



Grant Details

125123 - FY24 DMO Plan

128706 - FY24 Southeast Montana DMO Plan

DOC Office of Tourism

Grant Title: FY24 Southeast Montana DMO Plan
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Contract Dates

Contract Sent Contract Received Contract Executed Contract Legal

Project Dates 07/01/2023
 06/30/2024

Project Start Project End

Comments
Amendment Comments

DMO Plan Narrative

1. Describe Your Destination

Describe your destination (who you are, who you wish to attract and why they would come) addressing your strengths, opportunities, and potential challenges.

Southeast Montana is a region of complexities and juxtapositions, a land of vast, open spaces, a place of surprising twists and turns as unexpected as the flowing rivers. The region is a small portion of the Crow Tribe's ancestral land and modern-day home to the Northern Cheyenne nation, and it is ranching, spread farther than naked eyes can see, dotted with small communities more than a century old.

From the state's largest city, Billings, with its walkable downtown and expansive growth along the middle Yellowstone River, to one of the smallest towns, like Ekalaka, which created its identity from the very fossils found in the surrounding area, the Southeast Montana region offers visitors niche experiences of the real Montana.

The Yellowstone River, the longest undammed river in the lower 48 states, flows through the region, alongside I-94 to North Dakota – this is the same route that Capt. Lewis Clark used to navigate back to St. Louis, and includes his timeless signature carved into Pompeys Pillar. Today we can dare to explore the same river using the Lower Yellowstone River Trail (still under development by Montana FWP). Other rivers, like the Tongue and Bighorn, which flow north into Montana, are dammed and create recreational oases. The massive Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area, which contains the 71-mile long Bighorn Lake (locally known as Yellowtail) beneath towering 1,000-foot-high red cliffs, dwarfs and stuns visitors with its raw beauty.

It is this ruggedness, this stark contrast of seemingly benign rolling prairies and flowing rivers that gives way to natural breaks and unexpected Eastern Montana badlands.

Created by prehistoric rivers, the Terry Badlands and Makoshika State Park badlands, hold more secrets to be discovered amongst the crevices and coulees. Explore them by day or watch as the setting sun stains the land in elusive shades of mauve, pink and gold that remain indescribable.

Nighttime provides another opportunity to be awed by Southeast Montana. Visit any one of the 40-plus locations along Montana's Trail to the Stars and be mesmerized by incredible views of stars beyond compare. Medicine Rocks State Park, located between Baker and Ekalaka, stands as the anchor site of this trail and only one of two International Dark-Skies "sanctuaries" in the state.

Southeast Montana is rich in history, with the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument (operated by NPS) serving ~250,000 visitors each year. With nearly 20 museums and cultural centers, the history buff can spend days in the region. Our history maps help navigate this journey, as will the upcoming Trail to the Little Bighorn project. As a bonus, many museums are no-cost and docents are locals who love sharing the story of the community with visitors.

While dinosaurs once roamed these craggy lands, they never get old out here. From a personal dig on private property to the award-winning annual Shindig in Ekalaka, to the Montana Dinosaur Trail, both the young and the young-at-heart will find an experience to treasure in Southeast Montana. The Musselshell Museum in Roundup recently added a paleontological exhibit and is working to join the Montana Dinosaur Trail.

Signature events like the Miles City Bucking Horse Sale, Buzzard Day (Makoshika), Reenactment of the Battle of Little Bighorn, Roundup Independence Day Extravaganza (RIDE), Crow Fair & Powwow and NILE Rodeo bring visitors from

across the globe to Southeast Montana. Newer, smaller events like Makoshika Triathlon continue to attract a more interactive and competitive crowd.

Those visiting Southeast Montana can taste Montana in nearly every town by following the Southeast Montana Burger Trail (which will be expanded with a digital application in FY24). While in Billings, the Brew Trail and newly expanded Trailhead Treats offer alternatives. Plus, the region is home to several James Beard Award nominees and winners – and not just where one would expect – but also The Backporch in Roundup.

Southeast Montana is a place of Big Space and Big Tastes.

WE'RE BIG OUT HERE

That is what a visit to Southeast Montana promises. Wide-open spaces. Historical stories. Deeply-rooted traditions. And, adventures as varied as stars in the vast night skies.

