



## DECISION NOTICE

### Management of Historic Structures at Clarks Fork Yellowstone FAS

FWP-CEA-POR-R5-25-002

2/05/2026

#### ACTION

Decision Notice (DN). Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) shall prepare a DN for the proposed action. The DN must identify the agency's decision, the reasons for the decision, and any special conditions surrounding the decision or its implementation.

With this action, FWP hereby adopts the Draft Environmental Assessment or Draft EA as final, without modification, and approves Alternative 2, the proposed action.

#### AUTHORITY: MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT

According to the applicable requirements of the Montana Environmental Policy Act or MEPA and its implementing rules and regulations, before a proposed action may be approved, environmental review must be conducted to identify, consider, and disclose any potential impacts of the proposed action on the affected human environment. The level of environmental review will vary with the complexity and seriousness of environmental issues associated with a proposed action. The level of public interest will also vary. The agency is responsible for adjusting public review to match these factors. *Title 75, Chapter 1, Parts 1 through 3, Montana Code Annotated (MCA)*.

Based on these factors, FWP determined a checklist (Draft EA) constitutes the appropriate level of review for the proposed action. Therefore, to assess and disclose potential impacts of the proposed action, FWP prepared a Draft EA for public review and comment. See *Public Participation Process* below.

Further, FWP must consider any substantive comments received in response to an EA and proceed in accordance with one of the following steps: determine the EA did not adequately reflect the issues raised by the proposed action and issue an Environmental Impact Statement or EIS; determine the EA did not adequately reflect the issues raised by the proposed action and issue a supplemental EA; or determine the Draft EA adequately addressed the issues raised by the proposed action and make a final decision, with appropriate modification resulting from the analysis provided in the Draft EA and the analysis of any substantive public comments received. See *Public Comment and FWP Response* below.

#### PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROCESS

The Draft EA was made available for public review and comment from November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2025, to December

14<sup>th</sup>, 2025, for 21 days of comment. The Draft EA was posted on FWP's Public Notice webpage: <https://fwp.mt.gov/news/public-notices>. The Draft EA was available for public review on the Environmental Quality Council or EQC website: <https://leg.mt.gov/mepa/search/>, by individual request, and through notice to identified interested parties, 15 adjacent landowners, and Bridger Historic Society. FWP received twelve comments during the public comment period.

#### **DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION**

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) and Bridger Historical Society (BHS) have an opportunity to cooperatively establish a management plan and preserve historic structures at Clarks Fork of the Yellowstone Fishing Access Site (FAS). BHS is working to highlight local history with this site. The primary objective of the FAS is providing public hunting and fishing access and preservation of riparian habitats. This proposal would balance preservation of an important heritage resource while continuing to provide the primary fishing access site objectives.

The FAS was acquired with Access Montana Funds in 2009 by FWP. It consists of 172 acres of land adjacent to the Clarks Fork Yellowstone River, approximately two miles south of Bridger, Montana, in Carbon County. The Jennings-Mahr Homestead (24CB1848) is a historic site located at the north edge of the property along Ridgeway Road. The homestead retains historic structures that have deteriorated, a sod roof log cabin, a granary, with associated fencing that have been determined eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) due to style and the regionally important historic people associated with the homestead. The BHS identified the Jennings-Mahr Homestead (24CB1848) as important to the community and in 2023 reached out to FWP about listing the property on the NRHP and began developing a preliminary plan to rehabilitate or stabilize the structures. Development to support visitation would include a walking trail from the existing FAS parking lot, pullout improvement adjacent to the FAS internal road, localized site and area cleaning, tree trimming, tree removal, and interpretive signs. Work to occur at the site includes but is not limited to the following: removal of dead trees and limbs at risk of falling on structures, cleaning immediate area around buildings of brush and debris, recordation and repair of collapsed log members and bracing of walls, removal of the collapsed sod roof and reinstall, stabilize foundation with concrete piers, assessment and repair of granary foundation by preservation mason, trail building, and interpretive signage.

On-going management of the historic structures will be the responsibility of FWP with cooperation by BHS, the specifics of which will be delineated in a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA). Public access to the cabin will occur via a pedestrian trail from the FAS's main entrance and established parking area from Highway 72. The administrative access gate on Ridgeway Road would remain locked except for FWP & BHS staff and contractors hired for this work. Efforts will be made to minimize disturbance and potential conflict along Ridgeway Road.

#### **PURPOSE AND NEED**

The proposed project would allow FWP to work collaboratively with BHS in the preservation of a historic homestead with local and regional history on the Clarks Fork of the Yellowstone Fishing Access Site. The

benefit of this project would be to the public and local community with the ability to observe historic structures and learn about the associated history of the site and area. The project demonstrates FWP commitment to responsible stewardship of Montana's heritage and a willingness to partner with local communities to protect the places important to local communities while maintaining the existing use of the FAS.

## **ALTERNATIVES ANALYZED**

### **Alternative 1: No Action**

In addition to the proposed action, and as required by MEPA, FWP analyzes the "No-Action" alternative in the EA. Under the No-Action alternative, the proposed action would not occur. Therefore, no additional impacts to the human environment would occur. The No Action alternative forms the baseline from which the potential impacts of the proposed action may be measured.

Under the No Action alternative, FWP would not undertake any preservation, interpretation, or site development activities related to the historic buildings. The structures would remain in their current condition with no additional efforts to stabilize, secure, or interpret them. No signage, trails, or infrastructure improvements would be installed, and no partnerships or grant funding would be pursued to support site maintenance or historical education.

### **Alternative 2: Proposed Action**

Under the Proposed Action, FWP, in partnership with the Bridger Historical Society through an MOA, proposes to preserve and interpret the historic buildings in place while developing minimal site improvements to enhance public access and understanding. The project would include structural stabilization of the buildings, installation of interpretive signage, and limited landscaping to improve site aesthetics and safety. Visitors would park at the FAS's parking lot or associated access interior FAS road pull out with a footpath connecting to the site.

### **Public Comment and FWP Response**

FWP received written public comments during the EA comment period expressing support and concern.

Comments overall were supportive for the following reasons: sharing local history, preservation of structures, improved recreational trails in the area, and supporting the local economy and tourism. Concerns raised included potential impacts to privacy with increased traffic and parking along the county Ridgeway Road, neighborhood character losing quiet country living, property values, questions about the proposed trail being both a road and a walking trail, opposition of moving the cabin, desire to regular oversight to reduce vandalism. The following responses intend to address those comments.

### **Response to Key Issues**

#### **1. Historic Preservation and Site Significance**

FWP acknowledges public interest in preserving the Jennings/Mahr Cabin site as a tangible connection to early settlement and local history. The cabin retains sufficient integrity to convey its historic associations, and stabilization in place is consistent with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties. The Selected Alternative responds directly to public support by preventing further deterioration with some preservation of the cabin within its historic landscape setting, rather than relocating it away from its original context or leaving it to degrade.

## **2. Privacy and Proximity to Adjacent Residences**

FWP commits to the following measures to follow the Good Neighbor Policy (MCA 23-1-26) This act allows for historic preservation and restoration of assets in State Parks and Fishing Access sites and seeks a goal of no impact to adjoining private and public lands. This following approach was recommended by a commenter with concerns and is acceptable to FWP. No designation for parking or new parking areas adjacent to private residences on Ridgeway Road will be created as part of this effort and no formal public access route will be established from Ridgeway Road. Access through the gate will be for administrative use, which may include FWP staff, contractors, and volunteers under the MOA, interpretive use of the cabin will be primarily passive, with no permanent staffing or routine programming anticipated at this time; volunteer workdays or occasional interpretive walks may be conducted by FWP or the Bridger Historical Society in coordination with FWP. Some activities for the site may require a special or commercial use permit, any interpretive signage installed will be limited in number, low-profile, near the cabin and oriented away from nearby homes on Ridgeway Road, and within the site along Highway 72 and established parking areas and the interior trail.

These measures are intended to preserve existing use patterns at the fishing access site and avoid intensification of activity near private property.

## **3. Traffic, Parking, and Access**

Concerns were raised regarding potential increases in traffic along Ridgeway Road. Under the Selected Alternative: public access to the cabin will be walk in only and will be developed from the existing Clarks Fork Yellowstone Fishing Access Site parking area. No new vehicular access roads will be constructed; there is an existing interior agricultural road that leads to the structures which may be improved for administrative use and will be part of the public trail. Location of wayfinding signage, if installed, will direct visitors to existing parking area and to interior enhancements such as the trail, FWP anticipates only minor and temporary increases in traffic and noise associated with periodic volunteer workdays or maintenance activities. These short-term effects will be mitigated through coordination with the Bridger Historical Society though the MOA with the majority occurring by access through the internal trail and administrative road.

## **4. Trail and Access Clarification**

One commenter noted confusion regarding trail descriptions and potential vehicle access routes (Page 9 of the draft EA). FWP clarifies that: the proposed pedestrian trail will be developed using an existing two-track

and will be intended primarily for foot traffic. Administrative vehicle access will be permitted only for maintenance, monitoring, or emergency purposes.

## **5. Property Values**

While concerns were expressed that preservation of the cabin could affect nearby property values, FWP notes that preservation of historic resources within public lands does not constitute a physical or regulatory taking. The project does not change zoning, access rights, or permissible uses of adjacent private property. FWP is not aware of evidence indicating that preservation of historic resources or small-scale cultural and recreational amenities on public land results in adverse effects to adjacent property values. Such features are commonly considered community assets when access and use are appropriately managed.

## **DECISION**

Based on the environmental review provided in the Draft EA, and in accordance with all applicable laws, rules, regulations, and policies, FWP determined the proposed action (Alternative 2), will not have significant adverse impacts on the human environment associated with the proposed action and constitutes a reasonable and appropriate strategy to achieve identified objectives. Therefore, preparation of an EIS is unnecessary. FWP hereby adopts the Draft EA as final and approves the Alternative 2, the proposed action.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Mike Ruggles". The signature is fluid and cursive, with "Mike" on the top line and "Ruggles" on the bottom line.

Mike Ruggles

Region Supervisor, R5 Billings

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks