 million in electrical upgrades at Lewis and Clark Caverns
- \$2 million for maintenance with a priority on projects addressing sanitation and safety concerns
- \$1.65 million in cultural preservation at Bannack, including a fire alarm system
- \$2.1 million for road repairs at Makoshika

The 2017 Legislature also diverted state parks funds for the following purposes:

- \$2 million to the Montana Department of Transportation for the Garfield County road leading to Hell Creek north of Jordan
- \$2 million for maintenance and repair work on state-owned facilities at Virginia and Nevada Cities

Those appropriations and transfers reduced the ending fund balance in the parks accounts. Given that balance and the expectation that future expenditures will outpace revenues, the 2017 Legislature asked for a fuller accounting of the Parks Division’s budget in the 2019 session.

Instead of starting 2019 discussing proposed changes to the previous budget, known as the “base” budget, the Legislature will discuss every component of the base budget itself, in addition to any proposed changes. The DFWP must provide this information for the Parks Division as a whole and for each individual park.

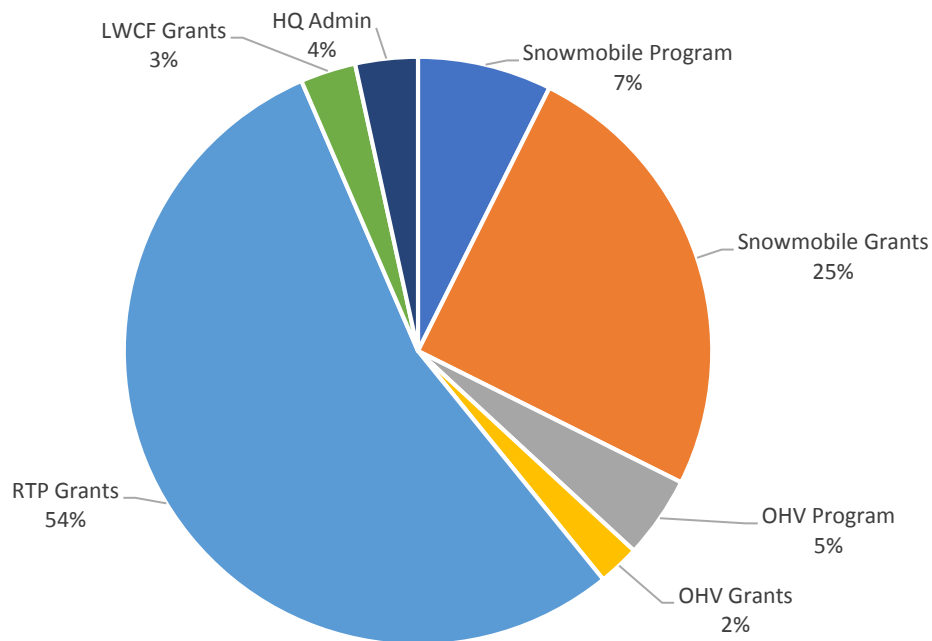
Outdoor Recreation Programs

Financial Overview

The State Parks Division administers four state and federal outdoor recreation programs (Land and Water Conservation Fund, Recreational Trails, Snowmobile, and Off-Highway Vehicle) that offer myriad recreational opportunities. These programs are separate from Montana's state parks and funded through different sources.

In FY 2017, the four recreation programs saw expenditures of \$2.27 million. Eighty-four percent of that was for grants awarded to particular recreation projects and activities. Eleven percent was for the 3.93 FTE that administer the programs.

Recreation Program and Grant Expenditures, FY 2017
\$2.27 million



Land & Water Conservation Fund Grants

In 1965, Congress established the Land & Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) to provide grants to federal, state, and local governments for the acquisition and development of public outdoor recreation areas and facilities, as well as funding for shared land acquisition and conservation strategies.

The LWCF is funded with revenue from the disposal of federal surplus property, certain user fees, and a portion of the federal royalties from offshore oil and gas production. The maximum that can be appropriated nationwide in any one year is \$900 million.

After much debate in 2015, Congress reauthorized the LWCF for 3 years, appropriating \$450 million to the program in 2016. The amount for 2017 has yet to be finalized.

Any political subdivision of the state or tribal government may apply for a grant. The project sponsor must own or have effective control of the site in the form of a long-term lease. Examples of eligible projects include ball fields, open space acquisitions, golf courses, public parks, swimming pools, skating rinks, playgrounds, picnic facilities, snowmobile facilities, and walking trails. Facilities directly supporting outdoor recreation areas, such as restrooms and maintenance sheds, are also eligible.

Since 1965, Montana has distributed nearly \$45 million in LWCF funds to more than 900 projects across the state. The Parks Division says most of the public tennis courts and swimming pools in Montana were built with some LWCF money.

The maximum grant per project may not exceed \$150,000 and may provide up to 50% of a project's total costs. Funds are not available for operation and maintenance costs. Once LWCF funds are used in development or acquisition, the entire recreational site must be managed for outdoor recreation in perpetuity.

Montana's [2014-2018 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan](#) implemented a rating system, which is used by the state's LWCF selection committee to rank grant applicants. Projects that are useable for more months of the year, that provide both active and passive recreational opportunities for a variety of uses, and that seek to acquire new recreational areas rather than develop existing ones receive more points.

Applicants also must survey the public in the project service area to determine the public's propensity to engage in the primary activity provided by the project and the public's desire for the proposed project.

Montana has two LWCF grant categories: small (\$24,999 or less) and large (\$25,000) or more. The National Park Service reviews the top scoring applications from each category and must approve the selected projects.

Between 2009 and 2016, disbursements in Montana averaged \$363,679. The Parks Division did not award grants in FY 2017 but says as much as \$769,913 could be disbursed to communities in FY 2018. However, the division is still waiting to learn exactly how much LWCF money Montana will receive in the coming year.

The division plans to hold LWCF funds in reserve in FY 2018 so that \$500,000 is available for a potential 20-acre expansion at Traveler's Rest and \$350,000 may be used for the electrical improvement project at Lewis and Clark Caverns as approved by the 2017 Legislature for the coming biennium

The division attributes .05 FTE to the LWCF program. A full FTE is needed, but the previous allocation was moved to enforcement duties about 5 years ago. With a full FTE, the division says it could improve its LWCF compliance work. Right now, the division says it's "just making LWCF fit" within existing resources to get grants out the door.

SCORP

To be eligible to receive LWCF funds, each state must prepare a Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) every 5 years. Most SCORPs address the demand for and supply of recreation resources within a state, identify needs and new opportunities for

recreation improvements, and set forth an implementation program to meet the identified goals.

The Parks Division led the effort to develop Montana's 2014-2018 SCORP, which was developed with the help of a 12-person advisory committee and various research and data resources from several state agencies.

The SCORP identifies four recreational challenges: the declining priority of outdoor recreation, decreased funding and resources, increased maintenance costs, and lack of statewide coordination.

A survey conducted during the development of the SCORP found:⁵⁴

- 95% of Montanans say outdoor recreation is important to their quality of life;
- 75% of Montanans use paths and trails for hiking, walking, jogging, and bicycling;
- 37% of recreation managers reported a decrease in recreation funding over the previous 5 years;
- 61% of Montana adults and 21% of high school students are overweight or obese;
- Aquatic facilities and hiking and biking trails are top needs to meet growing demands;
- Motorized recreation grew significantly with a 300% increase in OHV registration and a nearly 200% increase in snowmobile registration since 2000; and
- Youth and future generations are the top influencing issue for recreation management decision-making.

The key priorities identified by the SCORP are:⁵⁵

- **Improve the quality of life of all Montanans** by strengthening connections between outdoor recreation, healthy lifestyles, public safety, and livable communities;
- **Sustain economic vitality** by assessing and adapting to the growing recreation and tourism demands and changing preferences of residents and visitors, and promoting the benefits of recreation to state and local economies;
- **Promote stewardship and sustainability** by protecting and enhancing Montana's natural, cultural, and heritage assets by growing a responsible recreation land ethic among residents and visitors, and by developing creative solutions to provide adequate funds for routine and preventative maintenance of current facilities, as well as expanded development to meet the growing needs of residents and visitors; and
- **Enhance agency service provision** by promoting a seamless system of coordinated management among recreation providers and agencies at all levels.

Recreational Trails Program

More than half (\$1.24 million) of the overall recreation program funds expended by the Parks Division in FY 2017 were for the Recreational Trails Program (RTP), a federally-funded grant program that helps develop and maintain recreational trails and trail-related facilities across the country. RTP funds come from federal gas taxes paid on non-highway

⁵⁴ [Montana 2014-2018 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan](#), page 7.

⁵⁵ Ibid, page 0210s 12 and 13.

recreational fuel used in off-highway vehicles, including snowmobiles, all-terrain vehicles, off-highway motorcycles, and off-highway light trucks.

The Parks Division assigns 1.25 FTE to the RTP. Personal services accounted for 8% of RTP spending in FY 2017.

Local, state, federal, and tribal agencies, trail clubs, and nonprofit organizations are all eligible to apply for RTP grants. Examples of eligible projects include development of trails and trailside facilities, basic front and backcountry trail maintenance, restoration of areas damaged by trail use, and educational and safety projects related to trails.

There are three grant categories: small (\$20,000 or less), standard (\$20,001-\$45,000), and big (\$90,000). Up to four big grants are available each year. Equipment purchases are an allowed use. Up to five equipment purchases may be awarded in the small grant category and one equipment purchase in each of the standard and big grant categories.

The DFWP administers its RTP funds with help from the State Trails Advisory Committee (see sidebar), which reviews the applications each year.

In 2017, 69 applicants requested \$2.6 million in RTP funding. Ultimately, [54 projects](#) received \$1.66 million. The 2017 big grants were:

- \$90,000 for the Foy's to Blacktail Trail Connector from Herron Park to Blacktail Mountain used by hikers, bikers, and horseback riders near Kalispell
- \$70,000 for trail grooming and maintenance equipment, and weed control by the Bridger Ski Foundation
- \$60,000 for grooming and maintenance of the Rendezvous Ski Trail System by the West Yellowstone Ski Education Foundation
- \$50,000 for trail construction at and renovation of Syringa Park by the Missoula Parks and Recreation Department

RTP grants require a 20% match by the applicant with 5% from nonfederal sources.

Legal public access to trails and facilities developed with RTP funds is required. If a project is not entirely on public land, the applicant must include an owner-signed legal easement or lease agreement valid for a minimum of 15

STATE TRAILS ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The State Trails Advisory Committee advises the DFWP on trail issues related to funding, provision of, development, renovation, maintenance, usage, and promotion of recreational trails in an environmentally responsible manner.

The committee currently consists of 10 public members, is administered by the DFWP, and receives technical advice from the Governor's Office of Community Service, the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, the Department of Transportation, the Federal Highway Administration, the U.S. Forest Service, and the Bureau of Land Management.

The federal legislation authorizing the RTP funds requires each state to establish an advisory committee that represents motorized and non-motorized trail

SNOWMOBILE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The Snowmobile Advisory Committee advises the DFWP on snowmobile issues related to funding, provision of, development, renovation, maintenance, usage, and promotion of snowmobile trails in Montana.

The committee consists of five public members, is administered by the DFWP, and receives technical advice from the U.S. Forest Service and the Montana Snowmobile Association.

years. Projects on public land require documented approval from the land manager and at least 5 years of assured access. The scoring committee places higher value on longer term easements and agreements that have the potential of being in perpetuity.

Snowmobile Program

The snowmobile program provides grants and snowmobile education activities, accounting for nearly a third (\$736,355) of the Parks Division's expenditures in FY 2017. This includes 1.63 FTE.

The program began in the early 1970's and, while focused on snowmobiling, supports other types of motorized and non-motorized winter recreational activities. That's because the program's grants support trail grooming activities that provide access and opportunity for many other users, including cross-country skiers, snowboarders, dog-sledders, snowshoers, and many others.

On the education front, the program distributes the [Montana Snowmobile Handbook](#), which provides information on the basics of snowmobiling, Montana's laws for the sport, snowmobile maintenance, protecting the environment, safety and riding tips, and Montana's snowmobile clubs and other resources.

The program includes five state parks employees who serve as local snowmobile coordinators in the Kalispell, Missoula, Seeley Lake, Bozeman, and Great Falls areas. They inspect grant-funded trails, work as liaisons with snowmobile clubs, and participate in club education programs such as avalanche training and awareness.

The snowmobile grants may be awarded to snowmobiling clubs for trail grooming, the purchase and repair of grooming-related equipment, and safety education. The grants are funded with a percentage of the state gas tax paid by snowmobile users, snowmobile permanent registration fees, a resident groomed snowmobile trail pass, and non-resident snowmobile temporary use permits.

Applications for the 2017-18 winter season are currently under review. About \$410,000 is available. In 2016-2017, [the program awarded \\$433,000](#). The five largest grants were:

- \$81,329 to the West Yellowstone Chamber of Commerce

- \$35,436 to the Upper Yellowstone Snowmobile Club in Cooke City
- \$32,104 to the Missoula Snowgoers
- \$26,332 to the Gallatin Valley Snowmobile Association in Bozeman
- \$24,170 to the Kings Hill Grooming Association in the Great Falls area

Since the Legislature enacted HB 300 in 2013, creating the resident groomed snowmobile trail pass, the program increased grooming grant awards by 12% and funded the refurbishment of the Beaverhead Snowmobile Club’s groomer in Polaris.

Twenty-five snowmobile clubs receive grant funding each year. The clubs groom an estimated 4,000 miles of trail throughout the state. The majority of designated trails are on public lands, predominately U.S. Forest Service lands.

Clubs must conduct trail inspections a couple of times per month as part of their safety program. This is in addition to random inspections conducted by the program’s snowmobile coordinators. Inspections are intended to keep track of trail and trailhead conditions, including whether trails are properly groomed, and to help locate and mitigate hazards and to replace missing signs.

As of 2015, the DFWP requires worker’s compensation coverage for club volunteers who perform grooming activities funded by the program. Clubs with payroll expenses and worker’s comp policies must add a volunteer endorsement to their policies. Clubs staffed only by volunteers are covered under a DFWP volunteer policy and must submit volunteer agreements and logs annually.

The Parks Division estimates the clubs’ volunteers donate more than 10,000 hours of their time annually to operate Montana’s snowmobile trails.

Research

In 2014, the Bureau of Business and Economic Research (BBER) at the University of Montana published a study commissioned by the Parks Division on snowmobile fuel use and related recreational spending patterns.

The study found that Montanans owned 56,844 registered snowmobiles in 2013, an increase of 81% over 2006. About 8% of households (an estimated 100,000 Montanans) snowmobiled, spending about \$96.3 million each winter. Just over half of that went to gasoline.⁵⁶

Nonresidents accounted for about 97,000 activity days in the 2013-2014 snowmobile season, spending nearly \$14.3 million and supporting about 200 winter jobs.⁵⁷

Combined, residents and nonresidents bought about 4.3 million gallons of gasoline, generating over \$1.2 million in revenue for the state highway trust fund.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Sylvester, James T., [Montana Recreational Snowmobiles Fuel-Use and Spending Patterns 2013](#), University of Montana Bureau of Business and Economic Research, July 2014, pages 1 and 8.

⁵⁷ Ibid, page 1.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

The study asked surveyed respondents what they thought was the most important issue facing snowmobilers. Sixty-two percent said access, 12% said safety, particularly personal responsibility, and 3% said impact on the environment.⁵⁹

Off-highway Vehicle (OHV) Program

The OHV program is the smallest of the Parks Division's recreational programs, accounting for 7% (\$154,361) of the division's spending in FY 2017. The division assigns 1 FTE to the program, which is funded by OHV fuel taxes and registration and decal fees.

The program provides OHV safety training and grant funding for safety, ethics, education, and resource maintenance, protection, and improvement projects.

In 2017, 12 applicants requested \$171,000. Ultimately, 10 projects received \$110,000. The four largest awards were:

- \$20,000 for the On the Right Trail OHV Ethics & Education Program by the Montana Trail Vehicle Riders Association
- \$14,000 for a trail technician and trail maintenance in the Pintler Ranger District of the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest
- \$13,000 for a trail steward for the Bureau of Land Management's Butte Field Office
- \$13,000 for critical repair and maintenance for motorized trails #2850 and #2091 on Big Pryor Mountain by the Beartooth Ranger District of the Custer-Gallatin National Forest

Research

In 2014, the BBER published a study commissioned by the Parks Division on OHV fuel use and related recreational spending patterns.

The study found about 77,200 OHVs registered for off-highway use in Montana in 2013. Used for pleasure and work, OHV-owning households have an average of two machines and spend between 4.2 million and 5.9 million

OFF-HIGHWAY VEHICLE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The Off-Highway Vehicle Advisory Committee advises the DFWP on the distribution of OHV grant funds and provides recommendations on OHV-related issues, including safety and ethics education.

The committee consists of five public members representing both user groups and land management agencies. The committee is administered by the DFWP and receives technical advice from the U.S. Forest Service, and the Bureau of Land Management.

days recreating, nearly quadruple the days reported in 2007.⁶⁰

In 2013, residents spent about \$208 million per year on OHV activities, nearly triple the expenditures reported in 2007. More than 80% of their costs are for gasoline. The report estimates that OHV users buy about 6.6 million gallons of gasoline per year, generating over \$1.8 million in revenue for the state highway trust fund.⁶¹

The study was unable to estimate impacts from nonresident OHV users due to the dispersed nature of their OHV use in Montana.

The study asked surveyed OHV users what they think is the most important issue facing OHV recreation. Fifty-eight percent said access to trails, 12% said safety, 10% said personal responsibility, and 3% said impact on the environment.⁶²

State Trails Plan

The Montana State Trails Plan, developed between October 1993 and April 2001, was a first attempt to provide long-term, interagency direction for the statewide public trail system, including nonmotorized and motorized trails, except snowmobile trails.

The long-term vision for trail-based recreation in Montana is to:

*maintain and develop a trail system that is an integral component of outdoor recreation in Montana; that meets or exceeds user expectations; that provides a variety of readily accessible public trails, in a wide range of settings; and maximizes opportunities for a wide range of trail uses, while minimizing conflict and protecting natural and cultural resources.*⁶³

Coordinated by the DFWP, the trails plan was not intended to usurp other management plans and planning processes, but to provide managers with information about the trail system and the people who use it and to produce strategic recommendations on trail issues and needs.

The trails plan established the following goals:⁶⁴

- Improved access to public trails and lands
- More local trails, greenways, and trail connections for recreation and transportation in, around, and between populated urban areas
- Develop urban trail linkages between residences, parks, and other recreational facilities, schools, historic and cultural sites, open space, shopping areas, and other important community destinations
- Reduced trail-related impacts on natural and cultural resources through avoidance and mitigation

⁶⁰ Sylvester, James T., [Montana Recreational Off-Highway Vehicles Fuel-Use and Spending Patterns 2013](#), University of Montana Bureau of Business and Economic Research, July 2014, pages 1 and 8.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid, page 6.

⁶³ [Montana State Trails Plan Executive Summary](#), page S-3.

⁶⁴ Ibid, pages S-4 through S-7.

- A diverse trail system for a wide variety of uses in all parts of Montana
- Improved trail-related funding at all levels of government
- A trail system that is maintained in a safe, attractive, and environmentally-sound manner with no net loss of mileage due to lack of maintenance or other causes. Maintenance levels should be appropriate to the amount and type of use the site receives, and reflect the type of experience trail users desire.
- Trail management processes that consider all important issues, actively involve the public, and entertain a range of management alternatives
- Improved enforcement of trail regulations and a reduced need for enforcement by improving the behavior of all trail users
- Reduced conflicts and increased compatibility between users
- A safe and diverse trail system in which liability concerns among managing agencies and private landowners are reduced
- Improved trail-related communication, coordination, and mutual understanding within and between managing agencies, users, and others
- Ready access to information, maps, and signs
- Improved training and education to diminish conflicts and resource impacts and to improve ethics and safety
- More effective use of existing linear corridors (e.g., rail trails, utility corridors)
- More nonmotorized transportation trails, especially in urban areas
- A diversity of options for elderly and disabled trail users
- A strategically located and well-designed trailhead network, in which development is appropriate to the type and volume of use
- Research and data collection to provide facts about trail use, conflicts, user preferences, environmental conditions, and other information
- Trail networks designed to be interesting and integrated, offering access to a wide range of related outdoor activities in varied settings

A statewide trail inventory conducted in 1994 by the University of Montana's Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research in concert with development of the trails plan found 2,294 public trails in Montana totaling 14,633 linear miles. The U.S. Forest Service managed 90% of the trails and 92% of the trail miles, concentrated in western Montana. The National Park Service had 6% of the trail miles while the Bureau of Land Management managed 1%. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, local, state, and tribal governments, the University of Montana, and private entities managed the other 1% of trail miles.⁶⁵

The Parks Division initiated a multi-phase effort to update its trails inventory about 2 years ago. In the first phase, the division gathered data on all of the 138 miles of trail located within state parks. A handful of maps still need to be finalized. Once the maps are fully proofed, they will be available on the state parks' Web site.

The second phase of the inventory concentrated on motorized trails used in winter. By this winter, the DFWP expects to distribute maps for almost all of the trails groomed by the 25 snowmobile clubs in Montana.

There are nearly 3,480 miles of snowmobile trails currently recorded in the DFWP's online [Snowmobile Recreation Planner](#). Of those, nearly 79% are on Forest Service land, 12% are on private land, 4% are on state trust lands, and nearly 2% are on DFWP lands. Just over half of those miles are groomed regularly while 22% are groomed intermittently and 24.5% are not groomed.

The next phase of the Parks Division's trail inventory will look at motorized and nonmotorized trails used in summer. This is a much larger undertaking due to the various types and uses of trails.

Acronyms Used in This Report

BBER	Bureau of Business and Economic Research, University of Montana
CCC	Civilian Conservation Corp
DFWP	Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks
FAS	Fishing Access Site
FTE	Full time equivalent
FY	Fiscal Year
HR	Human Resources
LWCF	Land and Water Conservation Fund
O&M	Operations and Maintenance
OHV	Off-highway vehicle
P-R	Pittman-Robertson
RTP	Recreational Trails Program
SCORP	Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan