



Region 2 Headquarters  
3201 Spurgin Road  
Missoula, MT 59804  
Phone 406-542-5500

August 6, 2020

Dear Interested Citizen:

Enclosed you will find for your review the Draft Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Montana State Parks (a division of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks; FWP) proposal to acquire fee-title acquisition to an approximately 0.9-acre property (parcel) located immediately south of Fort Owen State Park (SP), which is located 1-mile northwest of the Town of Stevensville in Ravalli County. The parcel, currently owned by MGY Ranch, Inc., would be acquired and added to FWP's existing 1.0-acre Fort Owen SP, in hopes of later developing a parking area for the SP. FWP would also discharge (abandon) a small portion of its public roadway easement immediately east of the current park boundary. The proposed partial discharge would better protect the adjacent landowner's privacy and better delineate the park boundaries. The remainder of the roadway easement would stay intact and would lead the public to a potential new parking area for the SP.

The EA may also be obtained by:

- mail from Region 2 FWP, 3201 Spurgin Rd., Missoula 59804;
- phoning 406-542-5540;
- emailing [shrose@mt.gov](mailto:shrose@mt.gov);
- viewing FWP's Internet website <http://fwp.mt.gov> ("News," then "Recent Public Notices"); or
- viewing Montana State Parks website <http://stateparks.mt.gov/> ("Public Comment & Notices").

Comments may be made online on the EA's webpages or may be directed by mail or email to the addresses above. Comments must be received by FWP no later than September 4, 2020.

As part of the decision-making process under the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA), I expect to issue the Decision Notice for this EA very soon after the end of the comment period. The Montana State Parks and Recreation Board has the final decision-making authority for FWP's state park acquisitions, and tentatively the Board would be asked to render its decision on this proposal at its regularly scheduled September 17, 2020 meeting. (See State Parks webpage <http://stateparks.mt.gov/>, for further information on Board meetings.)

Sincerely,

Randy Arnold  
Regional Supervisor

RA/sr

# DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT PROPOSED LAND ACQUISITION FOR FORT OWEN STATE PARK

August 2020



Region 2 State Parks  
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks  
3201 Spurgin Rd, Missoula, MT 59804



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>1.0 Purpose of and Need for Action</b>	3
1.1 Type of Proposed State Action	3
1.2 Name of Project	5
1.3 Agency Authority and Responsibility for the Proposed Action	5
1.4 Relevant Plans	5
1.5 Location and Project Size	5
1.6 Permits, Funding and Overlapping Jurisdiction	6
1.7 Narrative Summary of the Proposed Action	6
1.8 Objectives of the Proposed Action	7
<b>2.0 Alternatives</b>	7
2.1 Alternative A--Proposed Action	7
2.2 Alternative B--No Action	7
2.3 Alternative Considered or Suggested but Eliminated from Further Analysis	7
<b>3.0 Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences</b>	8
3.1 Land Use	8
3.2 Aesthetics, Recreational and Educational Opportunities	8
3.3 Vegetation	8
3.4 Wildlife Species	9
3.5 Soils	10
3.6 Air Quality	10
3.7 Cultural and Historic Resources	10
3.8 Community and Taxes	12
3.9 Cumulative Impacts	12
<b>4.0 Resource Issues Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Analysis</b>	13
<b>5.0 Need for an Environmental Impact Statement</b>	13
<b>6.0 Public Participation</b>	13
6.1 Public Involvement	13
6.2 Duration of Comment Period	14
6.3 Timeline of Events	14
6.4 Offices/Programs Contacted or Contributing to this Document	15
<b>7.0 EA Preparation</b>	15
<b>Exhibit A: Tourism Report</b>	16

## 1.0 PURPOSE OF AND NEED FOR ACTION

### 1.1. Type of Proposed State Action

Montana State Parks, a Division of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (Department or FWP), proposes to acquire fee-title acquisition to an approximately 0.9-acre property (parcel) located immediately south of Fort Owen State Park (SP), which is located 1-mile northwest of Stevensville in Ravalli County (Figure 1). The parcel, currently owned by MGY Ranch, Inc., would be acquired and added to Department's existing 1.0-acre Fort Owen SP (Figure 2). The Department would also discharge (abandon or relinquish) a small portion of its approximately 1.2-acre public roadway easement along the private road immediately east of the current park boundary; this access easement allows the public to travel from public Highway 269 north along the private road to the SP.

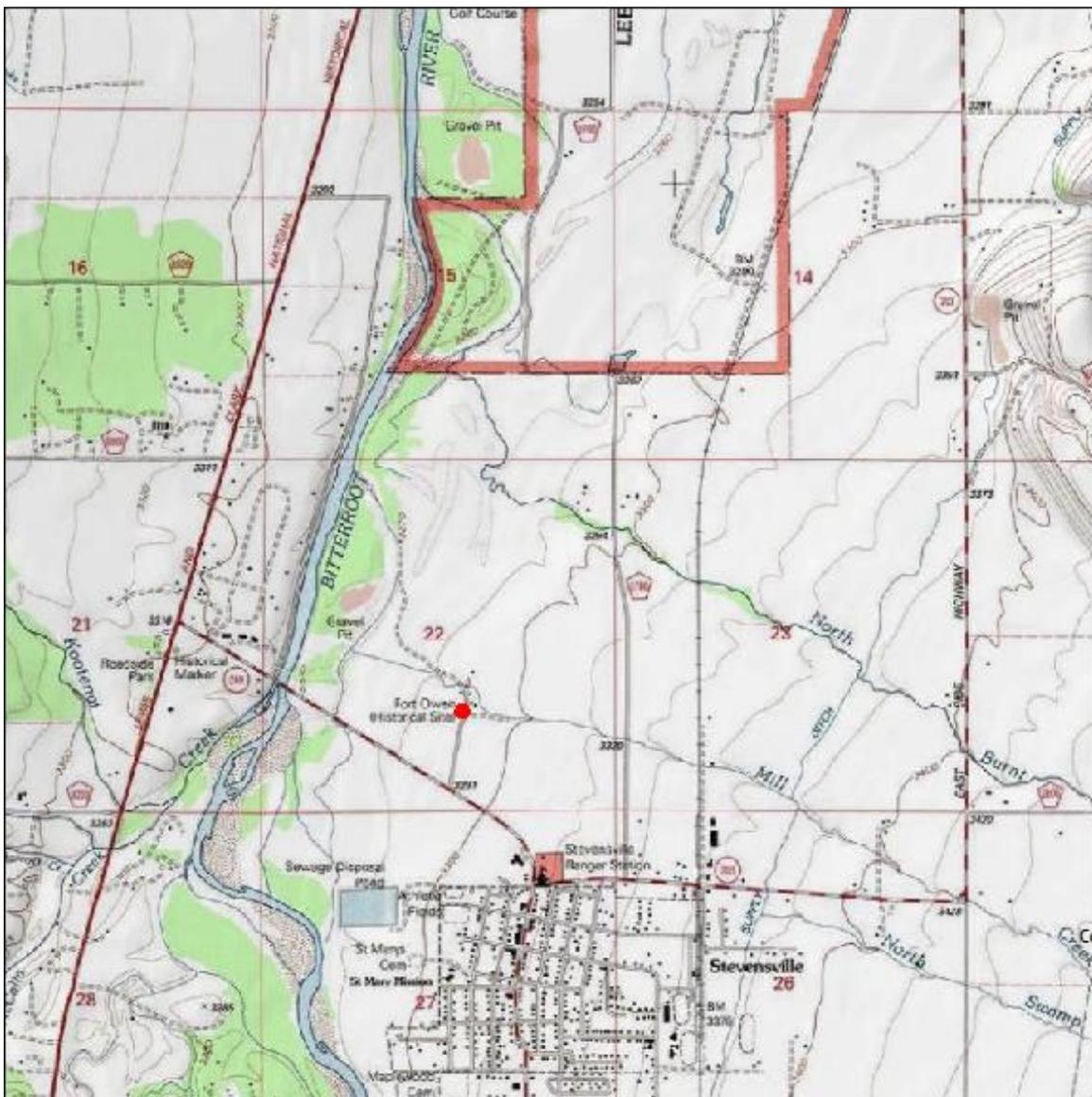


Figure 1. Location (red dot) of Fort Owen State Park, northwest of Stevensville in Ravalli County.



**Figure 2.** Approximate boundaries of the proposed addition (Tract B, red line) to existing Fort Owen State Park (Tract A, black line) and the portion of access easement to be abandoned (Tract C, blue line).

Approximately 25 miles south of Missoula on US Highway 93, Fort Owen SP visitors turn east at Stevensville Junction onto Secondary Highway 269 (Stevensville Cutoff Road) and proceed 0.9-mile east to the SP access road on the north side of Highway 269, and then proceed 0.2-mile north along the access road to the SP--a small parcel surrounded by private ranch and farm land. The long-term plan for this newly acquired parcel would be to develop a parking area that would address decades-long access issues encountered by the public visiting the park, the department, and the adjacent ranch owner.

The development of the parking lot would be addressed in a later, separate Environmental Analysis process, once a cultural resource investigation and consultation with the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) has been completed.

**1.2. Name of Project:** Proposed Land Acquisition for Fort Owen State Park

**1.3. Agency Authority and Responsibility for the Proposed Action**

- Montana State Statute § (Section) 87-1-209, Montana Code Annotated (MCA) allows the Department to “acquire by purchase, . . . lands or waters . . . The department may develop, operate, and maintain acquired lands or waters: . . . for state parks and outdoor recreation . . .”
- Administrative Rules of Montana (ARM) 12.2.428 through 12.2.433 establish procedures for implementing the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA; § 75-1, MCA) in conjunction with the Department’s Environmental Assessments (EAs) and public involvement for proposed FWP actions. This document provides for that public involvement.
- § 23-1-111, MCA, authorizes the Montana State Parks and Recreation Board (Board) to “establish the rules of the department governing the use of these [state park] properties and lands.” This statute also authorizes the Board to “review and approve all acquisitions . . . of interest in these [state park] properties, lands, and waters by the department . . .”
- § 23-1-105, MCA, authorizes FWP to “levy and collect reasonable fees . . . for the use of privileges and conveniences that may be provided [at state parks].”
- This current proposal is only for Department acquisition of land for a state park. For significant improvement or development of a state park, § 23-1-110, MCA, requires additional requirements that FWP must follow and document. (ARM 12.8.601 through 12.8.606 establish the rules for implementing § 23-1-110, MCA.) Additionally, per § 23-1-111, MCA, the Board must “review and approve construction projects that have an estimated cost of more than \$50,000; . . .”

**1.4. Relevant Plans**

While there are no current planning documents related to this project, the preliminary site plan closely resembles a variety of proposals dating back to the 1960s, which were designed to address the issues (and objectives) that remain to this day. The Department would be recording a new certificate of survey in the Ravalli County Clerk and Records Office, reflecting the new park boundary in its entirety, if the preferred alternative is chosen.

**1.5. Location and Project Size**

The project area is located near the Town of Stevensville at 99 Fort Owen Rand Road in Ravalli County.

Legal Description: Township 9 North, Range 20 West, portion of NW4 of SE4 Section 22

Project Size: 0.9 acre

## 1.6. Permits, Funding, and Overlapping Jurisdiction

Listing of any other Local, State or Federal agency that has overlapping or additional jurisdiction.

a. **Permits:** None

b. **Funding:**

<u>Agency Name</u>	<u>Funding Amount</u>
Montana FWP	\$60,000

c. **Other Overlapping Jurisdictional Responsibilities:**

<u>Agency Name</u>	<u>Type of Responsibility</u>
State Historic Preservation Office	Cultural Clearance
Montana State Parks & Recreation Board	Project Approval
Ravalli County Weed District	Weed Management Coordination

## 1.7. Narrative Summary of the Proposed Action (including benefits and purpose of proposed action)

From the time Fort Owen was added to state ownership in the 1950s, the managing agencies, including the Department, have struggled to provide appropriate public access and parking, while also protecting property rights and privacy for the neighboring private landowner. The existing one-acre State Park is surrounded by a private ranch, with ranch traffic and public access along a shared road. (This shared access road leading north from Highway 269 is a private road, but the Department holds a road easement along the road portion from the highway to the north end of the State Park, to allow the public and Department personnel to access the state park.) Given the current configuration, it is nearly impossible for a member of the public or Department staff to park at the site without trespassing on ranch property. In addition, the proximity of ranch buildings, including residences, to the park creates almost a daily privacy and security concern for the ranch residents and visitors. Conversations with owners of the ranch beginning in the 1980s (perhaps earlier) were never able to gain enough traction to lead to a long-term solution.

In late 2017, MGY Ranch, LLC, purchased the private ranch, and discussions were initiated toward finding a solution that would provide consistent legal access for all members of the public, as well as create appropriate separation of public and private lands. The parties have reached agreement where the Department proposes to acquire approximately 0.9 acre of property in fee simple purchase. With this purchase, the Department would then work toward developing a parking area--once a cultural resources survey has been completed and any appropriate protections and mitigation measures have been developed and approved if needed to protect any identified historic resources on this new addition. (Development of a parking lot would involve a later, separate project proposal, including a Draft EA and opportunity for public involvement/ comment.)

As part of the acquisition, the Department would also abandon the portion of the roadway easement located east of and adjacent to the existing park boundary, to ensure the public parks

in the new parking area and not on private ranch property. The Department would retain administrative and emergency access to this portion of the easement to allow for site maintenance and management.

If the project is approved and the acquisition is completed (and no sooner than the end of the current “peak” visitor season on September 8, 2020), Fort Owen State Park would be closed to the public until a cultural resource survey is complete. Following a later, separate project proposal for development of a parking area (including a Draft EA and opportunity for public involvement/ comment)--and if the new parking area project were to be approved and built—then construction could be completed in time for a tentative re-opening date of May 1, 2021.

### **1.8. Objectives of the Proposed Action**

- Provide for appropriate public access and parking;
- Create clear separation between private and public lands;
- Improve the quality of the visitor experience; and
- Improve landowner relations.

## **2.0 ALTERNATIVES**

### **2.1. Alternative A--Proposed Action: The Department would purchase approximately 0.9 acres from MGY Ranch and also discharge a portion of the existing easement for public use.**

Under this alternative, FWP would acquire additional property to incorporate into its existing Fort Owen SP. The Department would also abandon a portion of its current public roadway easement (the portion east of the existing park boundary) along the private access road leading north off Highway 269. The goal of the property acquisition would be to later develop a parking area, through a separate project proposal and EA process.

### **2.2. Alternative B--No Action: The Department would not purchase the property**

If no action is taken, FWP would not purchase the property, and public access and neighbor privacy would continue to be an issue. Due to inadequate parking and restricted access, the public would have limited access to this important historic site and the neighboring landowner would continue to suffer from public intrusion onto private property.

### **2.3. Alternatives Considered or Suggested but Eliminated from Further Analysis**

- Move the historic building to another location. (St. Mary’s Mission, located just west of the Town of Stevensville, has been frequently suggested). This alternative would conflict with historic preservation Best Management Practices that recommend that historic buildings be left in their original location.
- Close the site to public access and continue to maintain historic buildings and preserve cultural resources. This alternative was rejected due to the interest from the public to have access to this important historic site and the willingness of the adjacent landowner to work with the Department to secure a long-term solution.

### 3.0 AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT AND ENVIRONMENT CONSEQUENCES

#### 3.1. LAND USE

The proposed acquisition parcel is part of an agricultural field that has been flood irrigated for hay production and used as pasture land for cattle as part of MGY Ranch. A current road easement for public and Department access to the SP exists from Stevensville Cutoff Road to the north end of the SP boundary.

Alternative A--Proposed Action: The Department would acquire the approximately 0.9-acre parcel in fee simple. The roadway easement would be discharged beyond the current southern boundary of the park parcel along the eastern boundary of the park. This would protect the owner's privacy and greatly reduce confusion over where the public has the right to access the park.

Alternative B--No Action: Under the No Action Alternative, the Department would not acquire the land. The Department would need to consider alternative management strategies such as restricted or no public access.

#### 3.2. Aesthetics, Recreational and Educational Opportunities

The acquisition alone would not greatly impact these opportunities. However, when coupled with the future parking-lot development, the public would see greatly improved recreational and education opportunities.

Alternative A--Proposed Action: Recreation would continue to be managed in accordance with applicable Department rules and regulations, including the Parks Biennial Fee Rule, Commercial Use Administrative Rules, and Commercial Use Permit Fee Rule. The 2020-2024 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP<sup>1</sup>) would also serve as a guide for management and development. The Department would install appropriate boundary, entry and regulation signage, and additional site information would be available via brochures and the FWP's Montana State Parks website (<http://stateparks.mt.gov>) to inform the public of the recreational opportunities and activities within the park.

Alternative B--No Action: If the Department decides not to purchase the parcel, future recreational and educational use of the site would not increase significantly.

#### 3.3. Vegetation

The proposed acquisition parcel is largely comprised of introduced short grasses commonly found on agricultural land in west-central Montana. The elevation of the parcel is approximately 3300 feet throughout.

Invasive weed species are present in very limited areas within the parcel. Exotic weed species include spotted knapweed (*Centaurea maculosa*), leafy spurge (*Euphorbia esula*), common

---

<sup>1</sup> Montana State Parks, a Division of Montana Fish, wildlife & Parks. 2019. Sustaining Montana's outdoor recreation legacy, 2020–2024 statewide comprehensive outdoor recreation plan. Available on Montana State Parks webpage <http://stateparks.mt.gov/about-us/scorp.html?tab=scorp2020#scorp2020SectionHeader> Accessed 1 Aug 2020.

hound's-tongue (*Cynoglossum officinale*), and Canada thistle (*Cirsium arvense*). The primary invasive species found at the existing SP site is kochia (*kochia scoparia*).

Alternative A--Proposed Action: If the Department acquires this parcel, the Department would manage noxious weeds in accordance with the Department's Statewide Integrated Noxious Weed Management Plan<sup>2</sup> (2008) and the Department's Region 2 Parks Division Weed Management Implementation Plan (2010). In accordance with § 7-22-2154, MCA, the Department is required to have the property inspected and to develop a site-specific noxious weed management plan agreement in cooperation with the local weed district. Any isolated patches of invading species would be eradicated by the most efficient and effective means (e.g., hand-pulling, digging and/or herbicide spot treatment), depending on weed species and site limitations. The Department's priority for herbicide control of noxious weeds in the park would be to spray roadsides and previously disturbed areas. Roadsides and trail edges would be inspected annually to detect and eradicate any new weed introductions before infestations become established. As an additional preventive measure, the Department would confine motorized traffic to the existing road system and would otherwise avoid disturbance of the soil surface.

Alternative B--No Action: If the Department did not acquire the new parcel, it is assumed that the current landowner would continue to operate the property as it has for the past many years.

### 3.4. Wildlife Species

The existing Fort Owen State Park and the proposed acquisition represent approximately 2 acres of land mass surrounded by private land. Therefore, it is unlikely that the park itself contains any critical wildlife habitat. However, the park is located less than one mile from Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge and approximately ½ mile from the Bitterroot River. The park is also just outside the boundary of the Bitterroot Important Bird Area (IBA<sup>3</sup>).

Table 1 lists Montana Species of Concern<sup>4</sup> (SOC) and Threatened/Endangered species (US Fish and Wildlife Service status under the Endangered Species Act) that could be predicted to occur within the park, based on its location<sup>5</sup>.

Alternative A--Proposed Action: This proposed project is not expected to have significant impacts to wildlife.

Alternative B No Action: There would not likely be significant impacts to wildlife as long as the property remains in agricultural use.

---

<sup>2</sup> Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. Available on FWP's webpage <http://fwp.mt.gov/fishAndWildlife/habitat/noxiousWeeds/> Accessed 1 Aug 2020.

<sup>3</sup> A program of BirdLife International; Montana Audubon, along with its local Bitterroot and Five Valleys chapters helped identify and designate the Bitterroot River IBA.

<sup>4</sup> A native animal (or plant) breeding in Montana and considered to be "at risk" due to declining population trends, threats to its habitats, and/or restricted distribution. Montana's SOC listing highlights species in decline and encourages conservation efforts to reverse population declines and prevent the need for future listing as Threatened or Endangered Species under the Federal Endangered Species Act. Further information available at <http://fwp.mt.gov/fishAndWildlife/species/speciesOfConcern/> Accessed 1 Aug 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Montana Natural Heritage database Available <http://mtnhp.org/SpeciesOfConcern/?AorP=a>. Accessed January 28, 2020.

**Table 1.** Montana Species of Concern (SOC) and Threatened/ Endangered Species observed or expected to occur on the land proposed for acquisition by the Department

Common name Species	Status*	Habitat	Status in Vicinity of Parcels
<b><u>Species of Concern</u></b>			
Townsend's Big-eared Bat <i>Corynorhinus townsendii</i>	SOC, Tier 3	Caves in forest habitat	Unlikely to occur on site. Poor to non-existent habitat for this species
Little Brown Myotis <i>Myotis lucifugus</i>	SOC, Tier 3	Generalist	Unknown
Great Blue Heron <i>Ardea herodias</i>	SOC, Tier 3	Riparian forest	Not common on site, but common along the Bitterroot River in the area
Bobolink <i>Dolichonyx oryzivorus</i>	SOC, Tier 3B	Moist grasslands	Likely to occur on irrigated fields
Pileated Woodpecker <i>Dryocopus pileatus</i>	SOC, Tier 3	Moist conifer forests	Unlikely to occur on site. Poor to non-existent habitat for this species
Hooked Snowfly <i>Isocapnia crinita</i>	SOC, Tier 3	Mountain streams to rivers	Unlikely to occur on site. Poor to non-existent habitat for this species

\*Tier 1 status identifies those species in greatest conservation need. PSOC are Potential SOC.

### 3.5. Soils

A search of the Natural Resources Conservation Service Web Soil Survey found that the parcel in question includes Owenfort complex soils, a cobbly loam, with somewhat excessively drained soil.

Alternative A--Proposed Action: The acquisition of the parcel and termination of a northern section of the roadway easement would not be expected to have any significant impact on the soils.

