

Recreation Site Analysis (RSA)

Executive Summary

Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests and Thunder Basin National Grassland January, 2017

The Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests and Thunder Basin National Grassland (MBRTB) is one of eleven national forest units in the Rocky Mountain Region (Region) of the U.S Forest Service. The Region manages an extensive outdoor recreation program under the overall guidance of the Forest Service Mission, the National Framework for Sustainable Recreation (2010) and the Leadership Intent for Outdoor Recreation for the Rocky Mountain Region (2015), as well as laws and agency policies.

In addition to congressional appropriations, National Forests in the Region use a variety of state funds, grants and collections from other governmental bodies, other federal agency funds, various partner groups and agencies, concessionaires, volunteers, outfitters and guides and others. These supplemental funding resources are used to extend the Region's capability to provide for quality, safe, and sustainable outdoor recreation opportunities on the Forests.

The benefits to American society that outdoor recreation provides are needed more today than ever before while at the same time there are unprecedented challenges to providing quality recreation in the long-term. Major drivers affecting the MBRTB's recreation program include new recreational technologies, changed or increasing use levels, changing climatic conditions, static or decreasing financial capacity, and increasing wildfire fighting costs which all affect the future of the Forest's and Region's recreation program.

Additionally, the MBRTB's recreation program is diverse and the factors described above must be considered across the spectrum of program areas. While developed recreation sites are often high-profile and offer popular types of activities, they represent but one segment that accounts for a high proportion of the Forest's recreation program costs. We also manage wilderness, administer outfitter/guide and ski area permits, visitor and customer services, heritage sites, trails, and motor vehicle travel programs, among others. Each of these components rely on the same limited agency resources and funding for proper delivery and management. While we remain dedicated to providing the best array and quality of recreation services possible, this must be tempered by the reality of available resources and the diverse experiences our public expects from the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests and Thunder Basin National Grassland.

In consideration of the whole of our recreation program areas, the following Recreation Site Analysis (RSA) for the MBRTB is presented here for public review and feedback.

Project Background

The Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests and Thunder Basin National Grassland manages 224 developed recreation sites, ranging from trailhead parking areas with very limited development, to full-service recreation facilities with intensive developments such as electrical hookups and drinking water. The RSA process is a holistic review of the Forest's developed recreation program and builds on a similar analysis completed in 2008 titled the Recreation Facility Analysis. The RSA process is intended to bring our developed site portfolio more closely in-line with projected staffing and funding levels, public demand and the expressed interests of constituents in the long-term.

Outcomes of this process can range from outright removal of sites (decommissioning) to reconstruction of existing sites or a wide range of options in between. However, it is imperative that our program be sustainable – socially, environmentally, and economically – going into the future. This is our guiding principle of the RSA process, “sustainability is the lens through which we make all decisions. We will not invest if we cannot sustain.”

Even a cursory examination of the MBRTB's projected agency resources and maintenance liabilities indicates that our current developed recreation program is unsustainable. This begs the question – what sites and/or services could we modify or forgo and still maintain the recreation opportunities the Forest is renowned for? We need our constituents' guidance in making difficult decisions and, as importantly, we need to ensure a broad understanding of the tradeoffs and opportunities inherent in this process. Although we may have to change or give some things up following this analysis, the Forest will be in much better position to sustain its developed recreation program in the long-term.

Key Principles of the RSA

☞ When projected downward trends in budget and staffing are considered, it is obvious that tradeoffs and tough decisions will need to be made. The Forest is no longer able to maintain all of its current sites to standards, which impinges upon the public's expectation of safe, operable and attractive recreation facilities.

☞ If budgets rebound after the program is streamlined, the Forest will be in excellent position to use any excess funding to catch up on work backlogs in trails, annual and deferred site maintenance, and special uses, among other program areas.

