



# Legislative Audit Division

## Performance Audit Summary

### Parks Division

### February 2001

#### **Introduction**

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At the request of the Legislative Audit Committee, we examined program activities of the Parks Division at the Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP). The Parks Division is responsible for administering programs related to state parks, recreation sites, and fishing access sites (FAS). Other programs administered by the division include trails development, land and water conservation funds administration, and Capitol Complex maintenance.

#### **Operational Controls are in Place**

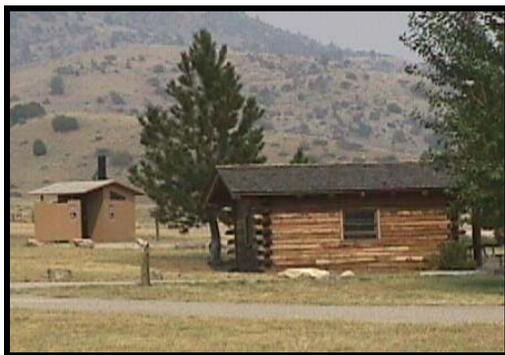
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Division staff are responsible for operating and maintaining over 300 sites including 41 state parks, 14 "affiliated lands", and over 275 fishing access sites. We examined operational controls such as defined procedures, methods for communicating with staff, and methods for directing program activities. To gather general information on state parks operations and fishing access site (FAS) maintenance, we visited 30 (66 %) state parks and 86 (31%) different FAS across the state. Park operational specialists conduct the day to day operations at all state parks. Operational duties we observed at all parks include:

- Developing park management plans.
- Supervising staff and volunteers.
- Conducting on-site maintenance and monitoring.
- Coordinating with various interested groups.
- Monitoring park expenditures and budgets.
- Proposing future capital projects.
- Collecting and depositing state park fees.
- Compiling visitation data for each site.

#### **Overall, State Parks Appear Well-Maintained**

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Generally, we found state parks well maintained and in good condition. Sites were trash free; areas were

mowed/trimmed as appropriate; facilities were cleaned; and roads were generally in good condition. Maintenance responsibilities were clearly delineated and assigned to the various regional staff.

#### **FAS Maintenance Practices Could be Improved in Some Regions**

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FAS maintenance is completed by the regional maintenance supervisors and their roving maintenance crews. We examined FAS maintenance through visits to 86 sites and interviews with each region's parks manager and maintenance supervisor.

Generally, we found regional maintenance supervisors had a methodology for assessing on-going maintenance needs. However, we believe steps could be taken to strengthen maintenance in two of the regions. Region 3, did not have a formal methodology for tracking maintenance or following standardized procedures. Sites in that region did not appear as well maintained as in other regions. Sites had poorly maintained roads, littered camping areas, unmowed areas, and unstocked latrines.

We also identified sites in Region 6 where additional maintenance may be required. Currently, Region 6 does not have any FAS maintenance staff. Staff in Region 4 and Region 7 split maintenance duties for Region 6. They generally visit those sites once a month during the season. At four sites, we found inadequate signs to direct visitors, poor quality facilities, and poorly maintained roads.

*We recommend the department direct the regional parks managers to develop and use standardized FAS site maintenance methodologies for Regions 3 and 6.*

#### **Parks Operations Comply with Primitive Park Designations**

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As part of audit compliance testing, we examined how division staff ensures compliance with the primitive parks designation in section 23-1-116, MCA. This statute established a list of 15 parks where specific development is prohibited.

Installing electrical lines, creating RV sanitary dumpsites, and building new roads are prohibited at these sites. We visited seven of these sites and interviewed regional staffs who are assigned oversight responsibilities for these facilities. Based on the interviews and our observations,

we did not note any instances of noncompliance with primitive parks statutory requirements.

## **Policy Considerations**

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In 1989 the department appointed a State Parks Futures Committee, with approval from the governor and legislative leaders. In November 1990, this committee made recommendations about the proper role, priorities, funding, program needs and direction for future parks system operations.

Recommendations from that report provided useful guidelines that have since directed Parks Division activities including:

- Developing a division-wide vision statement.
- Completing specific site management plans.
- Expanding partnerships with private/local groups and other agencies.
- Re-classifying division lands.
- Receiving additional funding support.
- Developing several "model" park destinations.

These recommendations laid the groundwork for the program strengths we noted. However, there have been new impacts to the system that warrant policy consideration.

## **Park Fee Revenues**

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In the State Park Futures report, it was recommended all users pay equitable fees for use of state park facilities. This has not occurred. User fees at the time of the Futures study (1990) were \$860,703. Ten years later (2000) projected fee revenue is at the same level, \$861,693. Several changes have impacted park fees. The Primitive Parks Act, established in 1993, removed a third of the state parks from the fee system for Montana residents. In addition, park resources for monitoring fee compliance have not increased. ***We believe it may be time to more formally evaluate the park fee system.***

## **Park Resources**

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Availability of program resources has always been a consideration for the state parks system. At the time of the Futures study, it was recommended that over 30 FTE were needed in the next five year period to capitalize on the economic benefits from a strong park system. Since that time, less than 10 FTE have been authorized to be added to the system. Fee compliance, quality of visitor services, and the number of staff available in the parks system impacts all program developments.

## **Statutory Park Designations**

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There are two different statutory designations for specific site management, which have impacts to the park system. Since these statutes have been put in place, changes in several parks have been impacted and other considerations

have surfaced. The Primitive Parks Act (Section 23-1-116, MCA) established a list of fifteen designated primitive parks eight years ago. Section 23-1-130, MCA designates Chief Plenty Coups and Pictograph Cave State Parks as the assets that are most at risk and vulnerable. The legislature went further by stating those assets should receive immediate priority for preservation and funding. We found the current laws impact division maintenance planning and fee revenues. Anytime major improvements or changes are proposed, the division must seek, and/or the legislature must take statutory action to add or subtract sites from the statutory list. This limits the division's ability to readily respond to local input for changes or developments at those designated sites.

## **Other Policy Considerations**

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Other policy questions we believe need to be addressed include:

- Is the State Parks Program a natural resource protection program or a tourism program?
- How does having two key historical & cultural sites outside the system impact State Parks operations?
- How is coordination with tourism and travel promotion assured?
- What are the long-term maintenance and replacement needs of an aging infrastructure?
- Should operations continue to place such high reliance on volunteer staff?
- How should the state's Tourism Advisory Council and the Heritage Preservation and Development Commission be more involved in parks decisions?
- Who are the system's primary customers - residents or tourists?

These questions point to a need for renewed policy analysis for the Parks Division. It is time to address these questions and provide long-term direction for state parks programs. What path should the state parks program take?



For a complete copy of the report (00P-13) or for further information contact the Legislative Audit Division at 406-444-3122; e-mail to [lad@mt.gov](mailto:lad@mt.gov); or check the web site at <http://leg.mt.gov/audit>.