Alternative B—No Action: If the Department does not purchase parcel for a later parking area, it is unknown how soils would be affected by future ownership or management.

### 3.6. Air Quality

Alternative A--Proposed Action: The acquisition of the parcel would have no long-term impact on existing or future air quality in the surrounding area.

Alternative B--No Action: If the Department does not purchase the parcel, it is unknown how air quality would be affected by future ownership or management.

### 3.7. Cultural and Historic Resources

From time immemorial, the area around Fort Owen and present-day Stevensville has been a significant part of the ancestral homeland of the Bitterroot Salish people. Beginning in the 1820s, the Salish sent emissaries to the east in search of the “black robes,” who were prophesied to have the ability to provide protection and safety to the Salish people. In 1839, one such expedition reached St. Louis and made contact with Jesuit missionaries. In 1841, a contingent of Jesuits under the leadership of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet arrived in the Bitterroot Valley. There they constructed a church (St. Mary’s Mission) and other structures around the current site of Fort Owen State Park. This was the genesis for the first permanent settlement in Montana.

By 1850, the Jesuits had determined to abandon the site. On November 5, 1850 John Owen leased the property and the improvements for \$250, signing what is the first legal document in Montana. "Major" John Owen took ownership from the Jesuits in 1852 and began to develop what turned into the cultural and commercial center of the region for many years. Owen constructed a sawmill, gristmill and cabins. By the late 1850s, he decided to replace most of the wooden structures with locally sourced adobe construction. Fort Owen became a major trading post, with Owen serving as Indian agent from 1856-1862.

Over the years, Owen developed the Fort area with two adobe barracks; a perimeter wall, constructed first of wood and later of adobe estimated at 12-feet tall and 2-feet thick; two-story bastions along the south wall; and a large, arching wooden gateway at the entrance. Outside of the compound were constructed structures such as an icehouse, barns and warehouses to store the agricultural products produced from the fields and gardens.

Following the death of his wife in 1868, Owen's health, finances and mental state began to deteriorate. By 1872 he had been transferred to St. John's hospital in Helena. In late 1872, Washington J. McCormick purchased the property at sheriff's auction to assist settling Owen's debts. McCormick operated the gristmill and rented the property for many years, but the buildings and amenities associated with Fort Owen deteriorated as the Bitterroot Valley became the agricultural center of west-central Montana. McCormick himself was killed in February 1889 when he was trying to save the roof of the west barracks during a windstorm. The remainder of the west barracks were pulled down for safety reason in the 1890s.

In 1927, Jay McCormick transferred possession of the land containing the ruins of Fort Owen to the Society of Montana Pioneers for \$1. Over the next 30 years, the land passed through many owners who had a mind to restore or preserve this important piece of Montana history. The State of Montana accepted the one-acre parcel in 1956 to become part of the State Parks and Monuments system (now the Parks Division of Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks).

Dr. Carling Malouf began archeological investigations of the site in 1957 and these continued off and on into the 1970s. Fort Owen State Park was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1970. Donald Merritt, as part of a Masters' thesis for the University of Montana's Department of Anthropology in 2010, catalogued more than 5,000 artifacts archived at the University of Montana, as well as making recommendations for future actions to preserve the historic record.<sup>6</sup>

Based on this long history, the importance of the Fort Owen site to state and regional history is evident. Any projects undertaken by the Department must recognize that importance and strive to preserve and learn from the historic and archeologic record, while also providing access and interpreting this history to the public in a manner that inspires them to have pride in their history and take action to conserve and restore Fort Owen and other sites like this across the country.

Alternative A--Proposed Action: The acquisition of the 0-9-acre parcel would not impact cultural resources. However, the Department's planned inventory of those resources within the proposed acquisition has the potential to identify new information about the history of Fort

---

<sup>6</sup> Much of the history of Fort Owen comes from Donald Roy Merritt, "Fort Owen: The history and archeology of a contact period site in western Montana," 2010 (available at <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1485&context=etd>, accessed 5 Aug 2020), and the website for Fort Owen at the National Register of Historic Places <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/71976490>, accessed 5 Aug 2020.

Owen. Any such new information would be made public in a subsequent environmental assessment for proposing the development of a parking area.

Alternative B--No Action: The land would remain in private ownership.

### **3.8. Community and Taxes**

This parcel is located within Ravalli County and outside the boundaries of the nearby Town of Stevensville (population 1,809 in the 2010 census and estimated at 2,025 in 2019).

