

**Assessment**

**Forest Plan Revision**

**Final Recreation Settings, Opportunities,  
and Access Report**

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# Recreation Settings, Opportunities, and Access

## Introduction

A draft of this report was released for public review on November 30, 2016 and feedback was requested by January 6, 2017. No changes were made to the final report based on public feedback.

This assessment provides information on many aspects of recreation and focuses on those specifically referenced in the 2012 Planning Rule:

- Recreation niches - Forestwide guidance for recreation settings and opportunities.
- Recreation setting - The social, managerial, and physical attributes of a place that, when combined, provide a distinct set of recreation opportunities. The Forest Service uses the recreation opportunity spectrum (ROS) to define recreation settings and categorize them into classes.
- Recreation opportunity - A specific recreation activity in a particular recreation setting pursued to enjoy the desired recreation experiences and other benefits that accrue. Recreation opportunities include nonmotorized, motorized, developed, and dispersed recreation on land, water, and in the air.
- Recreation access - The systems of roads and trails on which people travel to access certain recreation settings and opportunities.
- Recreation special uses and outfitter/guides - Recreation facilities and opportunities, owned and provided by private individuals, businesses, institutions and other organizations permitted to be located on the Custer Gallatin National Forest.
- Sustainable recreation - The set of recreation settings and opportunities on National Forest System lands that is ecologically, economically, and socially sustainable for present and future generations.

## Process and Methods

The Custer Gallatin used the best available data and science relevant to the plan area and management to inform the evaluation of conditions, trends, and risks to sustainability of the existing recreation opportunities, trails, and facilities where available. In particular, criteria applied to all data, studies, and reports supporting this assessment included (1) quality data and (2) the studies and reports used accepted and standardized scientific methodology and can be replicated. In compiling this assessment of the conditions and trends of the Custer Gallatin National Forest resources, goods, and services provided to the public, many major sources of information were reviewed and information incorporated. References included in this assessment reflect the most relevant documents, given the scope and scale of the assessment and determined to be best available scientific information.

## Scale

Recreation information is typically presented at two geographic scales: forestwide and by landscape area. The forestwide scale provides information on relevant Forest Service process and policy and overall direction for recreation. Recreation information by landscape area is more detailed and allows a reader interested in a specific area to find more area-specific information. Discussion of access to the Custer Gallatin National Forest also includes connections to roads and trails adjacent to the Forest.

Trends are evaluated at four scales: the Custer Gallatin National Forest, Forest Service Northern Region (Region 1), Greater Yellowstone Area, and the nation.

## **Current Forest Plan Direction**

Management of the recreation resource can be found throughout the Custer and Gallatin Forest Plans, with direction embedded within many management areas.

Key objectives and goals of both plans included the management of a range of developed, dispersed, and special use permitted opportunities in a variety of settings. The Custer Forest Plan generally provides more site-specific direction about recreation operations on the Beartooth District, while the Gallatin Forest Plan generally provides more broad objectives.

A clear objective for the management of recreation in the Gallatin Forest Plan was to recognize and manage for the high quality recreational, vegetative, and wildlife resources found on the Gallatin National Forest. The focus was on settings, facilities, access, infrastructure and road/trail management where identified as critical components in the management of the recreation resource. The Custer Forest Plan set the goal of resolving resource management conflicts in favor of maintaining or enhancing the recreation opportunities in the developed recreation management area include the vegetative setting.

Both forest plans speak to recreation special use management including ski area development and expansion, outfitter and guide permitting criteria, organization camp, and recreation event criteria.

A common element in the Custer and Gallatin Forest Plans is the management of recreation and wilderness in the context of the Greater Yellowstone Area. The Gallatin Forest Plan specifically speaks to the significance of the Greater Yellowstone Area and the objective to cooperate and coordinate management across that landscape. The Custer Forest Plan also directs the coordination in the Greater Yellowstone Area for the Beartooth District in recreation and wilderness.

Travel planning efforts have been conducted on both the Custer and Gallatin National Forests. These travel planning efforts resulted in four stand-alone decisions. The travel decision for the Gallatin National Forest addressed the entire national forest and was signed in 2006. Separate travel decisions were made each for the Sioux and Ashland Ranger Districts in 2009 and the Beartooth Ranger District in 2008. Each of the four travel decisions identified and established opportunities for public recreation use and access using the Gallatin's road and trail system, minimized or mitigated impacts on natural and cultural resources, and created enforceable travel management guidelines within the context of the individual planning areas.

The travel management planning process for the units identified the minimum road system necessary to meet the utilization (including recreation), protection, and administration needs of the district. Consistent with 36 Code of Federal Regulations 212.5(b)(1), the process involved the "science-based roads analysis" and "broad spectrum of interested and affected citizens, other state and federal agencies, and tribal governments" necessary for determining the minimum road system needed.

In addition, the travel decision for the Beartooth Ranger District resulted in a forest plan amendment that removed any site specific standards for specific routes on the Beartooth Ranger District from the Gallatin Forest Plan. The travel management decisions for the Custer National Forest addressed summer motorized uses in designating public motorized routes consistent with national policy. The Gallatin National Forest established programmatic and site-specific direction. At the site-specific level, for each

road and trail the Gallatin travel plan specified the types of uses that are appropriate. The Gallatin travel plan addressed all uses, including summer and winter, for motorized, mechanized, foot and horse travel. Winter-specific travel planning has not been completed for the Ashland, Sioux, or Beartooth Ranger Districts.

The Gallatin travel plan also established travel management goals, objectives, standards, and guidelines (programmatic direction) for the Gallatin National Forest as a whole and specific sub-areas referred to as travel planning areas. Goals and objectives provide a basis for future site-specific action proposals for management of the transportation system while standards and guidelines identify sideboards within which those actions must be designed.

The travel plan decisions came after years of robust public involvement, environmental analysis, and evaluation of tradeoffs and benefits. The resulting recreation opportunity maps and types of opportunity across the landscape demonstrates the commitment to provide a range of quality recreation experiences in the context of the forest. The Gallatin and Beartooth travel plans were the subject of litigation by a variety of stakeholders with final rulings as recent as 2014.

The Custer Gallatin Forest Plan will establish only programmatic level direction. It will not make site-specific travel planning designations, maintenance level determinations, operational choices, or project level decisions. The Forest Plan will set broad level context for sustainable recreation and trails management across the vast Custer Gallatin landscape. If higher level land management allocations result in inconsistencies with travel planning direction, subsequent travel plan amendments or modification may be necessary.

## **Existing Information Sources**

Much of recreation and special use data used for this assessment comes from the Forest Service infrastructure database, which is a georeferenced multi-resource database the Forest Service uses for data entry, retrieval, analysis, and display, referred to as Natural Resource Manager. This database is a collection of web-based data entry forms, reporting tools, and mapping tools (geographic information system [GIS]) that enable forests to manage and report information about their inventory of constructed features and land units. Use of GIS allows the Forest Service to visualize, analyze, interpret, and understand data to reveal relationships and patterns.

Visitor use and satisfaction data was assessed using information from the Forest Services' national visitor use monitoring project (USDA Forest Service 2008, 2009, 2013, 2014). This data was used to assess the current use as well as to explore future trends of recreation throughout the plan area, regionally and in the Greater Yellowstone Area. Information for this discussion was also gleaned from the following primary sources:

- The Northern Region sustainable recreation, heritage, wilderness strategy for 2015-2020(2015)
- The Gallatin travel plan and final environmental impact statement
- The Beartooth travel plan and final environmental impact statement
- The Custer and Gallatin recreation facilities analysis 2008
- The Draft Environmental Impact Statement for Forest Plan Amendments for Grizzly Bear Conservation for the Greater Yellowstone Area (GYA) National Forests (USDA 2004a)
- Recreation in the Greater Yellowstone Area – an Interagency Technical Report (USDA 2006a)

- Creating a Vibrant Future for Montana’s Outdoor Recreation Heritage, the Montana 2014–2018 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan.

## Existing Condition

### Recreation Settings

Recreation settings are the social, managerial, and physical attributes of a place that, when combined, provide a distinct set of recreation opportunities. The Forest Service uses several different means to describe recreation settings. Among the most important are the descriptions of scenic character and the recreation opportunity spectrum process. Additionally, forest recreation niches were identified through the recreation facilities analysis process. These niches convey the unique qualities of the forest’s recreation settings and opportunities when viewed within the larger context.

### Recreation Niches

Recreation niches are useful in conveying how the Custer Gallatin National Forest fits into the larger context and for determining the special, unique, or highly valued recreation opportunities across a landscape. In 2013, the Custer and Gallatin National Forests officially consolidated. The Custer Gallatin National Forest settings, special places, and recreation opportunities are each described in two niche statements developed through the Forest Service recreation facilities analysis processes that took place in 2008. The two niche statements have not been revisited since the consolidation so both statements are relevant when discussing the combined recreation niche of the much larger landscape.

The Region 1 niche product is useful in conveying how the Custer Gallatin National Forest fits in the bigger context, in this case, largely the State of Montana. Although not all recreation opportunities and settings are described, those that give the unit its identity, value, and uniqueness are captured. These niches begin to describe some of the distinctive roles and contributions the Custer Gallatin National Forest has when viewed within a larger context.

#### *Forest Service Region 1 Recreation Program Niche: Where Rural Meets Wild*

Wildlands connect with, and complement, vast expanses of rural settings and growing communities. Majestic scenery, clean water, and unique, charismatic wildlife that attracted the Northern Region’s first inhabitants continue to draw people seeking a high quality of life. The rich, colorful, and well preserved American Indian and Euro American heritage of the Northern Region, as reflected in living cultural traditions, historic buildings, and thousands of archeological sites; is accessible and protected for the benefit of future generations.

Hunting, fishing, and gathering products that were once life sustaining are now life enhancing. The Northern Region is a leader in facilitating collaboration between user groups, other public and private recreation providers, and communities. This protects open space and key access to the Northern Region that is vital to the delivery of quality, sustainable, recreation services. We remain relevant and responsive to communities, visitors, and changing climate. Outfitters and guides are an important connection to new and changing visitors. High value, low impact visitation through geo-tourism, and trail-based recreation, serve to link communities with wildlands and are regional in focus.

#### *Gallatin Recreation Program Niche: World Class Wildland Adventures*

The Gallatin National Forest and the waters of the Madison, Yellowstone, Shields, Gallatin, and Boulder Rivers sustain the lifestyle for nearby communities, while the spectacular peaks of the Absaroka, Bridger, Gallatin, and Madison Ranges are their backdrop. River corridors and high mountain trails are

the essence of the Gallatin National Forest. During any season, visitors and residents can enjoy world-class outdoor recreation opportunities.

The Absaroka-Beartooth and Lee Metcalf are classic high-mountain remote wilderness areas, while the Bangtails, the Crazies, and Cabin Creek add to the diversity of this mountain setting. Visitors enjoy watching this area come alive with a wide variety of unique wildlife that includes grizzly bears, wolves, and bison - an indication of the quality of this intact ecosystem. Guest (dude) ranching and historic Forest Service cabins provides alluring heritage resources. Forest wide, the snowmobile trails and backcountry ski zones make winter a favorite season. Geologic places of interest and research include Quake Lake, the Natural Bridge, and the Gallatin Petrified Forest. The scenery and the economic benefits as a result of the Gallatin National Forest supports the quality of life enjoyed by area residences and visitors.

- Corridors: River canyons and mountain roads and trails are keys to accessing the picture-postcard scenery and incredible opportunities in the backcountry.
- Dispersed backcountry: Accessible forest areas, both with and without roads (wilderness study area, roadless areas, and areas recommended for wilderness). This is the high country where visitors can challenge themselves in a variety of activities or just relax and enjoy the scenery.
- Wilderness: These vast, designated wilderness settings include portions of the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness and the Lee Metcalf Wilderness where humans learn their own capabilities in a primordial backcountry with some of the most respected wildlife in North America - wolves, grizzly, and wolverines.
- Snow: Overlays other settings, during the winter, access, scenery, and use patterns change. Consistent and long lasting snow transforms the Gallatin into a winter wonderland.

### *Gallatin Forestwide Activities, Opportunities, and Experiences*

Multiple opportunities, including those that accommodate visitors with disabilities, are available around the Gallatin: hiking, horseback riding, wildlife viewing, big game hunting, fishing, and photography. Outfitters and guides help provide a quality recreation experience for activities consistent with the niche.

- Corridors: Developed and dispersed camping, interpretive sites, high country trailheads, floating and kayaking, lake boating, hunting and fishing, driving for pleasure, viewing scenery, climbing, cabin rentals, resorts, all-terrain vehicle riding, hiking, mountain biking, wildlife viewing.
- Dispersed backcountry: Hiking, all-terrain vehicle riding, hunting and fishing, backpacking, horseback riding, outfitter and guide camps, mountain biking, and opportunities for solitude.
- Wilderness: Hiking, wildlife viewing, photography, backpacking, hunting and fishing, horse packing, outfitter and guide camps, climbing, and opportunities for solitude.
- Snow: Downhill skiing, snowmobiling, backcountry skiing, cross-country skiing, ice climbing, dog sledding, snowshoeing, and ice fishing.

### *Custer Recreation Program Niche: Uncommon Landscapes*

The jagged peaks and striking buttes of the Custer National Forest offer expansive views of the geologic and cultural changes that have formed this landscape over eons of time. These diverse landscapes, from the peaks and alpine lake plateaus to the rolling pine forests and prairies, provide quality habitat for wildlife viewing and hunting. Old west traditions of the local communities and Native American cultures

remind us of our past as we evolve to the new west. Visitors enjoy solitude and the natural beauty of the forest while driving, hiking, and learning about this special place.

The Custer National Forest has a range of unique landscapes, heritage resources, and places including the Beartooth Scenic Byway, Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness, Castles and Capital Rock National Landmarks, Tongue River Breaks, Pryor Mountains, and Granite Peak. Visitors value the ability to recreate on undeveloped public land in relative solitude surrounded by outstanding scenery. The drive through this ecologically diverse forest is part of the experience.

- *Vistas*: Accessible buttes and peaks scattered throughout the Custer National Forest offer stunning views of geology, wildlife, and a variety of ecosystems.
- *Beartooth Front*: The Beartooth Front rises dramatically from the plains, with eroded hogbacks of limestone visible in places, and glacially carved canyons intersecting its length. It is an intensely used area along the national forest boundary between the wilderness and adjacent urban areas.
- *Wilderness*: The Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness rises abruptly from the Montana prairie and is complete with active glaciers, towering peaks, and dotted alpine lakes. Massive granite plateaus and extensive open country at high elevations offer great views and quality fish and wildlife habitat. It is a unique piece of the Greater Yellowstone Area.
- *Remote*: Hills and buttes of ponderosa pine rising above rolling grasslands includes a system of roads for passenger cars to high-clearance vehicles. Visitors may drive for miles without encountering others, although grazing and other management is evident.

### *Custer Forestwide Activities, Opportunities, and Experiences*

Visitors to the Custer view the natural beauty of the forest while driving, hiking, horseback riding, and camping. Hunting includes big game, turkey, and birds. Interpretation and education are part of all programs. Partners help provide a quality recreation program on the Custer National Forest.

- *Vistas*: Access over easy, as well as difficult, roads take visitors to key vistas with expansive views of the forest.
- *Beartooth Front*: This narrow strip on the forest boundary provides intense day use opportunities and access to the wilderness. Higher amenities and overnight camping occur here. This setting includes the Red Lodge Mountain ski area and the Beartooth All-American Road – a gateway to Yellowstone National Park.
- *Wilderness*: Day hikes and backpacking or equestrian treks allow visitors to experience solitude, self-discovery, and abundant alpine lake fishing.
- *Remote*: Visitors have unstructured experiences and easy access to sites developed to protect the resource. Designated, well-managed off-highway vehicle opportunities are focused in this setting.

### **Recreation Opportunity Spectrum**

The Forest Service uses the recreation opportunity spectrum process to define recreation settings and categorize them into six distinct classes: primitive, semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi-primitive motorized, roaded natural, rural, and urban (36 Code of Federal Regulations 219.19). Similar to land use classifications (for example, residential, industrial, rural) used in city or county planning efforts, recreation opportunity spectrum classes serve as a zoning framework for planning and managing recreation settings and opportunities, both existing and desired, across National Forest System lands.



Specific recreation opportunity spectrum classes convey: the physical setting, mode(s) of transportation, anticipated concentration of people, and levels of management and infrastructure. By identifying recreation settings, the Custer Gallatin National Forest can better manage to provide a sustainable set of recreation opportunities for future generations and visitors can select where they recreate based on what they want to do, what equipment they want to bring, and the type of experience they want. Please see maps in Appendix A for recreation opportunity spectrum maps by forest and landscape area.

As noted in the forest recreation niche descriptions, the Custer Gallatin National Forest has a wide range of recreation opportunities and settings. The assessment will discuss the existing recreation opportunity spectrum on the Custer Gallatin. The existing recreation opportunity spectrum maps were generated following the national recreation opportunity spectrum inventory mapping protocol dated July, 2003 and incorporate the relevant travel plan or forest plan decisions. At the forest plan revision scale, desired recreation opportunity spectrum classes will be used as the zoning framework to synchronize the characteristics of recreation settings such as: scenery, access, facilities and other infrastructure and reflect integration with other resource values.

Five of the six of the recreation opportunity spectrum classes are found within the plan area. Table 1 defines these classes.

**Table 1. Recreation opportunity spectrum classes and definitions**

<b>Recreation Opportunity Spectrum Class</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Primitive(P)	Describes large, remote, wild, and predominately unmodified landscapes. Areas with no motorized activity and little probability of seeing other people. Includes most wilderness areas.
Semi-Primitive Nonmotorized (SPNM)	Areas of the Custer Gallatin National Forest managed for nonmotorized use. Uses include hiking and equestrian trails, mountain bikes and other non-motor mechanized equipment. Rustic facilities and opportunity for exploration, challenge, and self-reliance.
Semi-Primitive Motorized (SPM)	Backcountry areas used primarily by motorized users on designated routes. Roads and trails designed for off-highway vehicles and high-clearance vehicles. Offers motorized opportunities for exploration, challenge, and self-reliance. Rustic facilities. Often provide portals into adjacent primitive or semi-primitive nonmotorized areas.
Roaded Natural (RN)	Often referred to as front country recreation areas. Accessed by open system roads that can accommodate sedan travel. Facilities are less rustic and more developed (campgrounds, trailheads, etc.). Often provide access points for adjacent semi-primitive motorized, semi-primitive nonmotorized, and primitive settings.
Rural (R)	Highly developed recreation sites and modified natural settings. Easily accessed by major highway. Located within populated areas where private land and other land holdings are nearby and obvious. Facilities are designed for user comfort and convenience.
Urban * <i>Not currently represented on the Custer Gallatin NF</i>	Areas with highly developed recreation sites and extensively modified natural settings. Often located adjacent to or within cities or high population areas. Opportunities for solitude or silence are few.

Table 2 below demonstrates the variety in existing mapped summer recreation opportunity spectrum settings by acreage across the Custer Gallatin. The Custer Gallatin National Forest is relatively evenly distributed between primitive (designated wilderness), semi primitive nonmotorized, semi-primitive motorized, and roaded natural classes. As displayed in the below the nonmotorized classes represent

about 60 percent of the Custer Gallatin. The rural setting is much lower represented, with less than 3 percent or about 80,000 acres on the Custer Gallatin National Forest. There are currently no areas that meet the urban definition.

**Table 2. Summer recreation opportunity spectrum by class and landscape area**

Landscape Area	P	SPNM	SPM	RN	R	TOTALS
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	1,056,949	484,102	215,037	340,579	79,149	2,175,814
Bridger, Bangtail, Crazy Mountains	0	91,022	52,675	59,452	1,501	204,650
Pryor Mountains	0	29,654	22,442	25,892	0	77,987
Ashland	0	109,206	279,049	114,005	0	502,260
Sioux	0	61,690	59,768	53,253	2,986	177,697
Total Acres by Class	1,056,949	775,673	628,971	593,179	83,635	3,138,407
Percentage of Forest	33%	25%	20%	19%	3%	

Table 3 below displays the existing mapped winter recreation opportunity spectrum settings by acreage across the Custer Gallatin. The most notable change between summer and winter is an increase in the semi primitive motorized settings with a corresponding decrease in the roaded natural class and to a lesser extent the semi primitive nonmotorized class, this shift generally reflects the management of seasonally restricted roads for the purposes of winter recreation opportunities, when roads become winter trails.

**Table 3. Winter recreation opportunity spectrum by class and landscape area**

Landscape Area	P	SPNM	SPM	RN	R	TOTALS
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	1,045,357	475,813	417,152	157,728	79,155	2,175,205
Bridger, Bangtail, Crazy Mountains	0	84,057	118,054	1,773	1,501	205,384
Pryor Mountains	0	29,654	22,442	25,892	0	77,987
Ashland	0	109,206	279,049	114,004	0	502,260
Sioux	0	61,690	59,768	53,253	2,986	177,696
Total Acres by Class	1,045,357*	760,420	896,465	352,649	83,642	3,138,533*
Percentage of Forest	34%	24%	28%	11%	3%	

## Recreation Opportunities

A recreation opportunity is an opportunity to participate in a specific recreation activity in a particular recreation setting to enjoy desired recreation experiences and other benefits that accrue. Recreation opportunities include nonmotorized, motorized, developed, and dispersed recreation on land, water, and in the air (36 Code of Federal Regulations 219.19). The Custer Gallatin National Forest manages for a set of outdoor recreation opportunities that are consistent with the recreation niches (identified above) and recreation opportunity spectrum classifications. These opportunities may be provided by the Forest Service directly, such as a trail or developed campground or under a special use permit, such as a ski area or summer resort.

An interactive map that includes many Custer Gallatin recreation opportunities can be found by at <http://www.fs.fed.us/ivm/index.html>. Additional maps for reference as well as instructions for download can be found on <http://www.fs.usda.gov/main/custergallatin/maps-pubs>.

### *Developed Recreation Opportunities*

The Custer Gallatin has a robust developed recreation program that provides a wide range of opportunities appropriate to their recreation settings. Many Custer Gallatin National Forest visitors rely on recreation infrastructure to support quality recreation endeavors and national forest visits. Developed recreation opportunities are located at specific locations or sites and have infrastructure or features designed to protect the resources, reduce conflicts, and provide for safety. The types of features and infrastructure often offered at developed sites are developed roads and parking areas, trailhead bulletin boards and information, toilets, tables, fire rings, water systems, interpretive signs, fee stations, etc. Depending upon the location and the facilities available, these developed sites may or may not have fees associated with them.

The tables and discussion below do not detail the entire list of recreation facilities or infrastructure on the Custer Gallatin National Forest but represent some key opportunities provided for the recreating public. Other non-recreation-based infrastructure features, including administrative cabins, water systems, forest offices, staff quarters, and some historic sites, are discussed in the Infrastructure report (Shimek 2017) and the Cultural and Historic Resources and Uses report (LaPoint and Bergstrom 2017).

### **Recreation Rental Cabins**

There are 27 recreation rental opportunities; 25 cabins, and 2 lookouts available to the public for rent. Built primarily in the 1920s and 1930s for use by early Forest Rangers, the cabins offer visitors a chance to camp in the forest in a rustic, old-time setting. Some of the cabins have electricity. All have either wood or electric stoves for cooking and heating. Very few have indoor plumbing. Some of the cabins are located right on a road; others require users to hike, ski, or snowmobile to them. Disproportionally located on the west side of the Custer Gallatin National Forest, 21 rentals are located in the Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains landscape area, 4 are located in the Bridger, Bangtail, Crazy Mountains landscape area, and 2 are located in the Ashland landscape area. None are located in the Pryor Mountains or the Sioux District.

Rental fees on the Custer Gallatin for cabins range from 20 to 50 dollars per night with the bulk of the sites costing 30 or 35 dollars per night. The Forest Service retains and uses a portion of these collected uses fees to reinvest in the maintenance and operation of these sites under the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act authority. In 2015, the Forest Service collected approximately \$150,000 in rental fees at the twenty seven facilities. That amount reflects a small increase in cabin rental revenue. Forestwide rental cabin occupancy increased from about 46 percent occupancy in 2010 up to 57 percent occupancy in 2015.

Appendix B includes an occupancy comparison for each rental cabin from 2010 to 2015. Occupancy ranges from a low of 15 percent to a high of 93 percent. The condition of the facilities at each of the rental cabins varies widely. Although key investments have been made to resolve critical health and safety issues there is a back log of operational and deferred maintenance work that is not being achieved under current budget scenarios.

### Developed Camping and Picnicking Opportunities

The 63 developed campgrounds and picnic areas on the Custer Gallatin provide a wide range of settings and levels of development. Most of the picnic areas and campgrounds are located along or near lakes or rivers and are usually in forested settings. In general, these locations developed over time, many after World War II when family camping started to become very popular. To protect resources, facilitate camping and picnicking opportunities, and decrease conflicts, the Forest Service developed areas by adding facilities and designed camp and picnic sites, roads and information boards.

All of the campgrounds on the Custer Gallatin are consistent with the nationally-recognized niche of Forest Service campgrounds being on the rustic end of the spectrum. None of the campgrounds on the Custer Gallatin have flush toilets, showers, or constructed playgrounds for children, though some have pressurized water systems or hand pumps. The campgrounds range from very rustic areas with no facilities to large, more developed sites with amenities such as electrical hookups for recreational vehicles, accessible interpretive trails, and safety features, such as bear-resistant food storage containers.

Campgrounds and picnic areas on the Custer Gallatin are operated and maintained either directly by the Forest Service or by a concessionaire. Table 4 displays the breakdown of the number of campgrounds, their operation method, and whether they are non-fee or require campers or picnickers to pay a fee. None of the Forest Service-operated campgrounds or picnic areas are available for reservation, while many of the concessionaire-operated sites are available for reservation.

**Table 4. Custer Gallatin National Forest campgrounds by operator and fee charged**

Campgrounds	FS Operated-Non Fee	FS Operated-Fee	Concession Operated	Total Number
Madison, Henry’s, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	12	14	23	49
Bridger, Bangtail, Crazy Mountains	2	2	0	4
Pryor Mountains	1	0	0	1
Ashland	4	0	0	4
Sioux	5	0	0	5
Totals	24	16	23	63

At the 16 Forest Service-operated campgrounds where fees are collected, the price ranges from 5 dollars to 9 dollars per night. The fees at concession operated campgrounds range from 15 to 30 dollars for a single site and 45 to 100 dollars for a group site or picnic pavilion.

Appendix B, includes a breakdown of campground occupancy comparing 2010 to 2015. Estimated campground occupancy, based on reservation data has increased by an average of 10 percent across the Custer Gallatin National Forest with the highest occupancy rates in the campgrounds around Bozeman at around 40 percent for sites in Hyalite Canyon. Campground utilization is highest on weekends, holidays, and when school is not in session.

In 2015, approximately 90,000 dollars in Forest Service campground fees were collected on the Custer Gallatin, which is a slight increase from the prior year (2015 Point of Sales System report). This increase

was somewhat localized to campgrounds near the Yellowstone National Park entrance gates in Gardiner, which have reported increased occupancy likely associated with park visitor overflow.

### Other Developed Recreation and Facilities

In addition to the cabin, camping, and picnicking opportunities described above, the Custer Gallatin National Forest offers developed interpretive sites, visitor centers, fishing sites, wildlife observation and viewing sites, fire towers, and many other developed recreation opportunities. Table 5 displays the geographic location of these sites. The Earth Quake Lake Visitor Center, the Main Boulder Historic Ranger Station, and the OTO Dude Ranch are discussed in the section of this report titled “Fostering Greater Connections”. The Rendezvous ski trails are discussed in the “Winter Trails Opportunities” section, although the system does rely on developed facilities such as toilets, warming huts, and the biathlon range.

The type of developed recreation facility on the Custer Gallatin National Forest that is most numerous is the trailhead. This reflects the niche of the Custer Gallatin as offering a wide variety of trail-based and backcountry opportunities. Trailheads range from those having designed, constructed, and surfaced parking, horse facilities, vault toilets, and extensive information and interpretation kiosks to those with only informal parking areas with a small bulletin board or sign.

**Table 5. Other developed recreation sites and facilities managed and maintained by the Custer Gallatin National Forest**

Landscape Area	Boating Sites	Interp Site	Picnic Areas	Observation/ Wildlife Viewing	FS Ski Area Nordic	Trailheads	Totals
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	11	18	16	5	1	150	201
Bridger, Bangtail, Crazy Mountains	0	0	2	3	0	27	32
Pryor Mountains	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Ashland	0	0	2	0	0	0	2
Sioux	0	0	1	1	0	0	2
Totals	11	18	22	9	1	177	238

### Dispersed Recreation Opportunities

Dispersed recreation consists of those activities that take place outside developed recreation areas. Over two-thirds of Custer Gallatin National Forest visitors come to engage in dispersed activities. Once on the Custer Gallatin, over 86 percent of visitors participate in dispersed recreation (NVUM 2013, 2014). That accounts for nearly 2.6 million dispersed area visitors. Types of dispersed activities include, but are not limited to, camping, hiking, fishing, hunting, gathering forest products, river use, skiing, recreational shooting, climbing, and snowmobiling. Management of dispersed recreation has inherently different challenges based on the diverse types of use and large numbers of users, limited infrastructure, and visitors generally seeking an environment with fewer management controls and greater level of self-reliance.

In 2009, the Northern Region began developing a standardized protocol for inventorying and monitoring resource conditions of areas associated with dispersed recreation. The Custer Gallatin began this inventory outside wilderness in 2014. The focus has been primarily adjacent to main forest access

routes, with a priority on concentrated use areas, with limited or no infrastructure and/or facilities outside of the access route and directional signage.

Dispersed inventories completed to date have located over 1,332 individual sites outside wilderness. Additional inventory is being completed summer 2016 in a variety of locations including Cooke City, Gardiner Basin, Crazy Mountains, Gallatin Canyon, and other areas. The Custer Gallatin National Forest’s long-term goal is to have comprehensive information about dispersed recreation use across the Custer Gallatin. Location, condition, use type, concentration, and other collected information would provide managers with a more comprehensive understanding about dispersed use particularly in concentrated use areas such as peaks, lake basins, hunting areas, shooting areas, river corridors, or other destinations.

As with developed recreation opportunities, there is a wide range of management of dispersed recreation opportunities. Dispersed campsites have been designated in some popular, heavily used drainages, such as Hyalite Canyon or the Main Boulder Canyon, where site delineation and some development was needed to manage the level of dispersed use while protecting social and ecological resources. On other parts of the Custer Gallatin National Forest, such as Ashland, delineation is not necessary because of the level and seasonality of use. The range of management controls, designated areas, and prohibitions vary across the Custer Gallatin and are imbedded in travel planning and Forest Plan decisions.

Table 6 reflects the previously discussed dispersed inventory and the wilderness campsite inventory, which has been an ongoing effort since the 1990s as discussed in the Existing Designated Areas report (Oswald 2017).

**Table 6. Inventoried dispersed recreation sites by forest plan landscape area**

	Dispersed Campsites	Wilderness Campsites	Day Use Area	Fishing/River Site	Climbing Area	Total
Madison, Henry’s, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	810	1,697	110	123	8	2,748
Bridger, Bangtail, Crazy Mountains	68	0	2	0	0	70
Pryor Mountains	21	0	0	0	0	21
Ashland	92	0	0	0	0	92
Sioux	95	0	3	0	0	98
Totals	1,086	1,697	115	123	8	3,029

### *Recreation Special Uses*

Recreation special use permits are issued to private businesses, individuals, institutions, and nonprofit groups to provide for occupancy and use of the national forest beyond what is normally available to the public. Permitted recreation uses provide specific recreational opportunities to the public and deliver economic benefits to rural economics. Examples of commercial enterprises requiring permits include ski resorts, outfitting and guiding service, resorts, and organizational camps. Noncommercial recreation uses are those that require special use specific groups, such as clubs, or are used by individuals and single families, such as recreation residences. The Forest Service issues these permits under the authority of a variety of specific laws. Table 7 displays recreation special use by type and area.

**Table 7. Recreation special uses by type and area**

Landscape Area	Outfitter and Guides	Recreation Residences	Alpine and Nordic Ski Areas	Organization Camps	Recreation Resorts	Shooting Ranges	Recreation Events	Total
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	160*	291	2	6	3	1	40	463
Bridger, Bangtail, Crazy Mountains	9	0	2	0	0	0	10	11
Pryor Mountains	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ashland	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	2
Sioux	4	0	0	1	0	0	0	5
Total:	175	291	4	7	3	1	50	481

\*Outfitter number includes average annual temporary and priority permit holders

### Outfitter and Guides

Approximately 175 outfitter and guide permittees operate on the Custer Gallatin. The six operators on the Ashland and Camp Crook District exclusively provide hunting services. The remaining 169 operators provide a wide range of year-round services as demonstrated in Table 8. Horseback trail rides and rafting and boating are the two activity types with the most authorized days on the Custer Gallatin and account for over of 60,000 user days. Environmental education, fishing, hunting, and hiking and backpacking are the next highest authorized activities and primarily occur in the summer and fall. In winter, snowmobile guiding and rental in West Yellowstone accounts for the largest number of service days.

In 2015, the Custer Gallatin initiated a programmatic look at the outfitting and guiding program to help inform local management about existing levels of utilization, need, and capacity. The Custer Gallatin National Forest has not accepted new proposals in recent history because of the need to complete that programmatic effort. However, the Custer Gallatin receives dozens of requests annually from commercial and noncommercial operators that would like priority permit authorization to operate on the national forest. Recent requests from proponents include survival training, helicopter skiing, additional yurt operations, and environmental-education-based university classes.

**Table 8. Permitted outfitter and guide opportunities**

Permitted Activity Types	Approximate Authorized Days 2015
Backpacking	2,500
Boating/Rafting	28,000
Biking	110
Dog Sledding	350
Yurt/Camping	300
Environmental/Adventure Education	6,000

Permitted Activity Types	Approximate Authorized Days 2015
Fishing	4,250
Hiking	3,100
Horseback Trail Rides	32,500
Hunting	5,600
Shuttles/Livery	500
Mountaineering	500
Rock Climbing	5,750
Ice Climbing	725
Skiing	1,500
Snowmobiling	11,000
Snowshoeing	150
Wagon Rides	50
<b>2015 Authorized Days</b>	<b>102,885</b>

### Recreation Residence Cabins

Recreation residences are privately-owned cabins located on National Forest System land, authorized by special use permits that last 20 years. Permit holders pay an annual fee for their permit. The recreation residence program began under the Term Occupancy Act of 1915 with the Forest Service setting aside summer home tracts with lots available for the public to apply and construct summer homes on National Forest System land under a term special use permit. The original intent of creating summer home tracts and lots was to encourage recreation and public use of the national forests. On the Custer Gallatin, there are a total of 293 recreation residences, which is the greatest number of all Northern Region national forests. Table 9 displays number of recreation residences by ranger district. Nationally, there are approximately 14,000 permitted recreation residences on National Forest System lands.

Per national and regional Forest Service Handbook direction, no special use permits will be authorized for construction of new cabins on new lots, but because the cabins (not the land) are privately-owned, they may be sold by the current owners and permit holders. Often this is done by the use of a real estate agent. The annual permit fee amount is directed by the Cabin Fee Act that was passed by Congress in December 2014. By terms of their permits, cabin owners are required to submit any requests for changes to the land and the exterior of their cabins or other permitted structures so Forest Service staff can analyze potential resource impacts, including impacts to the eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places. Most recreation residence permits authorize a main cabin, along with other facilities such as a septic drain field or outhouse, a well, underground plumbing or informal, seasonal surface water lines, a shed or a boat access channel or boat dock (along Hebgen Lake).

In 2007 to 2008, prior to the last analysis for reissuance of 20-year permits, the Gallatin National Forest went through the public process of creating a detailed Forest Service Handbook supplement for the administration of recreation residence permits. Before that time, the only guidance for administering this program were in the national and regional Forest Service manual and handbook and the Gallatin Forest Plan (1987), which included these two standards:

“Authorization of most existing recreation residences will continue into the foreseeable future. An assessment of the continuance of a recreation residence permit will be based upon the need for a higher public use.



Recreation residences will not exceed 1,500 square feet of roofed or enclosed floor space. Existing buildings in excess of 1,500 square feet will be allowed to remain. New construction in excess of 1,500 square feet will be permitted only if needed to correct health or safety problems.”

In 2010, the Beartooth District of the Custer National Forest created a Forest Service Handbook supplement as well. The recreation residence cabins are mostly located on the Hebgen, Bozeman, and Beartooth Ranger Districts with a smaller amount on the Yellowstone District.

**Table 9. Recreation residence locations**

District	Number of permitted recreation residences
Ashland	0
Beartooth	96
Bozeman	86
Gardiner	0
Hebgen	80
Sioux	0
Yellowstone	31
Total Permits	293

### Ski Area Resorts

There are two alpine ski areas (see Table 10) and two Nordic ski areas that currently operate under special use permit on the Custer Gallatin. These areas hold somewhat unique management allocations and require specific vegetation, safety, and recreation management.

**Table 10. Ski area resorts**

Landscape Area	Ski Area	Location	2014-2015 visitation	2015-2016 visitation
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Red Lodge Mountain	Located along the eastern front of the Beartooth Mountains, approximately 6 miles west of the town of Red Lodge.	87,805	66,914
Bridger, Bangtail, Crazy Mountains	Bridger Bowl	Located approximately 15 miles north of Bozeman in the Bridger Mountains. With the base operations on private property accessing a variety of ski terrain on the Custer Gallatin National Forest.	204,501	244,916
		Visitation	292,306	311,830

Bohart Nordic ski area is located approximately 18 miles north of Bozeman in the Bridger Mountains. Two trails and approximately 8 kilometers are located on the Custer Gallatin National Forest, the remaining operation and all of the base facilities are on private property. Lone Mountain Ranch Nordic area is located in Big Sky. Approximately 10 kilometers of Forest Service Roads 166B and 166D and Forest Service Trail #16 are operated as groomed routes under special use permit. All of the base area and the remaining operation is on private property.

## Recreation Resorts

There are three commercial, privately owned resorts located on the Custer Gallatin National Forest. All are located on the Hebgen Ranger District in West Yellowstone. These commercial resorts are permitted under 20-year special use permits. Per the terms on their permits, any changes to the land or the exterior of their buildings must be submitted to the Forest Service for analysis of potential resource impacts. Authorized by legislation dating to 1915, the resorts pay annual fees to the Treasury Department (not to the Custer Gallatin National Forest) calculated based upon the graduated rate fee system. Table 11 lists the resorts within the plan area and the services offered through the special use permit.

**Table 11. Custer Gallatin recreation resorts**

Resort Name	Location	Services
Camp Fire Lodge	Located along Madison River	Cabins, camping, water access, food, laundry, etc.
Covered Wagon Ranch	Along Highway 191 at the mouth of the Taylor Fork drainage	Cabins, food, fishing, horse and hunting trips (authorized by a separate outfitter and guide permit)
Madison Arm Resort	Located on Hebgen Lake	Cabins, campground, marina, activities

## Organizational Camps

There are seven organizational camps currently operating in the plan area (see Table 12), under the most recent authority of the National Forest Organizational Camp Fee Improvement Act of 2003, which authorized the use and occupancy of National Forest System land for the purposes of “Organizational camps, such as those administered by the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and faith-based and community-based organizations, provide a valuable service to young people, individuals with a disability, and their families by promoting physical, mental, and spiritual health through activities conducted in a natural environment.”

**Table 12. Custer Gallatin organization camps**

Organization Camp Name	Landscape Area	District
Camp Needmore	Sioux	Sioux
Billings Lions Club	Madison, Henry’s, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Beartooth
Hyalite Junior Camp	Madison, Henry’s, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Bozeman
Mimanagish Camp	Madison, Henry’s, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Yellowstone
Templed Hills Camp	Madison, Henry’s, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Yellowstone
Timber Crest Girl Scout Camp	Madison, Henry’s, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Beartooth
Westminster Spires	Madison, Henry’s, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Beartooth

## Other Recreation Permits

The Custer Gallatin National Forest permits approximately 50 recreation and competitive events annually, including activities from endurance racing to national ski competitions. These events largely occur on the Hebgen Lake and Bozeman Ranger Districts around the communities of West Yellowstone and Bozeman respectively.

## Recreation Access

The Custer Gallatin National Forest currently manages approximately 3,100 miles of summer trails, and about 615 miles of winter trails (400 miles of snowmobile trails, and 215 miles of cross-country ski trails). Driving for pleasure has long been a favored activity on national forests and in Montana. Approximately 1,442 miles of the Custer Gallatin National Forest road system is open to public travel by passenger cars and trucks today (not including other public roads – State, County, Federal Highways). Both roads and trails currently open to motorized vehicles have a variety of seasonal closures to protect wildlife, minimize erosion and prevent damage to the facility.

Access to and through the Custer Gallatin National Forest is facilitated year-round and in a number of ways. Visitors select their access based on their preferred setting, experience, and mode of transportation. Roads, motorized trails, nonmotorized trails, and rivers enable Custer Gallatin National Forest visitors to walk, bike, boat, ride, or drive to their destination. Trail access on the Custer Gallatin is serviced by nearly 175 trailheads, from primitive to highly developed areas for parking, information, and safety. With few plowed Forest Service roads, many areas of the Custer Gallatin National Forest become less accessible in winter. Others with good access become destinations.

In some cases, the travel routes themselves are the destination and some instances are recognized by unique designations, such as the Beartooth Highway Scenic Byway- All American Road. This unique route enables visitors to experience unique vistas, wildlife, and scenery (see discussion in the Existing Designated Areas report). Special designations for travel corridors also include the Nez Perce Auto Tour, national recreation trails, national scenic trails such as the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail, and a number of eligible wild and scenic rivers. Regardless of special designation, the majority of the transportation network affords visitors the opportunity to view diverse wildlife and spectacular scenery.

Custer Gallatin National Forest access, through roads and trails, links local communities with forest settings and facilitates backyard recreation opportunities for residents. Additionally, adjacent areas provide road and trailhead access to the plan area. For example, the Bozeman Main Street to the Mountains trail system, trails located in Yellowstone National Park, the Shoshone National Forest, the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest, the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest, the Bureau of Land Management, State, municipal, and private property all provide access links to the Custer Gallatin National Forest.

### *Summer Trails*

Table 13 demonstrate the range of road and trail opportunities by Landscape Area in miles. Approximately 40 percent or 1,200 trail miles on the Custer Gallatin are open to motorized use with about 40 percent of those miles located on the Ashland and Sioux Districts. The 541 miles of trail located on the eastern units are open to full size and passenger vehicles but are intended to provide more of a trail experience in contrast to a passenger vehicle road. Approximately 23 percent of summer nonmotorized trails are open to mountain bikes, with the remaining foot and horse use miles located primarily on the montane units. Motorized trails also allow, and are used, for mechanized, foot and horse traffic. Mountain bike trails allow, and are used for, foot and horse use. Approximately 950 miles of trail are located within one of the two designated wilderness areas, with the bulk of those miles in the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness.

**Table 13. Summer trails miles by allowable uses**

Allowable Uses	Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Bridger, Bangtail, Crazy Mountains	Pryor Mountains	Ashland	Sioux	Totals in Miles
All Vehicles	0	0	49	405	87	541
ATV/UTV	226	99	0	16	0	342
Motorcycle	262	108	0	0	0	370
Bicycle	557	142	5	0	0	704
Stock	1,144	41	0	0	0	1,185
Foot	17	3	0.12	0	0	21
Totals in Miles	2,206	393	55	422	87	3,162

### *Winter Groomed Trails and Over-Snow Motorized Areas*

The Gallatin has a reputation for being a winter recreationist’s paradise. With over 400 miles of groomed or marked snowmobile trails, 215 miles of groomed or marked ski trails, and endless backcountry opportunities, winter enthusiasts have a wide range of choices for adventure. The Rendezvous ski trail system is a world-class public Nordic ski center outside West Yellowstone, Montana, with over 30 kilometers of professionally groomed classic and skating trails. Smaller grooming operations managed with partners or by the Forest Service can also be found in Bozeman, Gardiner, and Red Lodge. Bridger Ski Foundation, a partner in Bozeman, also provides grooming and winter recreation on a variety of community owned and operated trails.

Private Nordic centers (Bohart and Lone Mountain Ranch discussed in the “Recreation Uses” section of this report) offer additional high quality groomed and marked ski trails under special use permit with the Custer Gallatin National Forest. Bridger Bowl ski area in Bozeman and Red Lodge Mountain in Red Lodge are long-time, local downhill ski areas and are under permit by the Forest Service. One other downhill resort – Big Sky-Moonlight Basin – adjacent to the Custer Gallatin National Forest offers abundant alpine ski terrain nearby:.

Other dispersed winter activities including backcountry skiing, snowshoeing, and ice climbing have been growing in popularity. Areas with good winter access, trailhead parking, or other developed recreation infrastructure are often popular for these activities and see more winter pressure. With improvements in technology and safety equipment, winter sports are becoming more accessible to the general recreationist particularly in and around the mountain based communities.

Snowmobile trails are jointly managed across the Gallatin National Forest with local snowmobile clubs and the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks being the principal partners in grooming and maintenance. The West Yellowstone Chamber of Commerce is also involved with the grooming program for both ski and snowmobile trails.

The Gallatin National Forest is the destination for thousands of snowmobiling visitors, particularly near Cooke City and West Yellowstone. These two areas provide unique snowmobiling opportunities. Cooke City is known for big mountain, backcountry, and remote riding with less focus on groomed routes. West Yellowstone is known for its well-designed, groomed trails system that provide quality trail riding experience while also providing access to unique backcountry riding. Other popular areas include Big Sky snowmobile trail, Cabin Creek Recreation Area, Buck Ridge near Big Sky, the east Bridger’s near Fairy Lake, and the west slopes of the Crazy Mountains.

Table 14 reflects acres open to snowmobiling under the current Gallatin travel plan and the Custer Forest Plan decisions. However, allowing use does not necessarily mean the area currently provides a quality snowmobiling opportunity. For example, the Sioux Ranger District, although not restricted does not represent a dependable snowmobile riding opportunity. Areas in the closed acres include congressional designations but also include other management area focusses for nonmotorized recreation, wildlife, recommended wilderness or resource protection.

**Table 14. Acres open to snowmobiling**

Landscape Areas	Acres Open	Total Acres	Percent
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	749,068	2,343,529*	32
Bridger, Bangtail, Crazy Mountains	173,826	321,701	54
Pryor Mountains	71,141	77,944	91
Ashland	462,512	501,596	92
Sioux	178,625	178,625	100
Totals	1,635,173	3,423,395	48

\*1,051,322 acres are designated wilderness

### Roads

Roads are the primary conduits that recreationists use to access the Custer Gallatin National Forest. Roads often provide direct access to recreational facilities, such as campground, trailheads, picnic areas, and interpretive sites. Sometimes the road itself becomes the recreational experience, such as when people drive roads simply for pleasure, for viewing scenery, or both. As mentioned above, travel plans dictate which roads are open and for how long.

The Custer Gallatin operates approximately 1,442 miles of road for the purpose of public access and administration of the national forest. Table 15 demonstrates that nearly half of those miles have some type of seasonal restriction to protect wildlife, watersheds, or infrastructure and to provide winter recreational opportunity or address social concerns. Nearly 76 percent of the miles of road are located on the montane units where the bulk of the recreation opportunity and land mass is situated, with the remaining miles on the eastern units.

**Table 15. Miles of Forest Service roads open to the public on the Custer Gallatin National Forest**

	Open Yearlong	Seasonally Restricted	Total Miles
Madisons, Henry's, Gallatins, Absarokas, Beartooths	275	581	856
Bridgers, Bangtails, Crazies	59	106	165
Pryors	43	29	72
Ashland	141	0	141
Sioux	154	54	208
Total Miles	672	770	1,442

### Infrastructure Condition

The condition of infrastructure within the plan area is largely based on two factors: the current age of the infrastructure and the ability of the Forest Service to maintain the infrastructure effectively. Much of the developed recreation infrastructure within the plan area was designed and constructed in the 1970s and 1980s. Some sites have received capital improvements since that time, but many developed

recreation sites described above are in need of investment. Large numbers of facilities and high user demand combined with budget limitations and budget decline have resulted in a gradual decline in facility maintenance and condition. Use of volunteers and partners has helped with these endeavors and will continue to be influential into the future but cannot replace the necessity of investment and professional management.

Similar to developed recreation sites, conditions of trails have been affected by a number of forces (for example forest health and fire) and compounded by budget challenges. Maintaining main-line trails into remote or dispersed areas and other landscapes dominated by trail infrastructure is an ongoing struggle. Developments of strong partner relationships have aided other areas in the maintenance of trails. Area horseman groups, motorized groups, snowmobile associations, and others have assisted the Custer Gallatin National Forest personnel in maintaining trail infrastructure. Maintaining and managing these partnerships, as well as exploring new partnerships where appropriate, will continue to be an important component in the overall management of the recreation and trail programs of the future.

### **Sustainable Recreation**

The context for evaluating sustainable recreation is the Custer Gallatin National Forest's recreation niche, developed through the recreation facilities analysis process. In doing so, sustainability is focused on those things the Custer Gallatin is uniquely poised to provide and framed within a broader landscape. Current conditions and trends are discussed in each of the three spheres (ecological, economic, and social) of sustainable recreation.

Sustainable recreation is defined as the set of recreation settings and opportunities on National Forest System land that is ecologically, economically, and socially sustainable for present and future generations (36 Code of Federal Regulations 219.19). To be sustainable means the recreational settings and opportunities provided are compatible with other plan components that provide ecological sustainability, foster healthy social relationships among recreationists and within the broader community, and are within the fiscal capability of the planning unit (Forest Service Handbook 1909.12, chapter 20).

### *Ecological Considerations and Conditions*

The health and resiliency of the Custer Gallatin's natural resources are critical to the sustained delivery of their nature-based recreational settings and opportunities.

The plan area has been divided into five landscape areas, each of which displays its own geology and vegetative cover types. Ecological diversity is essential to discussing the forests of these landscapes. Productive coniferous forests are broken by large open parks covered in grass and wildflowers. There are populations of wildlife and fish species including thriving elk herds, big game animals such as deer and moose; grizzly bears, wolverines, bald eagles, goshawks and habitats for cutthroat and west slope trout. Without healthy resilient landscapes and habitats, many recreation opportunities that have historically been enjoyed would not be sustainable.

The top eight reasons (USDA Forest Service 2013, USDA Forest Service 2014) people recreate within the plan area are hiking, biking, hunting, general relaxing, wildlife or natural features, fishing, skiing, and snowmobiling. Obvious linkages exist between the types of activities being pursued and the presence and condition of the natural resources.

The history of exploration, settlement, and development of the area for mining, range allotments, and timber harvesting activities created a network of roads and trails which made recreational access to this

remote and rugged country possible. This historic pattern of access has had a notable effect on when and how people use the Custer Gallatin National Forest. Although areas of concentrated use are found along the main stream and river drainages and mountain ridge tops, much of the area's settings are relatively intact. Abundant and clean water, lush riparian areas, clean air, healthy forests, and diverse wildlife populations all contribute to sustaining the Custer Gallatin's recreation settings and opportunities.

### *Economic Considerations and Conditions*

Two aspects of economic sustainability are important. The first is how the Custer Gallatin's recreation program contributes to local economies and the other is the fiscal sustainability of the Custer Gallatin recreation program. Although related and interdependent, the scales at which economic viability is assessed are different.

The Custer Gallatin National Forest recreation programs contribute to the economic sustainability of south central and eastern Montana and northwestern South Dakota. Reports in 2012 show recreation on the Custer Gallatin contributed \$51,712,000 to the regional market area. Recreation is the primary reason visitors come to the Custer Gallatin National Forest, with hiking and walking identified as the largest percentage of participation (USDA Forest Service 2013, USDA Forest Service 2014).

Jobs in the recreation sector bring significant revenue into the local economies where outdoor recreation contributes significantly to quality of life. Many backcountry and river-based outfitters and guides and other recreation-based companies are dependent on the Custer Gallatin National Forest for their livelihood. Other recreation activities that bring local, national, and international visitors to the Custer Gallatin include downhill skiing, hunting, wildlife viewing, driving for pleasure, fishing, camping, snowmobiling and bicycling. Jobs and revenue directly and indirectly result from visitors traveling to the Custer Gallatin National Forest. The remoteness of some forest settings encourage visitors to purchase groceries, gas, and other supplies locally to support their visit. The proximity to major towns and population centers such as Billings and Bozeman also contribute to area vacation home rentals, rental cars, and airport use.

The fiscal sustainability of the Custer Gallatin National Forest recreation programs is partially dependent on congressionally appropriated budgets and regional allocations. Over the past decade, the Custer Gallatin National Forest budget to operate and manage recreation-related programs has declined. The declines have affected recreation, heritage, and wilderness program management; trails; recreation facilities operations and maintenance, and construction and reconstruction of all facilities, including administrative buildings.

During the past 7 years, the combined plan area budget has ranged from a low of \$2,231,000 to a high of \$2,847,000 with an average of \$2,526,000 annually. The decline since 2010 in the recreation, heritage, and wilderness budgets across the Custer Gallatin has been about 15 percent. The decline in trails budget has been about 9 percent, and budget to maintain facilities is down 28 percent. These numbers are a small portion of the entire budget picture.

Since 2011, capital improvement funds for recreation facilities have been retained for a Regional Office priority project and not available to the field. Funds to the Custer Gallatin National Forest for capital improvement projects had previously averaged around \$60,000 annually, making decreases in the recreation facilities budget much larger than the 28 percent indicated in Table 16, which only displays the operation and maintenance allocations.

**Table 16. Custer Gallatin 2010-2015 budget operations and maintenance appropriations in thousands**

Fiscal Year	Recreation, Heritage, and Wilderness Budgets	Trails Budget	Facilities Operation and Maintenance
2010	\$1,927.0	\$625.0	\$178.5*
2011	\$1,814.0	\$738.0	\$295.0
2012	\$1,782.0	\$686.0	\$250.0
2013	\$1,626.0	\$537.0	\$220.0
2014	\$1,521.0	\$504.0	\$206.0
2015	\$1,725.0	\$597.0	\$206.0
2016	\$1,640.0	\$573.0	\$210.0
Percent change	-15%	-9%	-28%

Declining budgets, combined with increasing costs, creates an unsustainable trajectory. To help bridge the gap between increasing costs and declining budgets, the Custer Gallatin has pursued two sets of strategies: decreasing costs and increasing revenue. Cost savings have been achieved through workforce adjustments (that is, eliminated, combined, or zoned positions); reduced services; and an increased partner, volunteer, and intern workforce. Increased program flexibility has been achieved through grants and partnerships with the state, university, other federal agencies, local communities, and partner groups.

It has become increasingly important for the Custer Gallatin to rely on user fees at developed sites such as campgrounds and cabin rentals. As discussed in the “Developed Recreation” section of this report, the inability to increase fees since the early 2000s has had major consequences to program delivery as outlined in the recreation facilities analysis.

### *Social Considerations and Conditions*

The Custer Gallatin serves as a backdrop, workplace, and playground for the communities of southcentral and eastern Montana and northwestern South Dakota. The communities are as diverse as the landscapes, from more rural, traditional use based eastern districts to more urban, youthful, and dynamically changing western units.

Across the Custer Gallatin, over 60 percent of users report having travelled less than 25 miles to visit the national forest indicating its importance to every local community. Hiking and walking far exceeded any other single use at a 60 percent participation rate with a clear preference for dispersed over developed recreation. Nearly 55 percent of the visitors to the Custer Gallatin National Forest are under 40, with nearly 21 percent in their 20s. In contrast about 15 percent are over 60 years old and 15 percent are in their 50s. Notably 13 percent of visitors were under 16 years old, implying that recreation on the Custer Gallatin is often a family activity.

Demographic data when combined with visitor trends is important when thinking about providing sustainable recreation opportunities into the future. National trends indicate that aging populations may desire more accessible opportunities, when combine with local trends the Custer Gallatin will need to consider recreation opportunities in that context.

### **Fostering Greater Community Connections**

Connecting people to their environment has been one of the Forest Service’s main stated goals for managing the recreation program and public expectation for activities on National Forest System lands.



Like many national forests, the Custer Gallatin connects with the surrounding communities and visitors through a combination of formal and informal interpretation and education programs, partnerships, service learning, and volunteerism. In 2015, conservation and educational programs across the Custer Gallatin National Forest primarily focused on wilderness, fire prevention and defensible space, avalanche safety, geology, history, living with wildlife and bear safety.

The following section highlights some of the efforts to promote the Custer Gallatin and to help the public make greater, more meaningful, connections to the natural environments around them.

### *Earthquake Lake Visitor Center*

The Earthquake Lake Visitor Center is located 27 miles northwest of West Yellowstone, Montana on US Highway 287. It is 44 miles south of Ennis, MT and 99 miles southwest of Bozeman, MT.

In August 1959, an earthquake triggered a massive landslide, blocking the Madison River and forming Earthquake Lake. This earth-changing event, known as the Hebgen Lake earthquake, measured 7.5 on the Richter scale. At the time it was the second largest earthquake to occur in the lower 48 states in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Twenty-eight people lost their lives in the event.

In 1967, the Forest Service's Earthquake Lake Visitor Center opened its doors for the first season of operation. The natural attractions and the easily-seen effects of the strongest earthquake in the Rocky Mountains made this area one of the outstanding scenic and geological study areas in the West. The visitor center complex hosts exhibits, films, presentations and interpretive trails focused on earthquakes, plate tectonics, and a working seismograph. In 2015, there were over 40,000 visitors at this site.

### *The OTO Ranch*

Located 10 miles north of Gardiner, Montana, the OTO Ranch was Montana's first dude ranch and helped set the standard for what was a uniquely western contribution to the nation's budding tourism industry during the first 40 years of this century. Now listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the ranch is intended for preservation, maintenance, and interpretation of the property.

The OTO creates a unique opportunity for the Custer Gallatin National Forest to connect with citizens. Ongoing programs have included volunteer and service learning projects, such as Passport in Time, where participants have participated in the preservation of the historic structures and site, while receiving interpretive programs and experienced the uniqueness of the landscape and setting. The Custer Gallatin is currently working with partners to help create a vision for the future use and management of the site that builds that connection and constituency for the site while preserving the character of the historic landscape, and is compatible with its natural resource setting. This site is also discussed in the Cultural and Historic Resources and Uses report (LaPoint and Bergstrom 2017).

### *The Main Boulder Ranger Station*

The Main Boulder Ranger Station, located 30 miles south of Big Timber, Montana, is visited by approximately 500 visitors annually. The accessible facility is open to the public as a house museum depicting the living and working conditions at what was once a remote ranger station. The site presents the early years of the Forest Service and the commitment of the United States to the conservation movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the visiting public. This site is also discussed in the Cultural and Historic Resources and Uses report (LaPoint and Bergstrom 2017).

### *Gallatin National Forest Avalanche Center*

The Gallatin National Forest Avalanche Center (Avalanche Center) began operating in 1990. Based in Bozeman, Montana, it covers the Bridger, Gallatin, and Madison Ranges, the Lionhead area near West Yellowstone, and the mountains around Cooke City. The primary purpose of the Avalanche Center is to provide the public with current avalanche, snowpack, and mountain weather information and basic avalanche education.

In 2015 and 2016 winter season, Avalanche Center advisories reached 4,523 people a day through email, website, and phone or fax. With the support of the Friends of the Avalanche Center, the Avalanche Center personnel held 99 classes reaching 4,729 students. The Avalanche Center made 77 videos on the current avalanche conditions which were viewed over 100,000 times on YouTube. Since 1995, the Avalanche Center has seen a 36 times increase in access to the advisories which reflects a substantial rise in backcountry use.

The Avalanche Center, with support from the Friends of the Avalanche Center, connects with communities in a way that is critical and exponentially growing. As backcountry use increases, the services provided by the Avalanche Center remain critical to public health and safety, but also vital in building future good winter stewards.

### *Partnerships and Volunteers*

Custer Gallatin programs are supported by a robust partnership program which share knowledge or skills, add capacity or resources, resolve issues or simply work together to achieve mutual benefits. Partners include; local, state, or federal agencies, land conservation organizations, youth groups, trail users groups, fire departments and universities. The Custer Gallatin National Forest annually enters into, or modifies, over 150 individual agreements at a monetary value of nearly \$4,000,000 for the purposes of achieving strategic high priority work.

The Custer Gallatin has an active volunteer program, with opportunities ranging from long-term opportunities such as campground hosts, to trail or project based volunteer opportunities, to data collection and citizen science programs. Approximately 80 percent of volunteer opportunities are tied to recreation and recreation management.

### *Montana Opportunities and Experiences - Yellowstone Country and Southeastern Montana*

Montanans and visitors enjoy just over 38 million acres of public land open to recreation, which equates to about 38 acres of public land per resident. The Forest Service manages the most federal land at 62 percent, or more than 17 million acres in Montana.

*Creating a Vibrant Future for Montana's Outdoor Recreation Heritage*, the Montana 2014–2018 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan serves as the guiding document to promote integrated outdoor recreation management and service provision in Montana in a more holistic and effective manner.

“Public lands in Montana are more than a scenic backdrop. They are valuable and diverse resources that contribute to local and state economies, characterize communities, provide abundant recreation opportunities, provide critical wildlife habitat, and greatly enhance the quality of life of residents while also drawing more than 10 million visitors to the state each year (2014-2018 SCORP)”.

Through the coordination of federal, state, and local outdoor recreation providers, land managers, and partners, the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan sets the stage for recreation in the 21<sup>st</sup>

century by describing current supply and trends, growing demands and challenges, and provides a framework for future recreation management and focus. The recreation opportunities provided on the Custer Gallatin National Forest, as described, represent one piece of the recreation opportunity throughout the State and within the Yellowstone Country and southeastern Montana Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan regions where most of the Custer Gallatin is nested.

