

# Application Summary

**Application:** FY25 DMO Plan

**Applicant:** Montana's Missouri River Country

**Funding opportunity:** FY25 DMO Plan

## Application Responses

**Organization Name:** Montana's Missouri River Country

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**City:** Fort Peck

**State:** Montana

**Zip:** 59223

**Funding Opportunity:** FY25 DMO Plan

**Amount Requested:** 126,911

## General Description Information

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

**1a. Destination:**

### Introduction

The FY25 Montana's Missouri River Country DMO Plan will lead us on a path to promote our region as a destination for visitors and, in turn, increase overnight stays at our motels and support for our local businesses and communities. We serve eight counties including the Fort Peck Indian Reservation, and our region borders North Dakota to the east and Canada to the north. According to market research company, Future Partners, Americans love to travel. Their travel excitement and desire for inspiration is coming back up after 4 years. An Institute for Tourism & Recreation Research, ITRR survey indicated residents demonstrate a balanced attitude and understanding of the tourism industry within the state. A majority of respondents agree that promotion of the tourism industry by the state benefits their community economically. Furthermore, we are thrilled to welcome even more visitors from across the Canadian border as we embark on a newfound, international partnership with South Saskatchewan Ready. Our regions aim to conceptually create and promote a "gateway" between our unique destinations and showcase local attractions, community events and the many ways visitors can explore and enjoy each landscape.

Missouri River Country is also working with the Coraggio Group to prepare a Resiliency Plan. This plan has enabled us to assess our strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for enhancing both visitor experiences and the well-being of our residents. It is one of six regional plans within our state, complemented by a statewide plan that enriches our efforts. With the success of tourism comes a responsibility to our communities and residents, a responsibility that has become even more evident in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. This plan emphasizes proactive and responsible tourism practices, celebrating positive impacts while addressing challenges. Through extensive stakeholder outreach, research, and reflection, we have crafted a practical, forward-thinking and self-aware plan. It is designed to bolster tourism, partnerships, and community resilience, ensuring sustainable growth for Missouri River Country.

With Sidney's recent qualification for CVB status, MRC is committed to forging a close partnership to support their success. We will collaborate closely with Sidney to provide assistance and expertise, leveraging our collective resources to bolster their efforts. By working hand in hand, we aim to ensure Sidney's smooth transition into the CVB role and help them thrive in their new capacity. Together, we will explore opportunities to maximize funding and marketing strategies, positioning Sidney as a vibrant travel destination while strengthening our region's tourism industry as a whole.

### **High Value Audience**

We are a destination for outdoor adventurers, geotourists, history buffs, families, Native American culturists, dinosaur trail followers, anglers and overall recreationists. Here, visitors will find spectacular nature, charming small towns, exceptional wildlife watching and breathtaking experiences. Missouri River Country is home to Fort Peck Lake, four national wildlife refuges, a Montana state park and 27 charming communities. Visitors come here to experience perfect solitude in nature, gain opportunities to spend genuine, uninterrupted time with their loved ones and take advantage of more room to roam. We believe that in the 21st century, as people become more and more engulfed in the hustle and bustle of daily life, what visitors now crave from their vacation is a chance to unplug and reconnect. Fewer people and less traffic means more time to focus on real experiences, so after careful evaluation by our Director and Board of Directors, we have chosen to continue our successful campaign and encourage visitors to take advantage of our amazing open spaces through our marketing campaign: More Room To Roam. "More Room To Roam" holds many meanings to us. It means that there are more opportunities to have an authentic, meaningful experience in Montana. It means there is more room to connect and more space to explore. We are proud of our campaign because it allows our target audiences to reflect: What would more room mean to me? Maybe that means time with family or friends, or more moments to sit still and observe the incredible biological diversity on our prairies and waters. Maybe it means getting lost—on purpose. We know that it means something different to everyone, but the message is clear: You can find whatever you are looking for in Missouri River Country, and we want to help you along the way.

**Fewer people and less traffic means more time to focus on real experiences.**

### **Identity**

Montana is an incredibly diverse state that is synonymous with the West. Our history is vast, same as our landscapes, and wide-open spaces surround our friendly, small communities. This is a side of our state that few see, but all who experience it fall in love with Montana all over again. We understand that many visitors who come to Montana come to experience the two national parks in our state, and for that reason much of our visitation comes from drive-through travel. However, Missouri River Country has many attractions that bring in visitors directly to our towns, waterways and wide-open spaces. Missouri River Country is a hub for outdoor recreation including hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, photography, hiking, boating and ATVing, and ice fishing, cross-country skiing and snowmobiling in the winter. Thanks to the remoteness of the region, the best show in Montana can be seen each night in Missouri River Country's beautiful night skies, unpolluted by light from large cities and towns. The Missouri River, which was an integral part of the Lewis and Clark route, runs through our district and attracts history and culture buffs. Uniquely, dinosaurs once roamed this vast landscape and the remains of these giants can be seen at museums throughout the region, including some of the full-size fossils discovered in Northeast Montana. A distinct region unto itself, this place of the Great Plains harbors unique landforms. Grand scenes intermingle with smaller bits of geologic wonder. Space, much of it undisturbed, is our greatest commodity, and an unending sky delivers a feeling of freedom with no borders or confinement. Missouri River Country is truly the land of wide-open spaces—of opportunity and spectacular nature. You can see for miles, stretch your arms, breathe the fresh air and sleep under the starry night sky. It's not the destination but rather the experiences had in Missouri River Country that are truly breathtaking.

### **1b. Strengths:**

#### **Strengths**

## Hunting

Visitors here spend less time hunting for open space and more time hunting! According to the 2023 ITRR report, 9% of nonresident visitors who spend at least one night in Missouri River Country participated in hunting activities, and we believe that this is thanks, in large part, to our less-populated nature. No matter where you go in Northeast Montana, you are surrounded by wildlife, from trophy elk on the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge to bighorn sheep south of Malta. Hunters come from all over the U.S. to bow hunt and/or rifle hunt for big game. The skies above are filled with upland gamebirds and waterfowl. Our wide-open spaces are home to pronghorn, mule deer and whitetails. Our corner of Montana is not only an exciting place for hunting adventures, but a land of unrivaled beauty and wonder.

## