

**Lewis & Clark Caverns State Park
Amendment to the Park Management Plan
Environmental Assessment
Decision Notice**

**Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region Three, Bozeman**

February 4, 2008

Proposed Action

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposed in an Environmental Assessment released in October, 2008, to amend the 2000 Lewis & Clark Caverns State Park Management Plan in three areas to address compelling issues. The preferred alternative (B) called for the following:

- Allow trail development in the undeveloped section of the Park
- Allow mountain bikes on portions of the Park trail system
- Upgrade overnight facilities in the Park campground, specifically to develop a limited number of campsites with electrical and water hook-ups

Public Comment

Public notification of the availability of an Environmental Assessment (EA) evaluating this proposed action was published in the Bozeman Daily Chronicle and the Montana Standard newspapers, and posted on the FWP website. In addition, known interested individuals, agencies, and organizations were sent copies of the EA.

The public comment period was open for 30 days ending November 9, 2007. Twenty-three comments were received on the proposals contained in the EA with individuals mentioning one or more of the three amendment proposals. The vast majority of comments were received on the mountain biking issue. The comments relative to each of the three amendment proposals are analyzed separately below. These comments have, in some cases, been edited and summarized but accurately capture the spirit of the comments. All comments received on this EA are available upon request.

One comment was received that did not directly relate to the proposals listed below. The question was posed, "Are there any of these proposed changes that might improve and/or reduce hunting opportunities on the L&C lands?"

FWP Response: These proposed management plan amendments will not affect hunting opportunities in the park. Trail development in the "primitive" zone of the park could potentially enhance access in the western portion of the park.

Allow trail development in the undeveloped section of the park

Twelve (12) comments were received on the proposal to develop trails in the primitive zone of the Park. Ten (10) supported the development of additional trails, and two (2) opposed additional trails. The comments received on this issue are summarized below. FWP agency responses are provided where questions are posed or clarification is warranted.

Support comment (1): My family and I enjoy hiking and biking at the L&C State Park. I would love to see additional hiker/biker trails in the area.

Support comment (2): I think increasing the trail network would be a great idea. My encounters with all user groups have been positive on the ability to use the trails in the colder months.

Support comment (3): I am in support of new trail systems.

Support comment (4): I'm writing this comment to support additional trail construction in the park.

Support comment (5): With all of the wilderness proposals and such restrictive use of our public lands, bikers are feeling attacked from all sides. I'm sure that Lewis & Clark can be a much more fun place during the shoulder seasons with additional great trails.

Support comment (6): I find it exciting that we may be able to access some of the western portion of the park, and I suggest that often routes can be enhanced by building properly designed single track connectors.

Support comment (7): Lewis & Clark Caverns is an important bike trail for me especially during the spring and fall. I support the expansion plans.

Support comment (8): I am in favor of providing more trails.

Support comment (9): I agree with your recommended choice of plans for our wonderful L&C Caverns Park. Take into consideration that this area is supported by volunteer fire & ambulance services. Is there a way these proposed changes could financially support the volunteer services that will be affected by the increase of visitors in the park?

FWP Response: The Park currently has a contract for fire protection with the Willow Creek Rural Fire District and the Jefferson Valley Rural Fire District and pays a yearly fee.

Support comment (10): As a biker and hiker, I support the proposed action that would allow development of biking trails in the primitive portion of the park. 1.) The well

drained and less erosive soils are relatively resistant to negative impacts from biking. 2.) Bikers tend to use the trails at times when hiker use is low.

FWP Response: All trail use, whether biking or hiking, result in negative impacts to trail surfaces. These impacts are mitigated by periodic maintenance. FWP staff are aware of varying levels of user conflict throughout the year.

Opposition comment (1): ...I do not support an enhanced trail system in the western section of the Park. There are now rustic trails in place that allow hikers access to the area. We prefer hiking on trails without sign clutter. We prefer the primitive setting found in the western section of the park.

FWP Response: It is not the intent of management to alter the primitive nature of the western portion of the park. Visitors have requested additional trail opportunities in the park. The development of trails in this portion of the park would offer a more natural setting with longer trail lengths and varying degrees of difficulty. They would allow more visitors to experience this side of the park. A minimum of signage would fit well with the nature of these trails.

Opposition comment (2): New trails in the western primitive section of the park will reduce the wild nature of that area and diminish my enjoyment of quiet off trail exploration.

FWP Response: Trails would be developed in this portion of the park with respect to the wild nature of the area. They would offer an opportunity for park visitors to access a side of the park they did not know existed. This would allow more people to enjoy the solitude that a few are now experiencing. With over 3,000 acres in this Park, off trail exploration will still be a viable and enjoyable option.

Allow mountain biking in some areas of the park

Comments received on this proposal totaled eighteen (18). Twelve (12) expressed support, six (6) expressed qualified support with restrictions, and two (2) expressed opposition.

Support comment (1): I think mountain bike use of trails is a great idea. They would be used by a lot of people, can't see a lot of environmental impact with the arid climate. I do believe the use of bikes on the trails does smooth them out for others. I haven't really seen many people hiking on these trails in the cold of winter, but in either case we all should be able to use these trails and protect these places which are used and loved by a lot of people.

FWP Response: Supposition that mountain biking serves to "smooth" trails is unproven.

Support comment (2): I fit the typical mountain biker use (Nov., Dec.) and rarely encounter anyone. Lewis & Clark Caverns offers a very different type of ride than trails at higher elevation with more moisture.

Support comment (3): The L&C Caverns trails system provides a vital “off-season” resource to the mountain biking community. Most sensible EA I have seen in recent years with regard to mountain bikes. GVBC (Gallatin Valley Bicycle Club) would work with management on trail construction and maintenance. The trail system can serve as an example for how bikers and hikers can co-exist when resources are thoughtfully managed. Good local access is all anyone wants.

Support comment (4): As an avid bicycle rider, runner, and hiker, I appreciate the trails at the Lewis & Clark Caverns. I hope the trails can stay open during the appropriate season for all human powered activities.

Support comment (5): ...and also support mountain biking in the off season.

Support comment (6): I support your preferred alternative. That recognizes bicyclists as welcome trail users in the park. GVBC members are looking forward to helping on trail maintenance, design and exploration. An opportunity to help draft a bicycle safety code is like an open door to us, as we wish to improve public perceptions of mountain biking.

Support comment (7): I’m writing to support the continued support of mountain bike access on the Park’s trails. The cycling community at large would help with the general stewardship of the Park’s trail system and character.

Support comment (8): I am deeply concerned about the possibility of losing my right to mountain bike in the Park. I think more trails should be developed in the area. More trails would spread people out and minimize erosion.

Support comment (9): I am writing to encourage continued mountain bike use on park trails. The opportunity to ride in the Park has become a special treasure for Bozeman bikers. I am sure local bikers would even purchase an annual bike trail pass as long as it assured continued access and trail expansion.

FWP Response: Montanans can contribute to operational and maintenance support of the Montana State Park system through payment of a \$4 vehicle registration fee that covers free park day use for all Montana residents.

Support comment (10): Please continue to manage the Park with mountain bike access in mind.

Support comment (11): I currently ride my mountain bike on the trails and enjoy the layout. I have been a professional trail builder for 20 years and have extensive experience designing trails for cycling and hiking. The perception that bikes can’t coexist on trails is just an uninformed perception.

Support comment (12): I agree with your recommended choice of plans for our wonderful L and C Caverns Park. Is it possible to develop a memorandum of agreement with a local bike club to conduct annual trail maintenance activities?

FWP Response: Yes, from previous offerings and from comments on this EA, we will develop an agreement with local bike clubs to address volunteer work for trail maintenance, use their expertise on trail design to stabilize trail turns, and work with them to develop trail etiquette guidelines for mountain bike use in the park.

Support with restriction comment (1): Alternative B is too simplistic. There should be some hiker only trails, which would require less maintenance. A schedule of alternate days of use would provide safe, conflict free opportunities.

FWP Response: The purpose of this EA is to examine whether the use of mountain bikes is appropriate in some areas of the park and how this use might be accommodated. The park's trail system will be signed and managed in a manner to minimize the potential for user conflicts and minimize damage to the park resources. Management adjustments will be made as the need warrants and as trail use changes or increases in the future. Trail use regulations will be adopted and/or adjusted to protect Park resources and to minimize user conflicts.

Support with restriction comment (2): There should be some hiker only trails, which would require less maintenance. A schedule of alternate days of use would provide safe, conflict free opportunities.

FWP Response: Trail use regulations such as that mentioned above are one of many options available for managing use on the Park's trail system.

Support with restriction comment (3): I am in full support of mountain biking use, especially unrestricted use in the "shoulder season". I take many mountain biking trips to the area in early spring and do the same in fall because of the dry conditions. I rarely see other outdoor enthusiasts, hikers, other bikers, and think it would be a waste to restrict access at this time of year. During the busy season, some sort of trail-share would be effective and efficient. As a biking community we have significantly increased our education, awareness, and importance of proper trail etiquette in terms of preventing and minimizing erosion, and proper respect and yielding to other trail users. Whether one bikes or hikes, I know we can all enjoy this treasured state park in harmony.

Support with restriction comment (4): I would like to express my support for allowing mountain biking at Lewis & Clark Caverns during the off-season. It is a beautiful spot to ride.

Support with restriction comment (5): I support Alt. B and would support Alt. C for the sake of compromise. Bicyclist and hikers should have to compromise their time of use rather than banning one or the other one from particular trails. Plus, hikers will have

exclusive use of the Nature Trail Loop and the Greer Gulch Loop and few bikers would expect exclusive trail use.

Support with restriction comment (6): As I understand the Draft, bikes would be restricted from riding the Greer Gulch or Nature Loop trails. I don't see this as a problem if other trails, comparable in length and technical difficulty, are available. However, I wonder whether a firm schedule allowing biking on these trails during the "shoulder season" but prohibiting them during times of high hiker use would be appropriate.

FWP Response: These two trails in particular close early to use with snow in the fall. They stay wet longer in the spring and bicycle damage has been noted on these trails due to wet conditions. It is not felt that mountain bike use is conducive to a nature trail.

Opposition comment (1): I am a mountain biker and thoroughly enjoy that activity. However, we strongly oppose the promotion of mountain biking opportunities in the Park. We believe there is a steady use of trails by hikers in the shoulder season. I believe that bikers are hard on the trails. We have noticed a dramatic increase in the presence of spotted knapweed along various sections of the trail. This increase seems to us to have occurred at the same time that mountain bike use began. Mountain bikers, due to the nature of their sport, are a fairly noisy group. The open, hilly nature of the trail promotes sound a considerable distance. Frequently, they will also bring their dogs.

FWP Response: Many of the Park trails cut through very steep, hard to reach areas in terms of weed control. Many of the Park's trails are new and have recently been built through areas with knapweed infestations. The Park is preparing for an aerial spraying campaign to treat these areas of the park. The Park staff noted the existence of these infestations before mountain bikes began using the trails. The esthetic difference between mountain bikers and hikers is noted and trail regulations or closures will reflect this difference. The park regulations concerning dogs will apply to both hikers and bikers equally.

Opposition comment (2): I think that trails are for hiking and enjoying nature and that speeding bicycles are in conflict with that purpose.

FWP Response: This concern is noted. If mountain bike use is to occur in the park, the park will be working with local bike clubs to address bicycle etiquette, safety, and the need to yield the trail to other trail users.

Upgrade overnight facilities in the Park campground, specifically to develop a limited number of campsites with electrical and water hook-ups

Five (5) comments were received concerning the proposal to upgrade overnight facilities in the campground. Three (3) expressed support, one (1) expressed qualified support with restriction and one (1) comment expressed opposition.

Support comment (1): I agree with your recommended choice of plans for our wonderful L and C Caverns Park.

Support comment (2): I support Alternative B and would support Alternative C for the sake of compromise.

Support comment (3): I am in favor of providing the RV power links. It would be excellent if we could provide the power as environmentally as possible.