### **Yellowstone Country**

Federal, State, and local government agencies all manage recreation resources within the Yellowstone Country region. The region offers an abundance of outdoor recreational activities, including scenic driving, all-terrain vehicle driving, hiking, climbing, mountain biking, horseback riding, RVing, camping, golfing, fly-fishing, wildlife watching and birding, ice climbing, Nordic and alpine skiing, snowmobiling, hunting, whitewater rafting, and other water sports. Approximately 42 percent of land in Yellowstone Country is Federal and State land. The Custer Gallatin National Forest manages about 2.3 million acres located in the Yellowstone Country region, with the Ashland and Montana portion of the Sioux located in the southeast region.

The Yellowstone Country region includes approximately 2.3 million acres of the Custer Gallatin, four states parks, the Lee Metcalf Wilderness and Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness, four wildlife management areas, 67 fishing access sites, and two national wildlife refuges. There are over 2,400 miles of trails in the region, many of which are located on the Custer Gallatin National Forest. There are also a number of local recreation agencies in the Yellowstone region that provide close-to-home, front country opportunities for residents and visitors. There are 54 communities throughout the region, including the larger cities Bozeman, Belgrade, and Livingston. At least six local city and county municipalities have a parks and recreation department and actively manage parks and open space, including Bozeman, Belgrade, Livingston, West Yellowstone, Gallatin, and Park Counties.

### **Southeast Montana**

The Southeast Montana region includes 13 counties encompassing 21.6 million is the largest Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan region in the state. Federal, State, Tribal and local government agencies all manage recreation resources in southeast Montana. The region offers an abundance of recreational and cultural activities, including hunting, fishing, boating, hiking, golfing, canoeing, bird watching, rock hounding, photography, and dinosaur digging. A number of natural and cultural sites include the Bighorn River and Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area, Custer National Forest, Makoshika State Park, Rosebud Battlefield State Park, Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, Pompeys Pillar National Monument, and dinosaur adventure in the Hell Creek formation.

The Crow and Northern Cheyenne Reservations also offer unique cultural activities, including pow wows, tours, and historical sites, like Chief Plenty Coups State Park. Southeast Montana is predominantly private land. The region includes the Ashland and Sioux portions of the Custer Gallatin National Forest, two national wildlife refuges, eight states parks, including Makoshika State Park, the largest state park in the state, seven wildlife management areas, and 33 fishing access sites. There are over 1,600 miles of trails in the region.

A number of local recreation agencies in the southeast Montana region provide close-to-home opportunities for residents and visitors. There are 95 communities throughout the region, including the larger cities of Billings, Miles City, Laurel, and Glendive. Five local city and county municipalities have a parks and recreation department and actively manage parks and open space including Billings, Glendive, and Yellowstone County.

## **Key Benefits to People**

Outdoor recreation helps add meaning to life, to gain stories and memories.

Outdoor recreation helps people achieve goals, to learn new skill or knowledge, to test oneself, to enhance personal growth.

Outdoor recreation helps create balance in one's life, reducing stress, as a recuperative activity, and to help one regain physical or mental health.

Outdoor recreation provides stimulation: fun, excitement, adventure, the chance to do something different.

Outdoor recreation helps underscore people's sense of belonging as they engage in recreation with family and friends.

Recreation is the Agency's single largest contributor to the economy by contributing over 13 billion dollars to the gross domestic product and producing more jobs than any other Forest Service program. The Northern Region's recreation, heritage, and wilderness programs are no exception. Recreation in the Northern Region contributes over \$200 million to the regional market area; recreation on the Custer Gallatin represents \$52,712,000 or 26 percent of that contribution.

In addition to economic benefits, recreation, heritage, and wilderness programs in the Northern Region are deeply rooted in the way of life for local residents, serving as community backdrops and backyards for daily recreation opportunities.

## **Trends and Drivers**

Use on the Custer Gallatin is most heavily slanted toward dispersed recreation activities like hiking, biking, hunting, general relaxing, fishing, skiing, and snowmobiling. These seven main activities account for over 80 percent of the Custer Gallatin's total visitation. The Custer Gallatin National Forest reported more recreation visits to dispersed areas than did any other national forest in the Northern Region. In the Greater Yellowstone Area, a similar pattern also occurs on the Bridger-Teton and Caribou-Targhee National Forests. The number of recreationists visiting wilderness was also comparatively high on the Custer Gallatin compared to other national forests in the Northern Region and in the Greater Yellowstone Area (USDA, FEIS 2006).

Hiking and walking are the most popular dispersed recreation activities on the Custer Gallatin National Forest by quite a wide margin, and stand out as a somewhat unique use pattern on public lands in Montana and the Greater Yellowstone Area. Forty percent of Custer Gallatin National Forest visitors indicated that hiking and walking was their primary activity, where on other national forests in Montana and the Greater Yellowstone Area this figure averaged 22 percent. Nearly 58 percent of Custer Gallatin recreationists indicated use of nonmotorized trails was an activity they participated in. The Gallatin's extensive trail system and relatively accessible hiking opportunities support this trend, as does proximity to the population centers of Bozeman and Billings.

The relatively low number of site visits to overnight developed recreation sites also stands out in the Northern Region and the Greater Yellowstone Area (NVUM 2013, 2014). Users of developed sites indicated camping was not their primary recreation activity, which supports the observation that use of developed sites is often ancillary to other recreation activities like hiking and fishing or serves as a stopping place while traveling to other areas to recreate.

### National Visitor Use Monitoring- Custer Gallatin

Recreation opportunities are affected by recreational trends and the mix of outdoor activities chosen by the public, which continuously evolve. National visitor use monitoring data provide information on visitor use and visitor satisfaction, which can create understanding about what types of activities people are interested in and the quality of their experiences. The data is the most relevant, reliable, and accurate information available on national forest visitation. National visitor use monitoring data are collected using a random sampling method that yields statistically valid results at the national forest level. As a rule, the results are unbiased. The sampling plan takes into account both the spatial and seasonal spread of visitation patterns across the Custer Gallatin National Forest. However, results for any single year or season may under or over-represent some groups of visitors.

The Custer Gallatin National Forest receives approximately 3.1 million national forest visits a year, based on most recent national visitor use monitoring conducted in 2013 and 2014. That is a about a 39 percent increase in visitation, up from 1.9 million visitors in 2008 and 2009. Nearly 85 percent of visitors come to the Custer Gallatin for the purpose of recreation.

Approximately 64 percent, or over 2 million visits, on the Custer Gallatin were to general forest areas (dispersed recreation areas) compared to about 5 percent (around 170,000 visits) in overnight developed facilities. Nearly 13 percent of Custer Gallatin visitors, or 440,000 people, are utilizing designated wilderness. That is a 112 percent increase in number of site visits over a 5-year period according to national visitor use monitoring data. These trends are displayed in Figure 1 (annual visitation by site type) and Table 17 (site visits by site type). A site visit as defined is the entry of one person onto a national forest area to participate in recreation activities for an unspecified period of time. A national forest visit can be composed of multiple site visits, which is why site visits (as depicted in Table 18) on the Custer Gallatin are substantially higher at 3.5 million compared to national forest visits at 3.1 million.

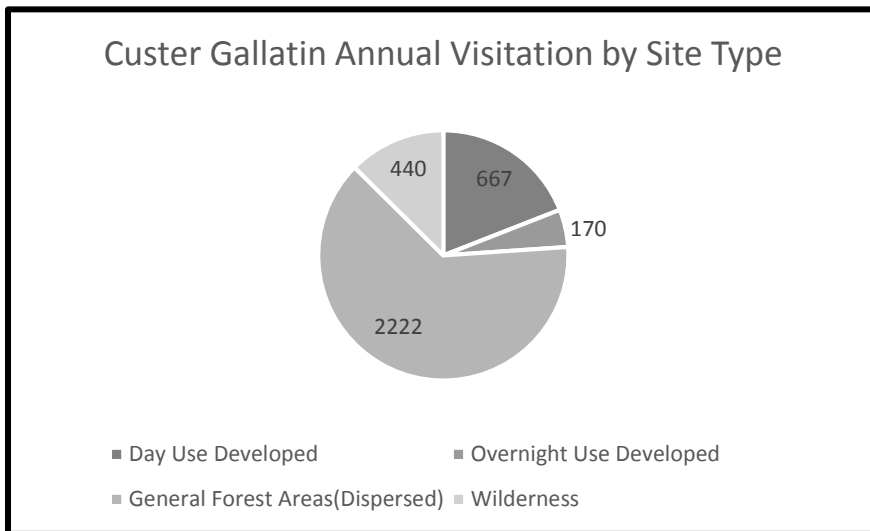


Figure 1. Annual visitation by site type

Table 17. Site visits by site type on the Custer Gallatin

Year	Day Use Developed	Overnight Use Developed	Undeveloped Areas (Dispersed)	Wilderness	Total Site Visits
2008/2009	536,000	104,000	1,257,000	207,000	2,105,000

Assessment – Recreation Settings, Opportunities, and Access

Year	Day Use Developed	Overnight Use Developed	Undeveloped Areas(Dispersed)	Wilderness	Total Site Visits
2013/2014	667,000	170,000	2,222,000	440,000	3,500,000
% Increase	24%	64%	76%	112%	66%

Approximately 67 percent of Custer Gallatin National Forest visitors travelled 50 miles or less to participate in recreational activities, and are considered local visitors by definition. Nearly 19 percent travelled over 500 miles to recreate on the Custer Gallatin National Forest.

As displayed in Table 18 below, the national visitor use monitoring effort asked participants to select activities they participate in while visiting the national forest, survey respondents could select multiple activities so this column does not equal 100 percent. The second column represents respondent’s answers when asked to identify the activity that most closely reflected their primary purpose for visiting the national forest. This list represents responses across the Custer Gallatin National Forest; the top activities on the Custer Gallatin may not represent recreation opportunity or use on every district or area. For example, hunting on the Ashland and Camp Crook units may represent a very large percentage of participation and primary purpose for visitors in those locations but that level of detail is not represented here. However, local managers still use local knowledge to inform management decisions. In addition, some individual activity types, such as rock or ice climbing are not stand alone categories, and are quantified in the context of dispersed recreation use.

**Table 18. Activity participation and primary activity on the Custer Gallatin National Forest, 2013 and 2014**

Activity	% participation	% main activity	Number of visitors participating in activity
Hiking/Walking	58.0	40.8	2,030,000
Viewing Natural Features	41.8	3.1	1,463,000
Viewing Wildlife	32.3	1.5	1,130,500
Relaxing	26.9	1.5	941,500
Driving for pleasure	13.7	2.8	479,500
Downhill Skiing	10.4	10.2	364,000
Bicycling	9.4	7.8	329,000
Fishing	8.2	4.9	287,000
Picnicking	6.3	0.7	220,500
Hunting	5.5	5.0	192,500
Snowmobiling	4.9	4.9	171,500
Developed Camping	4.6	2.0	161,000
Gathering Forest Products	4.5	1.1	157,500
Nature Study	4.2	0.1	147,000
Some Other Activity	4.1	3.2	143,500
Cross-Country Skiing	3.4	2.8	119,000
Visiting Historic Sites	2.7	0.01	94,500
Other Non-Motorized	2.3	0.5	80,500
Nature Center Activities	1.9	0.3	66,500
Non-Motorized Water	1.7	0.8	59,500

Assessment – Recreation Settings, Opportunities, and Access

Activity	% participation	% main activity	Number of visitors participating in activity
Motorized Water Activities	1.7	0.6	59,500
Motorized Trail Activity	1.4	0.6	49,000
Primitive Camping	1.2	0.2	42,000
Horseback Riding	0.8	0.4	28,000
Resort Use	0.6	0.1	21,000
OHV Use	0.5	0.2	17,500
No Activity Reported	0	4.7	0
Backpacking	0	0.4*	0

National visitor use monitoring participants were asked a number of questions about satisfaction regarding service, recreation infrastructure, settings, facilities, and opportunities on the national forest. Overall, the Custer Gallatin National Forest received positive satisfaction ratings from participants, with over 97.1 percent of respondents in the very satisfied or somewhat satisfied category and less than 1 percent in the dissatisfied category.

*Crowding*

During each national visitor use monitoring cycle, visitors rated their perception of how crowded the recreation site or area felt to them. This information is useful when looking at the type of site the visitor was using since someone visiting a designated wilderness may think 5 people is too many, while someone visiting a developed campground may think 200 people is about right. Table 19 shows the distribution of responses for each site type. Crowding was reported on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 denotes hardly anyone was there and a 10 indicates the area was perceived as overcrowded.

In an effort to understand trends, the information in Table 19 was compared to the previous crowding ratings from 2008 and 2009. Despite increases and site visits overall, average ratings for crowding decreased or remained stable. Given the subjective nature of this rating that may indicate a change in expectation or visitor reference, but that cannot be gleaned from this type of survey.

**Table 19. Percent of site visits by crowding rating and site type, national visitor use monitoring 2013 and 2014**

	Day Use Developed Sites	Overnight Use Developed Sites	Undeveloped Areas (GFAs)	Designated Wilderness
10 - Overcrowded	0.0	1.4	1.4	0.8
9	2.2	7.5	1.4	1.3
8	6.9	10.9	5.8	4.6
7	6.2	2.2	5.0	6.4
6	11.9	15.2	12.1	11.5
5	13.3	27.7	11.8	8.5
4	20.0	5.3	14.6	20.2
3	13.0	7.6	18.5	18.9
2	21.5	15.5	21.4	20.7

	Day Use Developed Sites	Overnight Use Developed Sites	Undeveloped Areas (GFAs)	Designated Wilderness
1 - Hardly anyone there	5.0	6.8	8.0	7.1
Average Rating	4.2	5.0	4.0	4.0

*Conflict, Crowding, and Competing Uses*

Increasing population growth and demand for recreation opportunities may lead to more crowding and conflict among forest users, particularly around Bozeman and other population centers around the Custer Gallatin to a lesser extent. As discussed above, sense of crowding is largely perception and is based in each individual's own experiences, references, and expectations. As population and demographics across portions of the Custer Gallatin National Forest change, those perceptions are likely to vary widely. The national visitor use monitoring data shows an increase in walking and hiking by nearly 900,000 people but also shown is an increase in biking as a primary activity from 3 percent to nearly 8 percent, with an increase of over 200,000 participants.

Despite the many options currently available for recreation access on the Custer Gallatin National Forest, there is a desire from segments of the public for more close-to-town, easily accessed opportunities. Trends show many users are looking for opportunities with 25 to 50 miles of their residences. Some local groups and interested public have expressed interest in expanding quiet nonmotorized and nonmechanized recreation opportunities. At the same time, there is an equal interest in providing additional opportunities for mountain biking and summer and winter motorized access to the Custer Gallatin National Forest. Other stakeholders propose limiting all recreation and human entry for the purposes of providing wildlife refugia. These competing interests can create conflict between Custer Gallatin National Forest users, the recreating public, and the local community. Collaborative efforts have attempted to foster communication among a variety of stakeholders to varying degrees of success.

*Climate Change*

Climate change has the potential to affect a number of biophysical landscape attributes such as vegetative composition and ecosystem habitat health and locations, water quantity, fish and wildlife habitats, snow quantity and length of stay, and seasons of use and patterns of recreation activities present and available across the landscapes. Recreation opportunities identified as potentially most vulnerable to climate change include water- and snow-based activities and those activities where wildlife is an important part of the experience, such as hunting and bird watching.

**National Visitor Use Monitoring- Forest Service Northern Region Scale**

Table 20 displays the Custer Gallatin visitation along with the other national forests in the Northern Region. In comparison to other national forests, the Custer Gallatin's visitation is quite high. Compared with other national forests in the Northern Region, the next closest in visitation is the Lolo National Forest, which also hosts large population centers and a State university.

**Table 20. Region 1 national forest visits, national visitor use monitoring 2010 to 2014**

National Forest	National Forest Visits
Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest	583,000
Bitterroot National Forest	400,000
Custer Gallatin National Forest	3,035,000



National Forest	National Forest Visits
Dakota Prairie Grasslands	77,000
Flathead National Forest	885,000
Helena- Lewis and Clark National Forest	591,000
Idaho Panhandle National Forests	879,000
Kootenai National Forest	468,000
Lolo National Forest	1,266,000
Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest	294,000
Total	8,478, 000

Table 21 displays regionwide activity participation. Percent participation at the regional scale is similar regionally as it is locally, with a few notable differences. Percent participation for hiking/walking, viewing natural features, driving for pleasure, bicycling, cross country skiing, and snowmobiling were higher on the Custer Gallatin than at the regional scale. Percent participation for all other activities were lower on the Custer Gallatin than at the regional scale. Most notably, hunting had 14 percent participation and 12.5 percent as the primary purpose at the regional scale, while on the Custer Gallatin participation was 5.5 percent with 5 percent identifying hunting as the primary purpose.

Regionally notable also is visitation at adjacent national parks, which influences recreation in the regional context. In 2015, Glacier National Park reported 2,366,056 visitors as compared with Yellowstone National Park reporting 4,097,710 visitors.

**Table 21. Region 1 activity participation, national visitor use monitoring round 3**

Activity	% Participation	% Main Activity
Hiking / Walking	46.6	24.7
Viewing Natural Features	39.7	5.9
Viewing Wildlife	34.2	1.8
Relaxing	31.3	3.9
Driving for Pleasure	20.0	4.9
Hunting	14.1	12.8
Downhill Skiing	10.6	10.1
Fishing	9.9	5.1
Picnicking	7.5	1.3
Gathering Forest Products	7.5	2.5
Developed Camping	6.5	2.5
Bicycling	6.3	4.4
Cross-country Skiing	5.5	4.6
Other nonmotorized	5.5	2.6
Nature Study	4.9	0.3
Some Other Activity	4.8	3.2
Visiting Historic Sites	4.4	0.6
Nature Center Activities	4.2	0.6
Snowmobiling	3.8	3.3

Activity	% Participation	% Main Activity
Motorized Trail Activity	3.3	1.1
Primitive Camping	3.0	0.5
OHV Use	2.3	0.8
Motorized Water Activities	2.3	0.6
Non-motorized Water	2.2	0.7
Resort Use	1.7	0.4
Horseback Riding	1.2	0.7
Backpacking	2.2	0.3
Other Motorized Activity	0.4	0.2
No Activity Reported	0.1	1.8

### National Visitor Use Monitoring – Greater Yellowstone Area Scale

The Greater Yellowstone Area includes the federal management lands within the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. The area includes five national forests, two national parks, and two wildlife refuges. The Greater Yellowstone Coordinating Committee is made up of the federal managers responsible for the management of federal lands. The Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem is considered the largest relatively intact ecosystems in the continental United States.

The Greater Yellowstone Area is a relevant region of comparison when discussing resource management opportunities, trends, and challenges on the Custer Gallatin. Often the Custer Gallatin has great similarities to other national forests in the Greater Yellowstone Area in comparison to other national forests in the Northern Region.

The 2006 “Recreation in the Greater Yellowstone Technical Report” is an interagency assessment of recreation in the Greater Yellowstone Area focused on trends, challenges, and opportunities. The report has not been revised since 2006 and was based on previous rounds of national visitor use monitoring for the national forests. Since 2006, the national forests have completed two rounds of data collection. The most recent visitation numbers for each are listed here.

Table 22 shows the Custer Gallatin visitation along with the other National Forests within the GYA. At the time of the technical report the Custer Gallatin represented about 20% of the visitation in the GYA region. Based on differences in NVUM reports and the technical report for other National Forests visitation it would appear that percentage has grown but an analysis, nor consultation with other recreation managers has been conducted for this assessment.

**Table 22. Greater Yellowstone Area visitation national visitor use monitoring, 2010-2014**

National Forests	National Forest Visits
Beaverhead-Deerlodge	583,000
Bridger-Teton	1,623,000
Caribou-Targhee	1,852,000
Custer Gallatin	3,035,000
Shoshone	366,000

Table 23 displays the up to date visitation data for Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks. Park visitation data is produced annually. The numbers shown have grown relatively dramatically since the 2006 technical report, which reported Yellowstone at 3 million visitors for a 36 percent increase and Grand Teton at 2.5 million visitors for a 25 percent increase over the decade. The visitation trends on the Custer Gallatin are similar to the trends in visitation at the national parks in the Greater Yellowstone Area; Custer Gallatin visitation increased approximately 38 percent since 2008 and 2009.

**Table 23. Visitation for Greater Yellowstone Area – national park units**

Unit Name	2015 Visitation
Grand Teton National Park	3,149,921
Yellowstone National Park	4,097,710

Table 24 displays the compilation of activity participation across the national forests in the Greater Yellowstone Area as reported in the national visitor use monitoring. The most notable differences are the increased participation on the Custer Gallatin in the areas of hiking and walking, bicycling, and collection of forest products. Also worth noting is the relatively low participation in developed camping on the Custer Gallatin compared to the Greater Yellowstone Area average: less than 5 percent on the Custer Gallatin compared to 7 percent in the Greater Yellowstone Area. This trend is likely consistent when one considers the niche and focus of the Custer Gallatin versus the Park Service in the Greater Yellowstone Area.

**Table 24. Greater Yellowstone Area national forest activities, national visitor use monitoring 2010-2014**

Activity	% Participation	% Main Activity
Hiking / Walking	43.4	23.8
Viewing Natural Features	38.7	7.9
Viewing Wildlife	32.1	1.5
Relaxing	26.3	3.8
Driving for Pleasure	17.7	4.0
Downhill Skiing	13.8	13.1
Fishing	10.7	6.4
Hunting	9.8	9.2
Picnicking	7.3	1.1
Developed Camping	7.0	2.9
Bicycling	6.9	4.8
Snowmobiling	6.5	5.4
Cross-country Skiing	5.4	4.3
Nature Study	5.1	0.3
Motorized Trail Activity	4.0	1.2
Visiting Historic Sites	3.9	0.4
Other Non-motorized	3.8	1.4
Gathering Forest Products	3.8	1.2
Some Other Activity	3.7	2.9
Nature Center Activities	2.7	0.3

Activity	% Participation	% Main Activity
OHV Use	2.6	0.7
Primitive Camping	2.1	0.2
Motorized Water Activities	2.0	0.7
Non-motorized Water	2.0	1.1
Horseback Riding	1.9	1.1
Resort Use	1.5	0.2
Backpacking	1.4	0.4
Other Motorized Activity	0.2	0.0
No Activity Reported	0.0	1.9

The 2006 Greater Yellowstone Area technical report developed projections and trends for the Greater Yellowstone Area as a whole. Across the Greater Yellowstone Area, the greatest growth in participation was forecasted in the areas of hiking and walking, biking, viewing scenery, wildlife watching, and picnicking. No winter uses were addressed in the reports growth projections. The projections are intended to provide Greater Yellowstone Area managers an indication of the volume of use rather than just a focus on activity participation. These projections cannot directly be applied to any one unit to forecast growth but do demonstrate trends and potential across the Greater Yellowstone Area. Table 25 shows the projected growth index for a few key activities based on Greater Yellowstone Area level 1995 starting point.

**Table 25. Projection Index by activity across the Greater Yellowstone Area, 2006 technical report**

Activity	2010 Projection Index	2030 Projection index	2050 Project Index	Potential GYA participation numbers by 2050
Biking	1.13	1.29	1.42	256 million
Developed Camping	1.14	1.35	1.50	59 million
Fishing	1.16	1.40	1.59	121 million
Hiking	1.12	1.28	1.44	127 million
Hunting	1.05	1.15	1.22	64 million
Viewing Wildlife	1.28	1.68	1.94	1.1 billion

### Statewide Recreation Trends and the Montana Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan

Creating a Vibrant Future for Montana’s Outdoor Recreation Heritage, the Montana 2014–2018 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan serves as the guiding document to promote integrated outdoor recreation management and service provision in Montana in a more holistic and effective manner. The Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan provides discussion on recreation supply, demand, and usage patterns, for each of the regions as summarized from a variety of sources including the 2012 Public Recreational Use Survey by Institute for Tourism and Recreational Research.

This information is useful for understanding regional and statewide recreation trends and public desire regardless of management boundaries. Key areas identified for recreation manager emphasis during the 2014 through 2018 timeframe across Federal, State, and local boundaries include walking, hiking, biking

paths and trails, motorized trails, connecting youth with recreation opportunities, and collaborating with service-based organizations.

When looking at visitation and expenditures by the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan regions, there are some big variations. In 2012, Yellowstone Country had the highest visitation at over 3.8 million nonresident visitors, 35 percent of the total statewide visitation, and the highest nonresident expenditures at nearly \$920 million. Glacier Country had 33 percent of nonresident visitors and \$714 in expenditures. Missouri River Country has about 3 percent of the nonresident visitation and generated just under \$400,000 in visitor expenditures. Southwest and southeast Montana have similar visitation levels – around 19 percent – but visitors in southeast Montana spent almost \$200 million more than visitors in southwest Montana.

In the Yellowstone Country region, 72 percent of nonresident visitors participated in scenic driving. The rest of the top five outdoor recreation activities include wildlife watching (52 percent), nature photography (52 percent), day hiking (45 percent), and visiting other historical sites (31 percent). For Montana resident travel, rock climbing and downhill skiing were the top activities. Among the regions, Yellowstone was most popular for road biking, rock climbing, downhill skiing, and snowshoeing (SCORP 2014). The region was also tied with Glacier Country for most popular region for cross country skiing at 32 percent. Other popular activities include nature photography and snowmobiling.

Recreation needs for the region were also identified in the 2012 Public Recreational Use Survey by the Institute for Tourism and Recreational Research. About 84 percent of respondents used hiking trails in Yellowstone Country in the last year, followed by walking, jogging, and biking paths (81 percent). When asked to rate their use of public lands and areas in the region on a scale from 1 to 5 (with 5 being the most use), recreationists in the Yellowstone County region most often use national forests (mean 3.61), rivers and streams (3.38), national park land (3.35), natural lakes (3.14), State parks (3.05).

In the Yellowstone Country region, trails and paths are identified by interagency recreation providers as one of the top facility needs to maintain, increase, or improve in this region. Walking, jogging, and biking paths, in particular, are the most desired facility among managers, as well as the most used facility among recreation users. Hiking trails, bike lanes on roads, and mountain biking trails were also identified as priority considerations among managers.

In southeast Montana, 65 percent of nonresident visitors participated in scenic driving. The rest of the top five outdoor recreation activities include nature photography (37 percent), wildlife watching (34 percent), visiting other historical sites (32 percent), and day hiking (31 percent).

For the Montana resident, golfing was the top activity for the southeast Montana region. Road biking, hunting, and horseback riding were also top activities. Among the regions, southeast Montana was not the most popular for any activity.

Recreation needs for the region were also identified in the 2012 Public Recreational Use Survey by the Institute for Tourism and Recreational Research. About 75 percent of respondents used walking, jogging, and biking paths in the southeast Montana region in the last year, followed by hiking trails (65 percent). When asked to rate their use of public lands and areas in the region on a scale from 1 to 5 (with 5 being the most use), recreationists in this region most often use city parks (mean 3.13), State parks (3.09), national forests (3.05), rivers and streams (3.05), and national park lands (2.97).

The top facility and area need in the region is walking, jogging, and biking paths, and the highest response for increase is hiking trails. Southeast Montana had the most needs, with outdoor pools,

sledding and tubing areas, playgrounds, and rifle and handgun ranges also among the top needs. This suggests community-oriented facilities are in great demand, perhaps speaking to the rural landscape, the low population, and the desire for people to connect over outdoor activities.

A few key statewide trends identified in the 2014-2018 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan include:

- Trails provide important connections within communities and between communities and public lands. Planning for youth as well as the aging population will help Montanans at all stages of life and will continue to further Montana’s recreation heritage among the young and seniors. Facilities like trails can meet the needs of all ages and abilities, and this theme was strong throughout reference documents and public involvement. Walking remains the primary activity for Montanans, followed by backpacking, hiking, fishing, and hunting.
- In Montana, 62 percent of residents participated in wildlife-associated recreation, with 33 percent participating in wildlife watching and 29 percent participating in fishing or hunting activities. Both of these are above the national participation rate, with hunting and fishing considerably higher than the national rate of 16 percent. Montana had the fifth highest participation rate among states in hunting and fishing. Although Montanans participate in fishing and hunting activities more than the national level, data on fishing and hunting licenses indicate participation in fishing and hunting is generally declining.
- Motorized recreation has increased significantly from 2000, with a 300 percent increase in off-highway vehicle registration and a close to 200 percent increase in snowmobile registration. Nearly 30 percent of Montanans age 16 and over participate in off-highway vehicle recreation, putting Montana in the top 10 states for off-highway vehicle recreation.
- Recreation safety is a growing concern in Montana. Data shows that Montana is in the top states for fatalities related to avalanches and boating.
- The top barrier for participation in recreation included lack of time (30 percent), physical disability (14 percent), cost (11 percent), and poor health (8 percent). The other 23 percent chose unknown. Montanans are trending towards higher rates of obesity. By 2021, nearly one in three Montanans could be obese.

### National Recreation Trends

A recent publication by Cordell (2012), in support of the 2010 Resource Planning Act assessment, describes the trends and outlooks for outdoor recreation in the United States. Some important trends especially relevant to recreation on public lands include:

- There is overall growth in outdoor recreation participation. Between 2000 and 2009, the total number of people who participated in one or more of 60 outdoor activities grew by 7.5 percent, and the total number of activity days of participation increased over 32 percent.
- There is substantial growth in both participants and annual days for five nature-based viewing and photography activities: viewing birds, other wildlife (besides birds), fish, wildflowers, trees, and other vegetation, and natural scenery.
- Public lands continue to be highly important for the recreation opportunities they offer. In the West, recreation on public lands account for 69 percent of annual recreation days, slightly more than 60 percent of viewing and photographing nature activity, around three-fourths of backcountry activity, 57 percent of hunting, and 67 percent of cross-country skiing.

- Recreation resources will likely become less available as more people compete for their use.
- Trends towards more flexible work scheduling and telecommuting may well allow recreationists to allocate their leisure time more evenly across the seasons and through the week, thus facilitating less concentrated peak demands.
- Technological innovations will allow more people to find and get to places more easily and quickly, perhaps leading to over-use pressure not previously considered a threat.

Projected trends in outdoor recreation up to the year 2060 were also highlighted in the report. The five activities projected to grow fastest in number of participants are:

- developed skiing (68 to 147 percent increase);
- undeveloped skiing (55 to 106 percent increase);
- challenge activities (50 to 86 percent increase);
- equestrian activities (44 to 87 percent increase); and
- motorized water activities (41 to 81 percent increase).

The activities with the lowest projected growth in participant numbers are:

- visiting primitive areas (33 to 65 percent increase);
- motorized off-road activities (29 to 56 percent increase);
- motorized snow activities (25 to 61 percent increase);
- hunting (8 to 23 percent), fishing (27 to 56 percent increase), and
- floating activities (30 to 62 percent increase).

## **Information Needs**

The Forest has identified some information needs for forest plan revision:

- Compilation of wilderness management direction from existing various existing plans
- Completed outfitter and guide forest programmatic assessment
- Updated winter motorized and nonmotorized trails layer
- Updated recreation site database to include new installations
- Updated report indicating the condition of recreation facilities, trails, and roads

The Forest has identified some information needs for ongoing management:

- Geospatial outfitter and guide database
- Completion of the dispersed recreation site inventory
- Development of one consolidated Custer Gallatin National Forest recreation niche

## **Key Findings**

The Custer Gallatin National Forest is part of a larger state and geographic area with world-class recreation opportunity. The combination of big backcountry, wilderness, and roaded access are key to the kinds of opportunities available. Recreation use is growing, and the way people want to recreate is diversifying. Population growth, wealth, and demographic changes have outpaced projections on the western portion of the Custer Gallatin National Forest. Front country near rapidly growing or changing communities is under tremendous pressure from both residents and visitors.

Use is year round but not the same everywhere. Summer continues to be the largest visitor season on the western and central portions of the Custer Gallatin National Forest. Participation in winter recreation is increasing, and demand for winter opportunity is projected to continue to increase in Montana.

On eastern portions of the Forest, Ashland and Camp Crook, recreation may be described and experienced differently as inherent to permittees' livelihood and way of life, experienced while ranchers manage allotments, check cows, and visit neighbors.

The Custer Gallatin National Forest has a large number of recreation special use permittees such as campground concessionaires, ski areas, outfitter and guides, recreation residences, organization camps, and recreation events that help provide opportunity for these visitors. Demand for the ability to operate on the Custer Gallatin for organizational groups, at-risk youth, religious groups, wellness retreats, and universities is growing.

Maintenance and capital improvements needed for existing public use of infrastructure, trails, roads, education and public service routinely exceeds the fiscal capability of the Custer Gallatin, and the demand for increased recreation opportunities shows no indication of decreasing.

The resource that draws people to the Custer Gallatin is not infinite. As visitor's expectations, needs, and perceptions change, desires must be balanced with resource capabilities. Not all desired uses or future recreation trends may be accommodated or appropriate on the Custer Gallatin National Forest. Limits based on terrain, safety, resource availability, wildlife and other resource needs may not meet the demands of the public.

A range of recreation opportunities and settings is key when managing a large national forest with a variety of stakeholders in the context of dramatically different setting, needs, challenges, and desires. A future desired recreation opportunity spectrum effort may look similar or different from the existing condition. Focusing on the Custer Gallatin National Forest's roles and niches will be critical as financial, ecological, and social resources become more limited. A continued focus on opportunities provided by other entities, partnerships, cooperators, and volunteers will be needed.

Travel planning will continue to be a contentious issue nationally, regionally, and locally. The Forest Plan will provide broad context for sustainable recreation. It will not make site-specific travel planning designations, maintenance level determinations, operational choices, or project level decisions. If higher level land management allocations result in inconsistencies with travel planning direction, subsequent travel plan amendments or modification may be necessary.

Recreation on the Custer Gallatin occurs in locations that also provide habitat for grizzly bears, bison, mountain lions, cutthroat trout, badgers, and game species to name a few. This fact makes recreation



management more challenging when considering public safety, level of development, seasons of use and other sustainable recreation challenges.

Many campground facilities have become outdated or are not meeting the demands of today's demographic of users or vehicles. Utilization and investment in developed recreation sites should be examined in the context of desired opportunities.

Existing recreation facilities and opportunities clearly demonstrate that recreationists are drawn to water: lakes, streams, waterfalls, reservoirs, seeps, and major rivers. Managing dispersed and developed recreation in these areas is important to the recreation opportunity, scenery, wildlife, and water resources.

Many of the highly popular, concentrated use areas may have been designed and developed more than 40 years ago for a different purpose, technology, or user group. These areas often can sustainably accommodate visitation growth after investment, redesign, or re-visioning and cause less resource impact than pioneering into less developed, less hardened areas.

Recreation management issues have grown in complexity and scale since the completion of the 1986 Custer Forest Plan and the 1987 Gallatin Forest Plan. Some original forest plan direction has elements that may be carried forward such when to strategically consider investing or divesting in developed recreation infrastructure but must be updated in the context of sustainable recreation, demand, and recreation participation forecasts. Other areas of the Forest Plans, such as outfitting and guiding standards, provide direction that does not adequately address current day social, resource or capacity issues.

Many national reports do not address Montana or South Dakota, perhaps due to low population numbers or the difficulty of getting sufficient sample sizes; the availability of data is a challenge for policy makers, resource staff, recreation managers, and decision makers when conducting data collection and analysis. Additionally, recreation data is dispersed and not centralized, particularly at the local level. Cities and counties maintain their own data, but there is not a statewide method to collect and share data for statewide analysis (SCORP 2014).

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## Appendix A: Recreation Opportunity Spectrum Maps

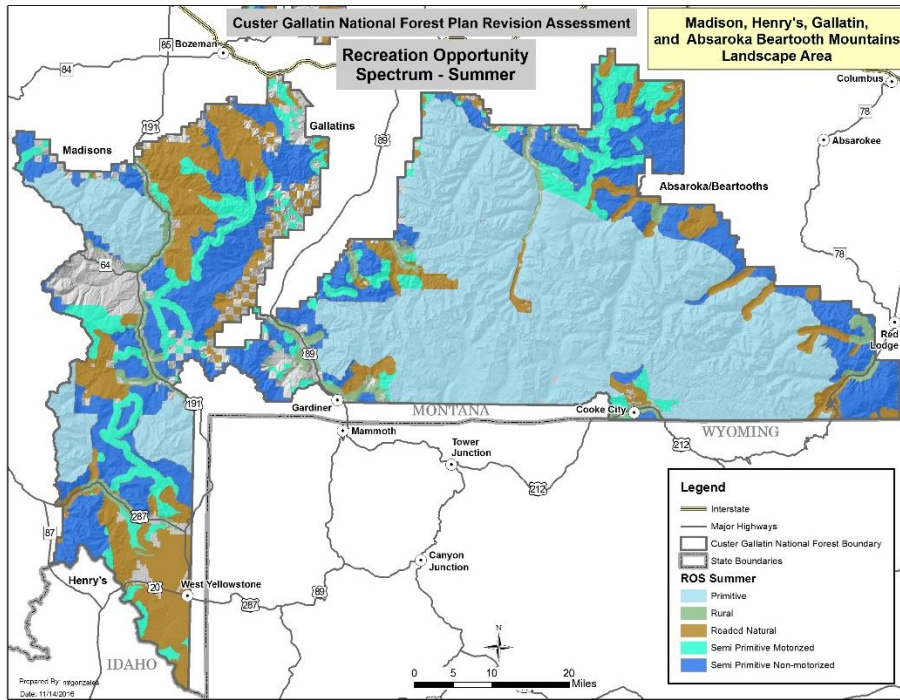


Figure 2. Summer recreation opportunity spectrum Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, and Absaroka Beartooth Mountains

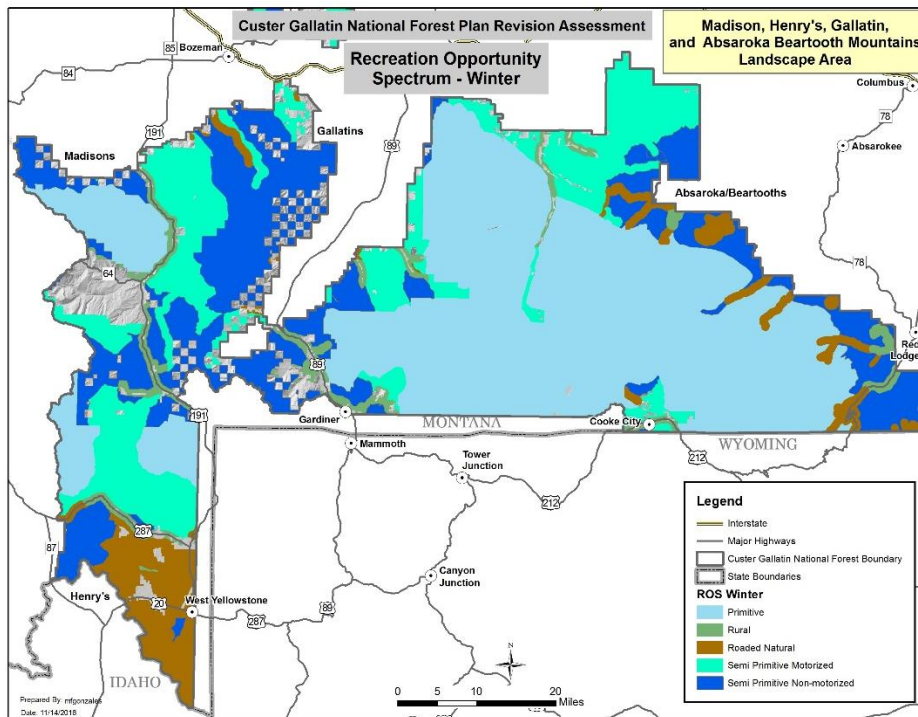


Figure 3. Winter recreation opportunity spectrum Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, and Absaroka Beartooth Mountains

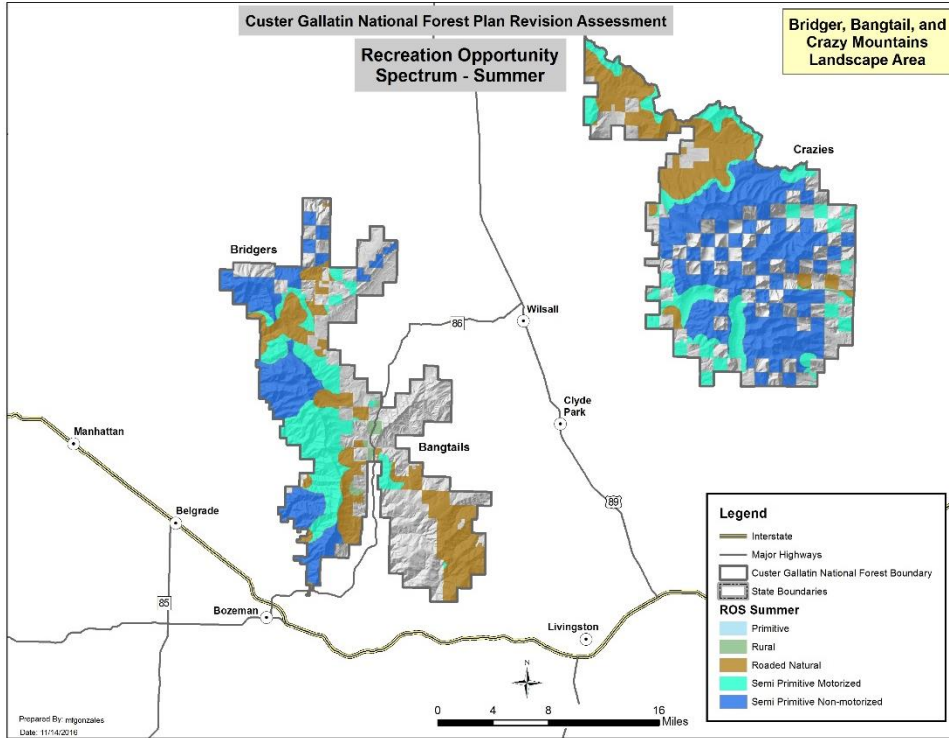


Figure 4. Summer recreation opportunity spectrum Bridger, Bangtail and Crazy Mountains

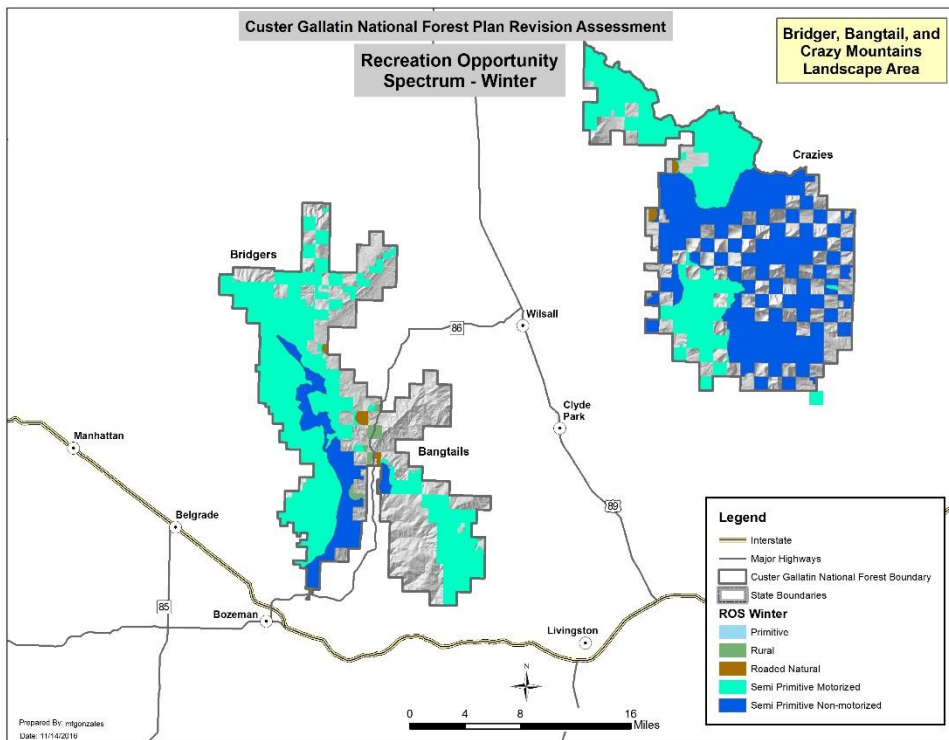


Figure 5. Winter recreation opportunity spectrum Bridger, Bangtail and Crazy Mountains

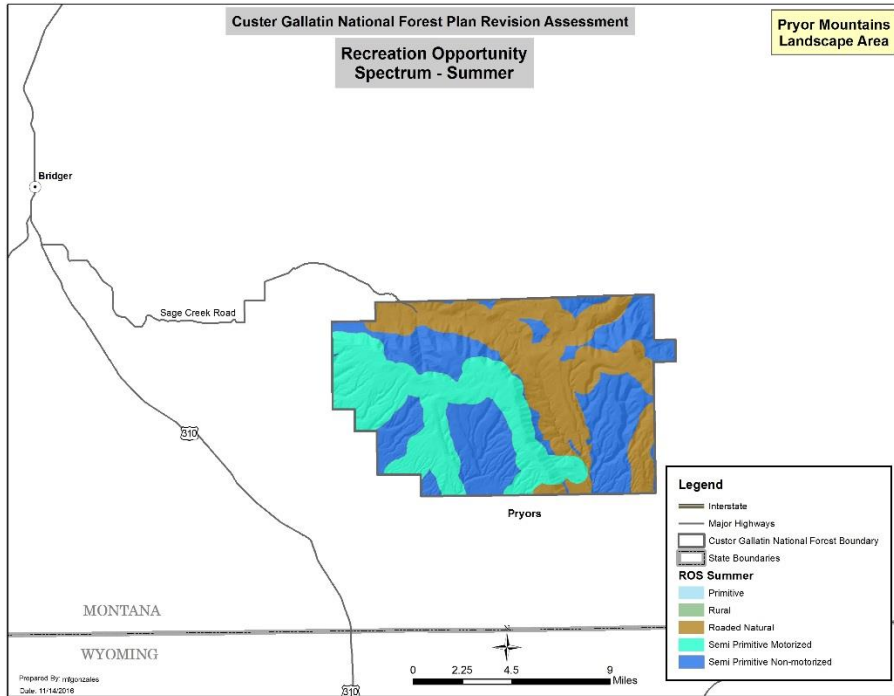


Figure 6. Summer recreation opportunity spectrum Pryor Mountains

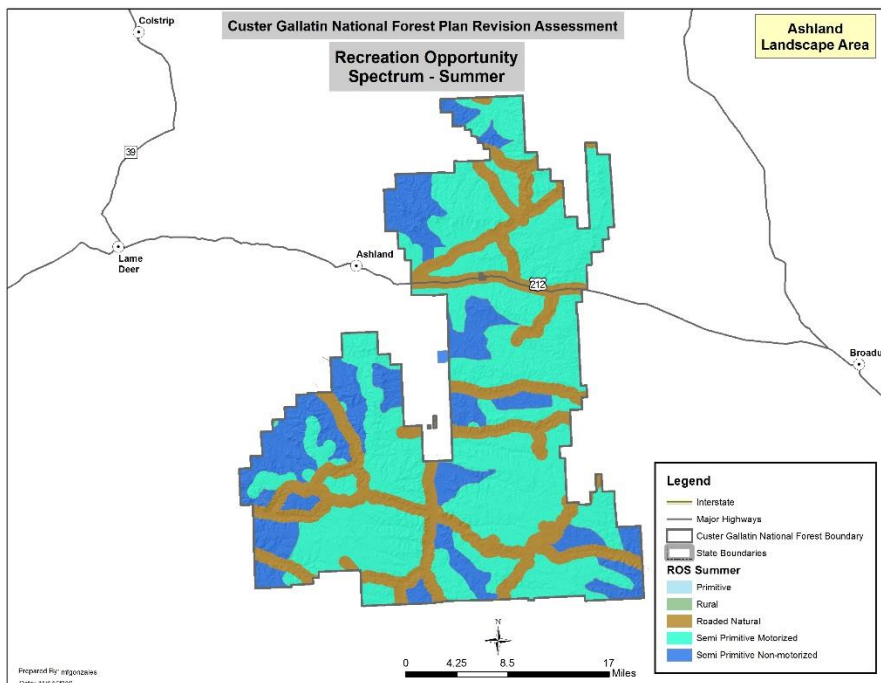


Figure 7. Summer recreation opportunity spectrum Ashland District

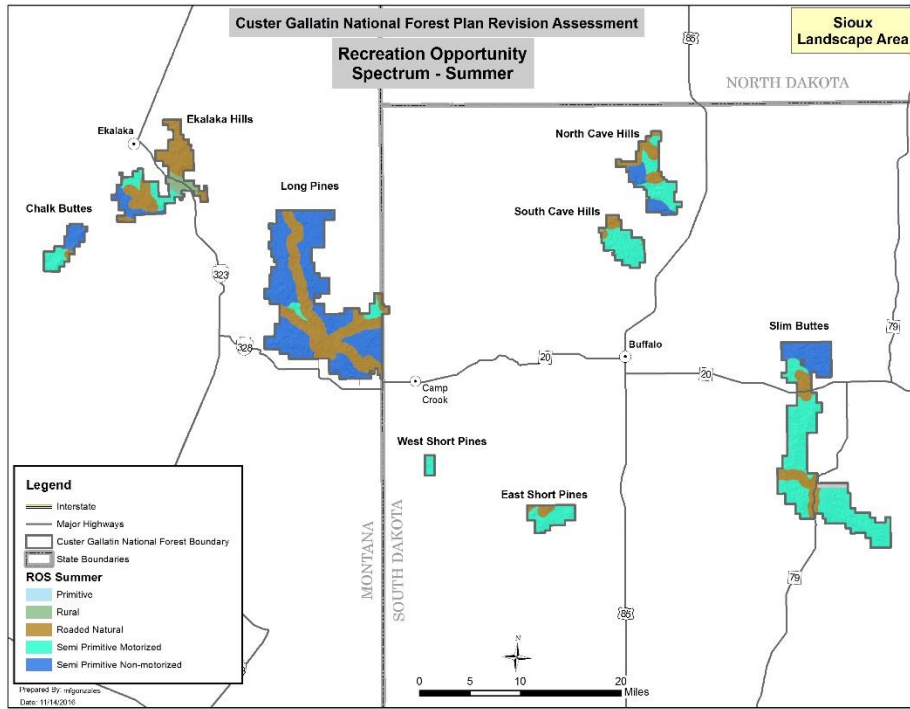


Figure 8. Summer recreation opportunity spectrum Sioux District



## Appendix B: Utilization of Recreation Rental Cabins and Campgrounds

### Recreation Rental Cabins

There are 27 recreation rental cabins and lookouts available for the public to rent on the Custer Gallatin National Forest, displayed in Table 26 by landscape area. Built primarily in the 1920s and 1930s for use by early Forest Rangers, the cabins offer visitors a chance to camp in the forest in a rustic, old-time setting. Some of the cabins have electricity. All have either wood or electric stoves for cooking and heating. Very few have indoor plumbing. Some of the cabins are located on a road; others require that you hike, ski, or snowmobile to them.

**Table 26. Custer Gallatin National Forest recreation rental cabins**

Landscape Area	Number of Cabins	Number of Lookouts	Totals
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	20	1	21
Bridger, Bangtail, Crazy Mountains	4	0	4
Pryor Mountains	0	0	0
Ashland	1	1	2
Sioux	0	0	0
Totals	25	2	27

Rental fees on the Custer Gallatin for cabins range from 20 to 50 dollars per night, with the bulk of the sites costing 30 or 35 dollars per night.

The Custer Gallatin retains and uses a portion of these collected uses fees to reinvest in the maintenance and operation of these sites under the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA) authority. In 2015, the Custer Gallatin collected approximately \$150,000 in rental fees at the twenty seven facilities. That amount reflects a small increase in cabin rental revenue. Rental cabin occupancy increased from about 46 percent occupancy in 2010 up to 57 percent occupancy in 2015.

Occupancy calculations are based on the total number of days the site was available for public rental and how many days it was rented during the fiscal year. This information only includes online reservations and does not include walk-in reservations which would represent a minor increase in utilization. As reflected in Table 27, some desirable sites, such as Windy Pass Cabin, have close to 93 percent occupancy. Others that are more challenging to get to or less popular report relatively low utilization. For example, the Deer Creek Cabin was rented less than 15 percent of the time. Utilization on the Custer Gallatin National Forest tends to be highest on the weekends and holidays and during hunting seasons and school breaks. Availability tends to be the highest midweek, in less desirable seasons, or when access is more challenging.

Variations in cabin rental utilization in some instances can be correlated with weather conditions that facilitate or limit access. For example, cabins accessed by snowmobile, such as Crandall Cabin, may not be accessible when snow is not present and the road is closed to motor vehicles. In contrast, new facilities, such as new trailheads or trail relocations, can also affect utilization by improving visitor's ability to access the cabin. Other environmental factors such as flooding, fire season, road and trail conditions, or heat may also cause minor variations.

**Table 27. Custer Gallatin Recreation rental cabins utilization by calendar year and percent change over 5 years**

<b>Landscape Area</b>	<b>Ranger District</b>	<b>Cabin Name</b>	<b>2010 Utilization</b>	<b>2015 Utilization</b>	<b>2010-2015 Change</b>
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Hebgen Lake	Basin Station	42%	53%	11%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Hebgen Lake	Beaver Creek	45%	65%	20%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Yellowstone	Big Creek	62%	71%	9%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Hebgen Lake	Cabin Creek	24%	32%	8%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Yellowstone	Deer Creek	18%	15%	-3%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Yellowstone	Fourmile	44%	53%	9%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Bozeman	Fox Creek	12%	25%	13%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Bozeman	Garnet Mountain Fire Lookout	56%	77%	21%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Bozeman	Little Bear	41%	46%	5%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Bozeman	Maxey	68%	82%	14%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Beartooth	Meyers Creek	30%	37%	7%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Yellowstone	Mill Creek	60%	78%	18%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Bozeman	Mystic Lake	49%	53%	4%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Bozeman	Spanish Creek	57%	67%	10%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Yellowstone	Trail Creek	29%	40%	11%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Hebgen Lake	Wapiti	48%	62%	14%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Yellowstone	West Boulder	63%	71%	8%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Yellowstone	West Bridger	41%	47%	6%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Bozeman	Window Rock	71%	73%	2%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Bozeman	Windy Pass	71%	93%	22%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Bozeman	Yellow Mule	17%	25%	8%
		Average Percentage Utilization:	46%	56%	10%

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Landscape Area	Ranger District	Cabin Name	2010 Utilization	2015 Utilization	2010-2015 Change
Bridger, Bangtail, Crazy Mountains	Bozeman	Battle Ridge Cabin	68%	80%	18%
Bridger, Bangtail, Crazy Mountains	Yellowstone	Porcupine Cabin	45%	64%	19%
Bridger, Bangtail, Crazy Mountains	Yellowstone	Crandall Creek Cabin	51%	62%	11%
Bridger, Bangtail, Crazy Mountains	Yellowstone	Ibex Cabin	41%	58%	17%
		Average Percentage Utilization:	51%	66%	16%
Ashland	Ashland	Whitetail Cabin	44%	38%	6%
Ashland	Ashland	Diamond Butte Lookout	27%	27%*	-
		Average Percentage Utilization:	36%	33%	-3%

The majority of the cabin rental fees were last adjusted in the early 2000s. Four on the Yellowstone District were increased in 2008. In 2008, both recreation facility analysis reports recommended increasing fees to minimally cover costs of operation and administration of the cabin rental program and to better align with other regionally available public and private facilities. This fee change has not occurred because of challenges on the national and regional scale. However, the consequence has been the Custer Gallatin National Forest’s inability to fully implement the recreation facility analysis and has resulted in an increasing backlog of maintenance and improvements. The condition of individual cabin sites affects customer satisfaction and cabin utilization.

## Developed Campgrounds

All campgrounds on the Custer Gallatin are consistent with the nationally recognized niche of Forest Service campgrounds being on the rustic end of the spectrum. None of the campgrounds on the Custer Gallatin have flush toilets, showers, or constructed playgrounds for children, though some have pressurized water systems or hand pumps. The campgrounds range from very rustic areas with no facilities to large, more developed sites with amenities such as electrical hookups for recreational vehicles, accessible interpretive trails, and safety features, such as bear-resistant food storage containers.

Campgrounds and picnic areas on the Custer Gallatin are operated and maintained either directly by the Forest Service or by a concessionaire. Table 28 displays the breakdown of the number of campgrounds, their operation method, and whether they are non fee or require campers or picnickers to pay a fee. None of the campgrounds or picnic areas operated by the Custer Gallatin are available for reservation, while many of the concessionaire-operated sites are available for reservation. The Custer Gallatin campground and picnic brochure found on line at <http://www.fs.usda.gov/recmain/custergallatin/recreation> and provides detailed descriptions about the amenities offered at each campground, picnic area, or pavilion on the National Forest.

**Table 28. Custer Gallatin National Forest campgrounds by operator and fee charged**

Campgrounds	FS Operated-Non Fee	FS Operated-Fee	Concession Operated	Total Number
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	12	14	23	49
Bridger, Bangtail, Crazy Mountains	2	2	0	4
Pryor Mountains	1	0	0	1
Ashland	4	0	0	4
Sioux	5	0	0	5
Totals	24	16	23	63

At Forest-Service-operated sites, the Custer Gallatin personnel perform the operation and maintenance tasks using a combination of available appropriated dollars and fees where collected. Work at the Custer-Gallatin-operated campgrounds is often accomplished with employees, volunteers, and in some instances, seasonal hosts.

At the 16 Custer-Gallatin-operated campgrounds where fees are collected, the price ranges from 5 dollars to 9 dollars per night. These fees were last adjusted in the early 2000s. The Custer and Gallatin 2008 recreation facility analysis report recommended increasing fees to minimally cover some costs of operation and administration of these facilities and to better align fees charged for similar services regionally and nationally. This fee increase has not occurred limiting the Custer Gallatin's ability to implement the recreation facility analysis, and consequently, there is a backlog of maintenance and improvements. In 2015, approximately \$90,000 was collected in Custer Gallatin National Forest campground fees, slightly up from the prior year (2015 Point of Sales System report). This increase was somewhat localized to campgrounds near the Yellowstone National Park entrance gates in Gardiner.

At the 24 non fee campgrounds and picnic areas, fewer services and amenities are available compared to sites where a fee is charged. Utilization statistics for these sites are not available or discussed in this report.

Two different concessionaires operate and maintain 23 campgrounds and 2 pavilions on the Custer Gallatin National Forest under special use permits. Concessionaires are privately owned companies that operate and maintain campgrounds and picnic areas under the authority of the Granger Thye Act of 1950. The Custer Gallatin National Forest uses the concessionaires if and when appropriate to enhance its capacity to provide public recreation opportunities. Concession opportunities are publically noticed, and proposals are evaluated based on overall benefit to the public.

The two concessionaires on the Custer Gallatin are responsible for the routine maintenance, including painting and updating signs, managing vegetation, cleaning and pumping toilets, trash clean up and removal, and keeping water systems clean and functional. All concessionaire-operated sites have either a resident, a full-time host, or a host shared with nearby sites during their season of operation. The campground hosts provide customer service and visitor information, collect fees, and perform daily site maintenance. Per the terms and conditions established in the special use authorizations, the concessionaires either pay a predetermined percentage of the revenue collected at each site to the Federal Treasury or can enter into an agreement to invest those funds in the maintenance and improvement of infrastructure at these campground and picnic areas. In 2015, approximately \$110,000 in approved projects were completed in using the reinvestment authority.

The fees at concession operated campgrounds range from \$15 to \$30 for a single site and \$45 to \$100 on for a group site or picnic pavilion. Table 29 below demonstrates campground utilization based on reservations. It does not include data for the first-come-first-serve sites which account for up to 40 percent of some campgrounds. Estimated campground occupancy, based on reservation data has increased by an average of 10 percent across the Custer Gallatin with the highest occupancy rates in the campgrounds around Bozeman at around 40 percent for sites in Hyalite Canyon. Campground utilization is highest on weekends, holidays, and when school is not in session.

**Table 29. Custer Gallatin concession campground utilization by calendar year and percent change over 5 years**

Landscape Area	Ranger District	Campground Name	2010 Utilization	2015 Utilization	2010-2015 Change
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Beartooth	Basin Campground	16%	26%	10%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Hebgen Lake	Beaver Creek Campground	10%	18%	8%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Hebgen Lake	Cabin Creek Campground	*	19%	*
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Beartooth	Cascade Campground	7%	13%	6%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Bozeman	Chisholm Campground	36%	41%	5%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Bozeman	Greek Creek Campground	12%	21%	9%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Beartooth	Greenough Lake Campground	23%	34%	11%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Bozeman	Hood Creek Campground	6%	42%	36%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Bozeman	Langohr Campground	26%	36%	10%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Beartooth	Limber Pine Campground	27%	30%	3%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Hebgen Lake	Lonesomehurst Campground	*	35%	*
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Bozeman	Lower Hyalite Group	22%	30%	8%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Bozeman	Moose Creek Flat Campground	9%	16%	7%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Bozeman	Moose Creek Group Site	5%	8%	3%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Beartooth	Parkside Campground	24%	34%	10%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Yellowstone	Pine Creek Campground	21%	26%	5%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Hebgen Lake	Rainbow Point Campground	28%	40%	12%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Beartooth	Rattin Campground	13%	21%	8%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Bozeman	Red Cliff Campground	15%	24%	9%

*Assessment – Recreation Settings, Opportunities, and Access*

<b>Landscape Area</b>	<b>Ranger District</b>	<b>Campground Name</b>	<b>2010 Utilization</b>	<b>2015 Utilization</b>	<b>2010-2015 Change</b>
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Beartooth	Sheridan Campground	20%	22%	2%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Yellowstone	Snowbank Campground	16%	32%	16%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Bozeman	Spire Rock Campground	13%	24%	11%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Bozeman	Swan Creek Campground	22%	28%	6%
Madison, Henry's, Gallatin, Absaroka, Beartooth Mountains	Beartooth	Woodbine Campground	13%	32%	19%

\*Data not available