Out here, Big Sky meets big adventure. It's the kind of place to slow down and fall in love with Montana. It's the kind of place where cowboys still ride horses across the open plains. It's the kind of place where dinosaur fossils are waiting to be discovered and history is rooted in the land. It's the kind of place where visitors can steep in the myriad colors of a prairie sunset and feel the drum beat that nourished the indigenous tribes for generations.

A BRIEF HISTORY

Originally called "Custer Country," Visit Southeast Montana began in 1984 as an organization charged with helping bring tourists to the region. It was named for one of its most famous attractions, the Little Bighorn Battlefield. In 1987 the Montana Legislature enacted a 4 percent Lodging Facility Use Tax to fund tourism promotion organizations. At that time, Custer Country became one of six state-funded tourism regions in the state. This organization continued to market the 13 counties and two Indian Reservations of Southeast Montana until 2010. The Billings Chamber of Commerce received the contract from the Montana Department of Commerce to manage the region and the organization moved from Forsyth to Billings. In 2012, the Custer Country Board of Directors voted to change the name of the region to "Visit Southeast Montana."

THE ORGANIZATION

Visit Southeast Montana is a nonprofit organization managed by the Billings Chamber of Commerce. We serve as a voice for Southeast Montana's tourism and hospitality industries, seeking to promote the region's many attractions, events and communities while ensuring that tourism is recognized as one of the region's top economic drivers, especially when changes to local and state-wide legislation are considered. Visit Southeast Montana consists of two full-time staff members under contract with the Montana Department of Commerce and is directed by a board consisting of no more than 21 members from across the region. Visit Southeast Montana partners with the region's two Convention & Visitors Bureaus (Billings, Miles City and Glendive) along with hoteliers, chambers of commerce and other tourism-related entities including state parks, county and federal organizations, plus private businesses ranging from coffee shops and restaurants to guide services, art galleries and private tour operators. The stakeholders and tourism partners of Southeast Montana provide the essence, flavor, identity and unique character of the region.

MISSION OF VISIT SOUTHEAST MONTANA:

The mission of Visit Southeast Montana is to increase tourism to Southeast Montana by increasing the awareness of our region, showcasing our cultural heritage, developing memorable experiences and educating our residents about the economic benefits of tourism.

OUR VISION: Southeast Montana will become the trusted source for free-spirited travelers to achieve their legendary life experiences, based on these key characteristics that align with the Montana Brand.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

This vast region, blessed with a diversity of people, geography and cultures, prides itself on connecting with visitors who enjoy our six very distinctive characteristics:

Strengths:

- Outdoor Recreation (the wide-open spaces & public land)
- Historical Significance
- Western Authenticity
- Dinosaur Adventures
- Crow & Northern Cheyenne Culture
- Interstates I-90 & I-94 funnel road-trippers into the region – and is “on the way” to YNP and GNP
- Billings – Montana’s largest city
- Wide open spaces – post-pandemic travelers (lower COVID rates/less people)
- Aligns with Brand MT, which has stated effort to divert visitor traffic away from national parks into all areas of Montana
- Signature Events – Bucking Horse Sale; Crow Fair; RIDE – plus new events
- Destination Development projects gaining momentum

At the same time, Visit Southeast Montana faces very real challenges, including:

- Perception that Montana is far away and difficult to travel to
- Distance between services/remote areas (
- Irregular mobile phone coverage
- Regions are confusing and no applicable for travelers
- Underdeveloped tourism product(s)

2. Align with Montana Brand

Briefly describe how your destination aligns with the Montana Brand.

The Montana Brand consists of three pillars:

1. More spectacular, unspoiled nature than anywhere else in the lower 48
2. Vibrant and charming small towns that serve as gateways to our natural wonders
3. Breathtaking experiences by day, and relaxing hospitality at night

Visit Southeast Montana aligns with the Montana Brand in a plethora of ways. Makoshika State Park, Terry Badlands Wilderness Study Area and Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area boast spectacular, unspoiled nature. These vast and stunning public lands are complemented with the wide-open spaces where the mountains roll out to meet the prairies and the Yellowstone River freely flows. In addition, Southeast Montana holds historical beauty in the Little Bighorn Battlefield and lesser-know historical locations and monuments like Rosebud Battlefield State Park, Tongue River Reservoir State Park and Four Dances Recreation Area.

We offer vibrant and evolving small towns – from Roundup to Baker, Forsyth to Hardin and Miles City to Baker – each with its own unique charm. Glendive is not only the gateway to Makoshika State Park, it and Wibaux are the gateways to Montana. Crow Agency, Fort Smith and Hardin also welcome visitors to the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument and Bighorn Canyon. And, of course, we are the home of Billings, Montana’s Trailhead – the state’s largest, incredibly progressive city.

With all these options of breathtaking experiences by day, our visitors deserve relaxing hospitality at night – including the newly-launched and awarded Montana Trail to the Stars. In Southeast Montana relaxing lodging options range from the luxurious Northern Hotel in Billings to the rustic (and haunted) Kempton Hotel in Terry – the longest continually operating lodging facility in the state. Over the past year, we launched the Southeast Montana Burger Trail, with more than 20 locations in communities across the region, and two businesses – Veronika’s Bakery and The Backporch in Roundup – are nominees for the prestigious James Beard Awards. Southeast Montana contains all amazing the ingredients necessary for relaxing hospitality, Montana-style.

3. What is the strategic role of your DMO?

Select all that apply: Destination Marketing, Destination Management, Destination Stewardship, Destination Development).

Destination Marketing, Destination Development

Based on the strategic role you serve, provide the following information.

3a. Define your audience(s) (demographic, geographic, and psycho-graphic).

Visit Southeast Montana parallels the target market identified by Brand MT, as identified here:

According to the 2016 Montana Destination Brand Research Study by Destination Analysts, the High-Profile Visitor (HPV) is not only attracted to Montana, he/she sees the destination as more attractive and competitive when compared to its regional competition. The HPVs are:

- City dwellers (not rural and not suburban)
- Married with children
- Well-educated
- Affluent (>\$80K)
- Younger (average age 36.4)
- Frequent travelers
- Male-oriented (54.3% male vs 45.7% female)
- Strongly attracted to and familiar with Montana’s tourism offerings
- Likely **repeat visitors**
- **Outdoor-oriented travelers** (psychographic index)

3b. What research supports your DMO strategy?

As stated previous, we follow Brand MT's target market, based on the research by Destination Analysts, which is further supported here, where we drill down to niche audiences:

10 OF THE TOP 12 DESIRED ACTIVITIES ALIGN WITH VISIT SOUTHEAST MONTANA'S PILLARS.

Destination Analysts identified two niche markets: family travelers and history buffs. Both niches align with Southeast Montana's strengths, with history buffs fitting a cross-section of SEMT's historical significance, western authenticity and Native American culture.

At this time, Visit Southeast Montana plans to focus on HPVs in drive geo-markets with these Target Markets:

- Brand MT's target markets:
- High-value family traveler
- Niche: History buffs & Road trippers from MidwestRegional travelers - within 10-to-12-hour drive radius of Miles City (center of region)
- Travelers on way to/from Yellowstone National Park and/or Glacier
- Western Montanans, especially outdoor adventurers

This is further supported with data from **Visit Southeast Montana's 2022 Conversion Study** (attached), which identifies Midwest Roadtrippers and direct flight markets as shown **Image 2**.

Additionally, the Conversion Study reinforces our understanding of the target market's desire to experience the natural beauty of Montana's wide-open spaces and outdoor recreation opportunities yet have affordable options within a "drivable distance." We also see direct-flight markets, culinary experiences and cultural experiences as factoring into a visitor's decision to visit Southeast Montana region (see **Image 3**).

Lastly, we noted that potential visitors wish to hike and fish, experience small-town charm and visit historical sites and museums, as per **Image 4** from the Conversion Study:

3c. What are your emerging markets?

In addition, we have identified the following Emerging Markets:

- Outdoor Recreationists:

- Specifically, water sports like kayaking and rafting
- Lower Yellowstone River water-based trail (continuing to build out)
- Night Sky Observers/Astrotourism, and
- Culinary Travelers - specific to the Southeast Montana Burger Trail (which received an EMI grant to expand with a digital passport program)

4. Define and describe your overall goals.

A goal is an idea of the future or desired result that a person or group of people envisions, plans and commits to achieve.

What is the strategic role of Visit Southeast Montana as a DMO?

We are primarily a **Destination Marketing Organization** (~75%), with basis in promoting regional visitation. At the same time, we are also a **Destination Development Organization** (~25%).

As we evolve into this dual identity, we will look for, develop and market regional assets. *Montana's Trail to the Stars & Montana's Dinosaur Trail* are both strong examples of tourism product development in this region.

In FY24 we will utilize a grant from the Eastern Montana Tourism Initiative to expand the one-year-old Southeast Montana Burger Trail by adding a digital passport, print and distribute more maps, elevate with paid advertising and promote with a participation contest.

We are also the lead on a new project, Badlands to Breaks to Beartooths (working name), which will route road-trippers between these three distinctive land features of Eastern Montana. The project is funded by a Montana Tourism Grant and includes four regions (Yellowstone Country; Missouri River Country; Central Montana; and Visit Southeast Montana) and is massive undertaking. We expect the project to launch in March/April of 2024.

All our goals support our Destination Development efforts, but specifically Goal #1 (dedicate 5% of paid media budget to destination development projects) and Goal 5 (connecting with tourism partners at a local level) demonstrate how our destination development work melds with marketing work. This combination allows us – and our tourism partners - to identify and grow “products” that are unique to this corner of Montana.

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In addition, the Visit Southeast Montana Board of Directors (Executive Board) is planning a retreat for fall of 2023, at which we will specifically explore new strategies to support visitor services across the region. In the past, we have

provided grants to (3) VICs; however, the Board wants to have a more broad impact in all regional communities (current budget includes a \$100 placeholder; will adjust budget after retreat and audit using rollover funds).

Overall Strategy

Visit Southeast Montana strives to increase awareness of and visitation to the Visit Southeast Montana region as a destination for outdoor recreation, historical significance and dinosaur adventures along with Western authenticity plus Crow and Northern Cheyenne culture, as desired by each tribe.

We will continue to follow the Montana Brand while elevating Visit SEMT's pillars and destination development projects to targeted audience, while simultaneously working with tourism partners within the region to grow regional pride and identity, tourism products and awareness. We will execute the FY24 Marketing Plan with these strategic objectives and goals defined below.

4a. Describe proposed tactics and projects as related to overall goals and controlled by the organization in its financial statements.

Visit Southeast Montana will continue website renovation (started in FY23) and enhancements, including video, to strengthen this core marketing component while adding Destination Development elements. We will specifically target content, like the e-newsletter and travel guide orders, to those already interested in visiting GNP by utilizing a new partnership with the Glacier National Park Conservancy. In addition to our foundational and strategic paid media plan, we will promote our Destination Development projects, specifically: Montana Dinosaur Trail; Montana's Trail to the Stars; Southeast Montana Burger Trail; and Trail to the Little Bighorn. And we will continue to support our regional partners, functioning as the conduit between Brand MT and all the communities of Visit Southeast Montana region. Lastly, we will again survey visitors and potential visitors in the fall of 2023 to glean insights and trends specific to the Visit Southeast Montana region.

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Objectives/Metrics/Evaluation

Objectives	Measurable Metrics for Success	Report the Metric Achieved	Evaluation of Measurable Metrics for Success
<p>Strategic Goal #3 – Connect with visitors who are already planning to visit YNP & GNP to elevate the Southeast Montana region as an option on their way to/from the parks.</p>	<p>Objective 1 - Generate 7,000 new leads by partnering with GNP Conservancy Call Center.</p> <p>Objective 2 - Increase reach to YNP travelers and gather 3,000 new email addresses by partnering with <i>Yellowstone Journal</i>.</p> <p>We will note number of e-blast subscribers on [DATE: July 1, 2023] with successful objectives increasing that number by at least 10,000 subscribers in FY24.</p>	<p>Report will be completed when the method is complete.</p>	<p>Report will be completed when the method is complete.</p>
<p>Strategic Goal #2 – Continue to add to online content on Visit Southeast Montana-owned channels and non-owned channels (earned media) and use this to drive traffic to <i>southeastmontana.com</i>.</p>	<p>Objective 1 - Gather and create more seasonal content (images, video, copy) & add seasonal content to website; execute additional photo/video shoot to increase fall photo library by at least (15) images.</p> <p>Objective 2: Maximize editorial calendar by writing & distributing (1) news release/month.</p> <p>We will use Google Analytics to track website traffic to <i>southeastmontana.com</i>; if we increase traffic to <i>southeastmontana.com</i> by 10% in FY24 over FY23, we will consider this method a success.</p>	<p>Report will be submitted when the method is complete.</p>	<p>Evaluation will be submitted when the method is complete.</p>
<p>Strategic Goal #1: Continue to utilize paid advertising to elevate Visit SEMT's</p>	<p>Objective 1 – Maintain minimum paid media budget of \$150K for pillars and Destination Development projects.</p>	<p>Report will be submitted when the</p>	<p>Evaluation will be submitted</p>