Support with restriction comment (1): I do not oppose developing one of the campground loops with electrical hook-ups. It is unlikely that we will camp at the Caverns campground if the fees are increased significantly. I would support higher fees for limited designated hook up areas in the campground only.

FWP Response: It is envisioned that a limited number of electrical hook ups would be provided in the campground. It is probable that a higher camping fee will be charged for those sites containing this service.

Opposition comment (1): A contributor to global warming, are motor homes, and the park should not be encouraging their use. Ban motor homes and require tents.

FWP Response: Fish, Wildlife & Parks does not intend to ban the use of motor homes and similar recreational vehicles in State Park campgrounds. Electrical hookups can preclude the use of generators, which produce noise levels unacceptable to other campers. Electrical hookups can also serve disabled visitors that require medical equipment dependent on electricity. As the population of the U.S. ages, increasing numbers of state park visitors arrive in larger self-contained vehicles and request electricity and other services. It is our intent to serve this segment of the camping public.

Decision:

The first Lewis & Clark Caverns State Park Management Plan was activated in 2000 and was intended to set the direction for the Park the next ten-year period. The Plan is a working, dynamic document. The rapidity with which change is occurring requires periodic adjustment of Plan direction to address threats, challenges and opportunities as well as to remain relevant to the public and park users.

Based on the analysis provided in the Environmental Assessment, and on public comment provided to FWP on this EA, it is my decision to amend the Lewis & Clark Caverns Management Plan as proposed.

The specific amending language that will be inserted in the existing Lewis & Clark Caverns Management Plan is as follows:

Allow trail development in the undeveloped section of the Park

The Lewis and Clark Caverns State Park Management Plan, pages 6 and 55, would be amended to read:

“There is potential for developing additional trails in the Park. In the 1950s and early 1960s, a series of jeep trails were constructed throughout the Park as fire breaks. These narrow roads were never maintained, but many are still clearly evident today. Some old roads would function very well as trails, requiring for the most part only minor modifications and the placement of information and direction signs. The majority of the proposed new trails would follow these existing roads. The preferred option calls for increasing Park trail opportunities within all three zones of the Park, utilizing the aforementioned jeep trails when possible in order to minimize impacts and keep costs low.”

Allow mountain biking in some areas of the park

The Lewis and Clark Caverns State Park Management Plan, pages 7 and 56, Issue 2: Trail Use, would be amended to read:

“This issue concerns the types of use that will be allowed on new or existing trails in the Park. Mountain bikes will be allowed on most Park trails year-round at the discretion of Park management. FWP will actively manage this activity as necessary to minimize resource impacts and user conflict. Mountain bikes will be prohibited on the Nature Trail Loop and the Greer Gulch Loop Trail, due to heavy use by pedestrians. Bicycles will be permitted on Park roads. The current trail system would not be adequate for horseback riding; horses on Park roads could create safety concerns and conflicts with vehicles, and therefore will not be allowed. Motorized trail use of any type will also not be permitted. Opportunities for providing disabled access trails or trail segments will be examined.”

Upgrade overnight facilities in the Park campground, specifically to develop a limited number of campsites with electrical and water hook-ups

The Lewis and Clark Caverns State Park Management Plan, page 6, section 9. Private Sector Support—would be amended to read:

“An emphasis will be placed on developing and enhancing positive relationships with private businesses and neighboring landowners on issues such as marketing and advertising, promoting special events, and weed control. Park management reserves the right to implement upgrades to overnight camping facilities in the Park but will make every effort to cooperate with rather than compete with area businesses.”

There are no modifications necessary to the Draft Environmental Assessment based on public comment and questions. The Draft Environmental Assessment, together with this Decision Notice, will serve as the final document for the proposal.

I find there to be no significant impacts on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, I conclude that the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.

This decision notice covers the amendments to the Lewis & Clark Caverns State Park Management Plan. Specific proposals to install, construct, or develop new facilities (i.e. camp site electrical hook-ups) or trails will comply with the Montana Environmental Policy Act through the preparation of an Environmental Assessment and the solicitation of public comment.

Patrick J. Flowers
Region Three Supervisor