By providing consistent understandable access to the site, visitation is expected to increase. Having an established parking area would also allow the community of Stevensville and Montana State Parks to better market the site to area residents and visitors to the region. This should increase tourism traffic to Stevensville as well as other communities in the Bitterroot Valley (Exhibit A--Tourism Report)

There has been widespread community involvement in addressing the access issues to Fort Owen State Park. A local group, The Friends of Fort Owen, formed in 2018 in part because of the continued questions about public access and preservation of the site.

The actual amount of property taxes paid to the County is expected to change insignificantly. As a park established prior to May 11, 2009, the current Fort Owen State Park land is exempt from property taxation, per § 87-1-603, MCA. As a new purchase of land by the Department, the 0.9-acre parcel may be subject to FWP paying a monetary amount “to the county in a sum equal to the amount of taxes that would be payable on county assessment of the property if it was taxable to a private citizen.” The property taxes paid by MGY Ranch would decrease slightly, as it would no longer pay taxes on the 0.9-acre parcel.

Alternative A--Proposed Action: By acquiring the additional land and securing appropriate public access, the public would have greater opportunity to visit and enjoy Fort Owen State Park. The landowner would enjoy greater security and privacy. The Department would be better able to manage the park and care for the historic resources. As explained above, the Department would likely pay a small but yearly monetary amount to the county.

Alternative B--No Action: The land remains in private ownership, parking is not developed and public access remains confusing and in conflict with ranch operations.

### **3.9. Cumulative Impacts**

Alternative A--Proposed Action: The proposed land acquisition would not result in any significant cumulative impacts.

State Parks in Montana provide significant economic benefits to local communities, and Fort Owen has the potential to add to the tourism economy of Stevensville, Ravalli County and west-central Montana. A survey of state park visitors in 2010 found that visitors to all Montana State Parks contributed \$289 million annually to Montana’s economy, with nonresident spending creating 1,600 jobs statewide. In the Region 2 FWP area, nonresidents spent more than \$22 million in 2010 and created nearly 300 jobs.

The project has the potential to address issues that have faced the public, the landowner and the Department for decades, regarding where to park and access the State Park.

Alternative B--No Action: There would be continued confusion on the part of the public about where and how to access the site and where to park. Thus, conflict between traditional ranching uses and public access would persist.

#### **4.0 RESOURCE ISSUES CONSIDERED BUT ELIMINATED FROM DETAILED ANALYSIS**

The Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) provides for the identification and elimination from detailed study of issues, which are not significant or which have been covered by a prior environmental review, narrowing the discussion of these issues to a brief explanation of why they would not have a significant effect on the physical or human environment or providing a reference to their coverage elsewhere (ARM 12.2.434(d)). While the following resources are important, the Department anticipates they would be unaffected by the proposed action or if any effects exist, those influences could be adequately mitigated, and therefore these resources were eliminated from further detailed analysis.

Fisheries Species and Water Resources  
Noise and Electrical Effects  
Risk and Health Hazards

#### **5.0 NEED FOR AN ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT**

**Based on the significance criteria evaluated in this EA, is an EIS required? No.**

**If an EIS is not required, explain why the EA is the appropriate level of analysis for this proposed action.**

Based upon the above assessment of the Proposed Action, which has identified a limited number of minor impacts which can be mitigated, an EIS is not required and an Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of review.

#### **6.0 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

##### **6.1. Public Involvement**

**Describe the level of public involvement for this project if any, and, given the complexity and the seriousness of the environmental issues associated with the proposed action, is the level of public involvement appropriate under the circumstances?**

The public would be notified as follows, to comment on the Proposed Land Acquisition for Fort Owen State Park, including its draft EA and alternatives:

- A news release would be prepared and distributed to a standard list of media outlets interested in FWP State Parks and Region 2 issues. This news release would also be posted on FWP's website.
- A legal notice would be published once each in the following newspapers: *Bitterroot Star* (Stevensville), *Independent Record* (Helena), *Missoulian*, and *Ravalli Republic* (Hamilton).

- Copies would be available at the FWP Region 2 Headquarters in Missoula and the FWP State Headquarters in Helena.
- Copies of this environmental assessment would be mailed (or notification of its availability emailed) to neighboring landowners and other interested parties (individuals, groups, agencies) to assure their knowledge of the Proposed Action.
- Public notice on FWP’s website <http://fwp.mt.gov> (“News,” then “Recent Public Notices”). The Draft EA would also be available on this website, along with the opportunity to submit comments online.
- Public Notice on the Montana State Parks website <http://stateparks.mt.gov/> (“Public Comment & Notices”). The Draft EA would also be available on this website, along with the opportunity to submit comments online.

Copies of this EA may be obtained by mail from Region 2 FWP, 3201 Spurgin Rd., Missoula MT, 5980; by phoning 406-542-5540; by emailing [shrose@mt.gov](mailto:shrose@mt.gov); or by viewing FWP’s website <http://fwp.mt.gov> under Public Notices.

This level of public notice and participation is appropriate for a project of this scope having few and limited physical and human impacts.

## 6.2. Duration of Comment Period

The public comment period would extend for thirty (30) days beginning August 6, 2020. Public comments must be received by FWP no later than September 4, 2020.

Comments may be submitted online on either of the Draft EA’s webpages (details in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> bullets in section 6.1 above) or mailed to the address below:

Region 2 FWP  
 Attn: Fort Owen EA  
 3201 Spurgin Rd  
 Missoula MT 59804

or emailed to Sharon Rose at [shrose@mt.gov](mailto:shrose@mt.gov).

For questions about the project, contact Loren Flynn at [LFlynn2@mt.gov](mailto:LFlynn2@mt.gov) or phone 406-542-5517.

## 6.3. Timeline of Events

Draft EA public comment period: August 6 to September 4, 2020

Decision Notice issued (estimated): September 10, 2020

Montana Parks and Recreation Board (for final approval): September 17, 2020<sup>7</sup>

Closing on property purchase: after September 17, 2020

---

<sup>7</sup> For specifics of the meeting date, time and details, please see Montana State Parks’ website <http://stateparks.mt.gov/> (“Montana State Parks & Recreation Board”).

#### **6.4. Offices/Programs Contacted or Contributing to this Document:**

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks:

Lands Bureau, Helena

Legal Bureau, Helena

Parks Division, Helena and Missoula

Wildlife and Fisheries Division, Missoula

Montana Natural Heritage Program, Species of Concern database

Montana Department of Commerce, Tourism Bureau

Natural Resources Conservation Service website Soil Survey

US Department of Agriculture, Soil Survey Database

US Fish and Wildlife Service, Wetlands Database

#### **7.0 EA PREPARATION**

Loren Flynn, Region 2 Parks Manager, FWP, Missoula

Rachel Reckin, FWP Heritage Resources Specialist, Helena

Mimi Wolok, Lands Agent, FWP, Helena

Sharon Rose, Region 2 Comments Coordinator, FWP, Missoula

**Exhibit A**  
**TOURISM REPORT**  
**MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT (MEPA) &**  
**MCA 23-1-110**

The Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks has initiated the review process as mandated by MCA (Montana Code Annotated) 23-1-110 and the Montana Environmental Policy Act in its consideration of the project described below. As part of the review process, input and comments are being solicited. Please complete the project name and project description portions and submit this form to:

Jan Stoddard, Industry Services & Outreach Bureau  
Montana Office of Tourism and Business Development  
Department of Commerce  
301 S. Park Ave., Helena, MT 59601

**Project Name:** Fort Owen State Park

**Project Description:** Montana State Parks (MSP), a Division of Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP), proposes to acquire in fee simple approximately 0.9-acres immediately south of Fort Owen State Park, approximately 1 mile northwest of Stevensville in Ravalli County. The land, currently owned by MGY Ranch, would be acquired and added to Fort Owen State Park.

1. Would this site development project have an impact on the tourism economy?  
NO **YES** If YES, briefly describe:

Yes, as described, the project has the potential to positively impact the tourism and recreation industry economy if properly maintained. Fort Owen State Park offers both recreational opportunities and an historical asset for non-resident and resident visitors. The park preserves a small part of the original trading post established by John Owen in the 1850's and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Over one-third of Montana's targeted market visitors, history buffs, identify "historic attractions" as extremely important in selecting their travel destination (Montana Destination Brand Research by Destination Analysts). This same survey identified Montana State Parks have very significant potential to attract visitors. Projects that upgrade or enhance the visitor experience including improved access, parking, and fencing are critical to destination development.

2. Does this impending improvement alter the quality or quantity of recreation/tourism opportunities and settings?  
NO **YES** If YES, briefly describe:

Yes, as described, the project has the potential to improve quality and quantity of tourism and recreational opportunities. Phases of the project will move forward only after consultation with both the Montana State Parks Heritage Resource Program and the Montana State Historic Preservation Office. The project includes important visitor amenities such as improving the existing access road; replace existing fencing with materials and style that are more reflective of the historic nature of the site; and, when funding permits, construct a permanent parking area on the newly acquired property. We are assuming the agency has determined it has necessary funding for the on-going operations and maintenance once this project is complete.

Signature: Jan Stoddard

Date: 2/7/20