<p>pillars while advancing existing Destination Development projects.</p>	<p>Objective 2 – Elevate Destination Development projects by dedicating 5% of paid advertising budget (\$7,500) to each of (4) DD projects: MT Dino Trail; MT’s Trail to the Stars; MT Burger Trail; Trail to the Little Bighorn (\$30K total).</p> <p>This method will be consider a success if we increase the effectiveness of paid media by increasing impressions and engagement (CTR, etc.) 10% in FY24 over FY23.</p>	<p>method is complete.</p>	<p>when the method is complete.</p>
<p>Strategic Goal #4: Utilize new call center to increase understanding of our visitors by executing a survey every fall with minimum of 300 responses.</p>	<p>Objective 1: Execute conversion study of at least 300 participants. Compare results with study from 2022.</p> <p>This method will be successful when we execute the Survey with at least 300 visitors and present the results to the Board at Jan/Feb 2024 Board meeting, in advance of FY25 planning.</p>	<p>Report will be submitted when the method is complete.</p>	<p>Evaluation will be submitted when the method is complete.</p>
<p>Strategic Goal #5: Connect with more tourism partners across the region to become the resource for destination development and tourism marketing.</p>	<p>Objective 1: Host at least (5) regional roundtables in FY24.</p> <p>Objective 2: Increase reach (open rate) of weekly e-blast to tourism partners by 1.5% over FY23 and add 40 additional subscribers to e-blast list [from what is in database on July 1, 2023].</p> <p>This method will be successful if at least (3) tourism partners, in each of (5) communities, attend the roundtable and have one-on-one conversations with staff and board members.</p>	<p>Report will be submitted when the method is complete.</p>	<p>Evaluation will be submitted when the method is complete.</p>

DMO Budget

Allowable Methods	Amount Budgeted	% of Budget Allocated	Amount Expended	% of Budget Expended
Administration	\$164,231.00	17.36	\$0.00	0

Agency Services	\$95,000.00	10.04	\$0.00	0
Cooperative Marketing	\$20,000.00	2.1	\$0.00	0
Earned Media/Tourism Sales	\$30,100.00	3.18	\$0.00	0
Education/Outreach	\$20,600.00	2.18	\$0.00	0
Joint Venture	\$50,000.00	5.28	\$0.00	0
Marketing Resources	\$8,000.00	0.85	\$0.00	0
Opportunity Marketing	\$40,000.00	4.23	\$0.00	0
Paid Media	\$222,423.00	23.51	\$0.00	0
Marketing Personnel	\$120,500.00	12.74	\$0.00	0
Product Development	\$37,500.00	3.96	\$0.00	0
Research	\$10,100.00	1.07	\$0.00	0
Travel/Trade Shows	\$3,100.00	0.33	\$0.00	0
Visitor Services	\$64,600.00	6.83	\$0.00	0
Website Development (Online, Website, Mobile)	\$60,000.00	6.34	\$0.00	0
	\$946,154.00	100.00	\$0.00	0.00

Narrative Evaluation

DMO Plan Attachments

Description	File Name	File Size
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Reg/CVB Required Documents

Description	File Name	File Size
Visit SEMT Compliance Checklist Visit SEMT Bylaws Visit SEMT 4.19.23 Board Meeting Minutes	SEMT Required Docs.pdf	664 KB

