DECISION NOTICE:
ALBERTON GORGE RECREATIONAL CORRIDOR ADDITION

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region 2
3201 Spurgin Road
Missoula, MT 59804
(406) 542-5500

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED PROJECT

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks proposes acquiring approximately 20 acres of riverfront property along the Clark Fork River within the Alberton Gorge. If acquired, the property would become a part of the Alberton Gorge Recreational Corridor.

In 2004 FWP completed a complex four-way land exchange within the Alberton Gorge. This transaction placed 306 acres along the Clark Fork River into FWP ownership. This recreational area is commonly referred to as the Alberton Gorge Recreational Corridor, a seven-mile segment of the Clark Fork River located near the town of Alberton, approximately thirty miles northwest of Missoula. The Alberton Gorge is known regionally for its rugged scenic canyon and excellent Class II and III white water rapids that support water-based recreation activities for over 25,000 users annually. The corridor also provides high-quality trout fishing opportunities and a ribbon of riparian habitat important to black bears, deer, elk, eagles, osprey and many other species.

The parcel considered for acquisition is commonly known as the "Stranahan Property." It was purchased approximately 5 years ago by Stranie Ventures; a conservation buyer, with the intent to sell it to FWP at a future date. The Department is now in a position to purchase the property, and the seller is anxious to do so. The values of the parcels have increased substantially since their purchase, but Stranie Ventures will still sell it to FWP for the original purchase price. By doing so, the seller is in essence giving FWP a substantial discount on the property. As the property is an in-holding, FWP feels it is especially important to acquire it; as such actions have been identified as a strategic priority for Montana State Parks. This property will make a valuable addition to the contiguous public lands currently held by the Department in the Alberton Gorge Recreational Corridor, which have a long history of public recreational use.

The parcel is currently unimproved except for the two-track access road but the topography of the site lends itself to possible future improvements such as parking areas and camping sites. As the parcel is within the Alberton Gorge, the majority of the river frontage is high bank, but it is possible to access the river for wade fishing, etc. Views of the Alberton Gorge from the property are quite spectacular. Specific improvements are not planned at this time and are not covered in the EA, but the site does have many outstanding characteristics in regard to public recreation, and its proximity to Cyr Bridge FAS is very useful. FWP is confident that the addition of this parcel would greatly add to public recreational opportunities in the Region.

The population of western Montana has been growing quickly over the past two decades, and demand for public recreational opportunities has increased even faster, as changing lifestyles propel more people of every age group to enjoy the many recreational opportunities available in the state. As existing facilities and sites become increasingly crowded, FWP is alert to opportunities to acquire property in areas of high recreational demand and value. This property fulfills those requirements, as well as having the additional value of being an in-holding and offered to FWP at a discount. The proposed acquisition would increase public recreational opportunities with no significant negative impacts.

Alternative A: No Action

If no action were taken, the parcels in question would be sold to another buyer, who would likely develop the land into residential home sites. As the parcel would probably be closed to public access under this scenario, opportunities for public recreation would be lost. In addition, the presence of houses or other development within the Alberton Gorge would detract from the wilderness experience and flavor that is so important to the typical visitor to the Gorge. These tourists and locals who recreate in and around the Gorge are an important source of revenue to the local economy.

Alternative B:

In Alternative B, FWP would lease the property from the current owner instead of purchasing it outright. This Alternative is no longer being considered because the owner wishes to sell the property outright and is not interested in leasing it over a long period of time.

Preferred Alternative C: Proposed Action

In the preferred alternative, FWP would acquire approximately 20 acres from Stranie Ventures by fee title. By acquiring this land, FWP would gain ownership of an in-holding within 306 acres already under Department ownership. Acquiring in-holdings and thus consolidating FWP lands is a stated priority of the Department, as it allows for better and easier management of Department lands. In addition, the parcels in question have high inherent public recreational value, and FWP wishes to preserve public access to the Clark Fork River in this location.

PUBLIC PROCESS AND COMMENT

The EA was sent out and the public comment period began October 27, 2006, and ran through November 28, 2006. Legal notices were published in the *Independent Record* (10-29-06, Helena); *The Mineral Independent* (11-1-06, Plains); and the *Missoulian* (10-29-06), and one statewide press release was distributed. There were 15 full copies of the EA, and 29 electronic- and 74 postcard-notifications announcing the availability of the EA, sent to interested parties consisting of neighbors, friends, conservation groups, commercial outfitters, Montana state legislators, county & state departments or agencies. This EA was posted on the FWP web site October 26, 2006 at http://fwp.mt.gov/publicnotices/archive.aspx, click on November 2006.

There were ten comments received from the public. Nine of the comments supported the preferred alternative to acquire the 20 acres. One person commenting wanted to know which funding source would be used to make the purchase? *FWP Response: The department will be using the State Park's Acquisition Account.* The tenth comment was from a person wanting to know what, if anything was going to be placed on the 20 acres and if there is a long-term plan for the area between Cyr and Ralph's Takeout and will there be a public meeting on the area as a whole? They also wanted to know if more speed limit signs could be placed on Old Highway 10? *FWP Response: The department's plans for the 20 acres right now are to do some basic site control that will include a gate and some fencing where the driveway is located. The public will still be able to walk into the site for day-use activities. As for the future of the recreational corridor, the department plans to do some conceptual long range planning to identify potential recreational facility needs & locations as well as other parcels for acquisition. Once a conceptual recreational/park plan is in hand, the department will be looking for public input through meetings and/or the mail. The request for more speed limit signs will be conveyed to the appropriate road department.*

DECISION

Based on the analysis in the Environmental Assessment (EA) and the applicable laws, regulations and policies, I have determined that this action will not have a significant effect on the natural or human environment. Therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement will not be prepared.

It is my decision to implement Alternative C and proceed with the acquisition of this parcel. This action also requires the approval of the MFWP Commission and the Montana Land Board, both scheduled in December. By notification of this Decision Notice, the draft EA is hereby made the final EA with the FWP responses in this Decision Notice. The final EA with Decision Notice may be viewed at or obtained from Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks at the above address. Please direct any further requests or questions to Mack Long, Region 2 Supervisor.

In accordance with FWP policy, an appeal may be made by any person who has either commented in writing to the department on the proposed project, or who has registered or commented orally at a public meeting held by the department on the proposed project, or who can provide new evidence that would otherwise change the proposed plan. An appeal must be submitted to the Director of FWP in writing and must be postmarked or received within 30 days of this Decision Notice. The appeal must describe the basis for the appeal, how the appellant has previously commented to the department or participated in the decision-making process, and how the department can provide relief. The appeal should be mailed to: Director, Fish, Wildlife & Parks, P.O. Box 200701, Helena, MT 59620.

Mack Long

11/30/06
Date