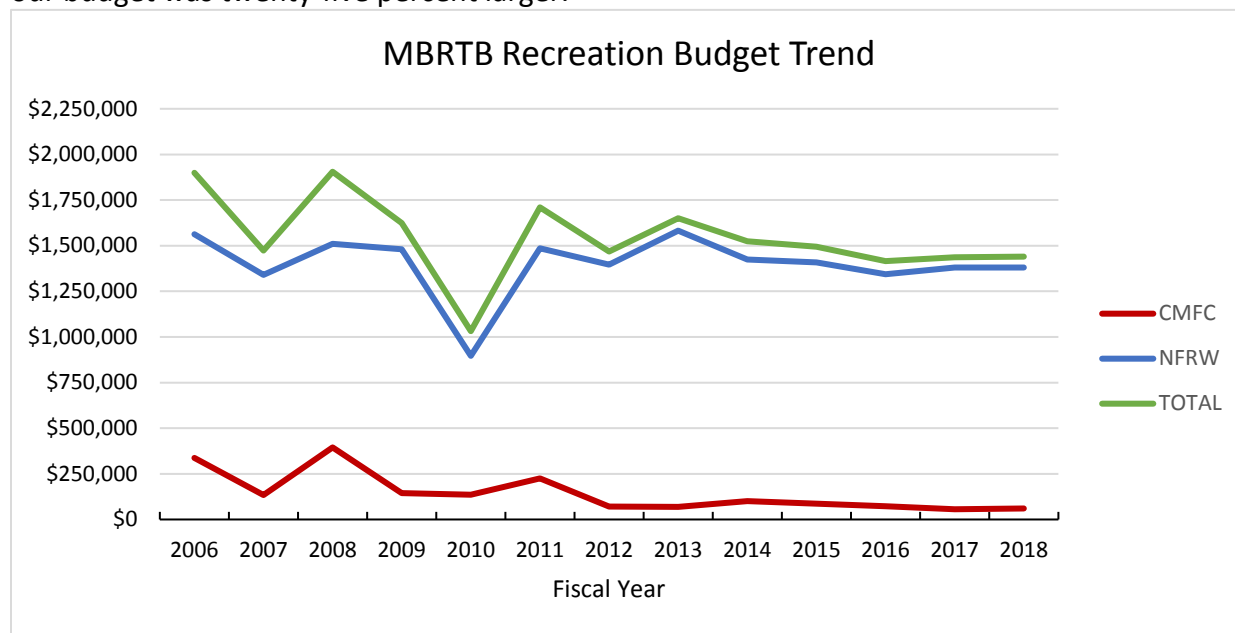
☞ Recreation program cost-saving measures have already taken place by the Forest, including streamlining contracts and purchasing for easier administration and reduction of staff based on limited funding. We are confident that such in-house actions have reduced program administrative costs as much as possible. Now we must specify changes to be taken on the ground to develop reasonable workloads for our remaining staff members.

☞ This effort is focused on **preserving quality recreation opportunities** provided by the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests and Thunder Basin National Grassland, while not necessarily retaining all services and facilities at the same levels as previously offered. The following types of questions are guiding the RSA process: Is each component of the site essential to preserving the opportunity? Is the site meeting the needs of today's recreationists per recent visitor-use survey data and user trends? Does the site's use level dictate continued operations, maintenance or investment? Is the site currently in a condition acceptable for general public use? Is the average cost per visitor reasonable and at sustainable levels? Does the site have reasonable occupancy rates to warrant continued opportunity?

Evaluation of Resources and Costs

The Forest is applying sound business principles to objectively evaluate its work capacity and site management obligations. The agency's developed recreation site database (INFRA) provides detailed cost information and other site data that are being used to inform management options and set realistic program goals across the Forest for the next five to ten years.

The following table shows budget trends in the two primary appropriations the Forest Service receives annually to manage its outdoor recreation and recreation facility programs. It is obvious we cannot sustain the same services and facilities today as we could 10 years ago when our budget was twenty-five percent larger.



Note: NFRW is the recreation operations budget and CMFC is used for annual and deferred recreation facility maintenance.

It is important to note that CMFC has decreased significantly over time. Prior to 2012, CMFC funded the bulk of recreation facility maintenance and covered recreation and administrative/fire facilities construction and reconstruction projects. However, with substantial reductions in this fund, MBRTB allocations have decreased from over \$200,000 per year on average (prior to 2012) to less than \$75,000 per year over the last few years. This reduced funding still provides for some recreation and administrative/fire facilities construction and reconstruction projects at the regional level but it no longer allows us to undertake significant maintenance projects and has led – in part - to significant increases in deferred and annual maintenance costs across the Forest. This situation has also rippled into other program areas as we struggle to find funding for simple annual maintenance projects on the ground.

In summary, the Forest’s budget dedicated to the developed recreation program has actually declined by nearly 25% over the last decade, even without factoring in inflation. Significant restructuring and cost-savings measures are in order to reach a sustainable recreation program in the long-term.

The Draft Plan of Work (Draft POW) proposed by the Forest – if fully implemented – would realize a savings of nearly 36% in annual site maintenance costs across the Forest. Additionally, deferred maintenance would be reduced by about 69%, reducing our long-term maintenance backlog significantly. The following table shows the aggregated cost savings that would be realized from full implementation of the POW by 2022.

MBRTB Developed Recreation Program Costs				
	Cost Category	Current Costs	Revised Costs Resulting from RSA Implementation	% Cost Reductions after RSA Implementation
EXPENSES	ANNUAL OPERATING COSTS	\$558,135	\$487,752	-13%
	ANNUAL MAINTENANCE COSTS	\$400,126	\$254,792	-36%
	DEFERRED MAINTENANCE COSTS	\$1,544,646	\$480,493	-69%

Note: **Operating activities and costs** = site start-up and shut-down, toilet cleaning/stocking/pumping, picnic table and litter cleanup, trash service, water testing and water system operations, hazard tree inspections and mitigation, national site reservation coordination, fee collection and accounting, regulation and information posting, activity information and public safety inspections and contacts, etc.

Annual maintenance = Painting/staining, refinishing, facility repairs & minor feature replacements, site grading and new gravel, maintaining accessible conditions & signing, etc.

Deferred Maintenance = Backlog of work projects not conducted in a timely manner and often major in scope.

Project Timeline

- ✓ September-December, 2015. **Review/revise recreation site database (INFRA).** Intensive data review/editing to ensure data moving forward in the RSA process is as accurate as possible.
- ✓ January, 2016. **Rank all recreation sites using objective criteria.** Resulted in scores from 17 (lowest value) to 56 (highest value) out of a scale from 12-60.
- ✓ March, 2016 and ongoing. **Public Outreach.** Outreach efforts have included news releases, Board of County Commissioner briefings, and significant one-on-one communication with key stakeholders – both individuals and groups.
- ✓ March-April, 2016. **Assign “actions” for each site.** “Actions” were identified for each site from among 66 choices, ranging from “no change” to “decommission” and everything in between. These actions, also known as Management Options, were assigned following evaluation of each site using data analysis/cost evaluations, internal program/site knowledge, external feedback (local government, interest groups, other stakeholders), and internal feedback from the MBRTB Forest Leadership Team.
- ✓ August-September 2016. **Draft and review “Plan of Work” (POW).** The POW is the primary outcome of the RSA process, and lines out actions to be taken at each site (if any), to reach sustainability over the next five years.
- ✓ August 2016. **Review Draft POW with Forest Leadership Team (FLT).** Received preliminary approval from FLT to move forward. Significant changes to be reviewed by FLT before Regional Office briefing and public release.
- ✓ December 2016-January 2017. **Brief USFS Regional Recreation Director and Staff.** Share Executive Summary and Draft POW with Rocky Mountain Regional Office staff. Revise Draft POW based on substantive feedback.
- ✓ January - February 2017. **Release Draft POW to public, constituents, and local government.** Hold public meeting in Saratoga, WY, based on Line Officer discretion and interest.
- ✓ March, 2017. **Revise Draft POW** based on substantive feedback/new information.
- ✓ April, 2017. **Release Final POW to public, constituents, and local government.**
- ✓ Late 2017. **Initiate Forest-wide NEPA analysis** for proposed significant actions.

Summary of Draft Plan of Work (POW)

The following table shows a summary of Management Option Codes (MOCs) that indicate what is proposed at each site (if anything) over the five year life of the POW.

Management Option Code Chart		
MOC Category	MOC Count	MOC %
A - Decommission (all or partial)	13	4%
B - Closure	2	1%
C - Change Season	59	18%
D - Remove Or Eliminate Cost Source Or Service Season	21	7%
E - Reduce Service Frequency	2	1%
F - Increase/Improve Services	32	10%
G - Construct A New Site	0	0%
H - Change Operator	0	0%
I - Change Fees	44	14%
J - Change Capacity	7	2%
K - Site Conversion	0	0%
L - Replacement/Repair	77	24%
NC - No Change	63	20%
Total	320	

Note: All sites must have at least one code assigned, but some required more than one code. Total number of sites analyzed is 224.

Of note is the fact that no change is called for at 63 (about 20%) of the Forest's 224 developed recreation sites. An additional subset calls for administrative changes only, such as reducing maintenance frequency or changing the open season. Fifteen sites are proposed for decommissioning or closure. These sites were typically ranked low and/or exhibited high operating costs due to their location, may have poor overall facility condition, tend to have low visitation, usually lacked access to other nearby opportunities, and were not directly commented on during the initial public outreach (see following data).

The following data summarizes the public comments received during the development of the Draft RSA this past year. In total, the MBRTB received ten comments related to recreation.

- **Wilderness, Trail, Dispersed Recreation Comments** – Six comments received. Comments focus on wilderness, trail, and dispersed recreation management which is outside of the focus of the RSA process. The MBRTB passed these comments along to the appropriate recreation manager and they will be noted for future decisions related to these topics.

- **Ferndale Trailhead on Hahn's Peak Bears Ears Ranger District** – Three comments received. Comments focused on the Ferndale Trailhead on the Hahn's Peak Bears Ears Ranger District. Two comments identifying the area as a developed site they would like to see reopened, one comment asking for the Forest Service to keep it closed. Ferndale was identified for closure in the 2008 Recreation Facility Analysis and has remained closed for a few years. These comments are outside of the scope of the RSA because we are not looking to expand our developed recreation footprint into new areas. Expansion would significantly impact our ability to provide the expected level of customer service at existing sites. The RSA recommended to keep the site closed while exploring additional partnership opportunities with the City of Steamboat and the 2A trail expansion project.
- **Expansion of existing services on the Rabbit Ears Pass corridor (Highway 40) on the Hahn's Peak Bears Ears Ranger District** One comment received. Comment focused on the need to provide additional trash cans and service along the Rabbit Ears Pass corridor. Sites listed along the corridor are identified as potential fee areas and, as such, would require new trash services to justify their inclusion into the fee program or be included into a new Special Recreation Permit for specialized use of the area if eligible and acceptable to the Forest leadership and the public.

The "Action Summary Table" identified earlier in this Executive Summary lists every management option for the variety of sites across the Forest. This is intended to be an easily understood summary of RSA recommendations, while the more comprehensive table is available in the RSA Draft Plan of Work.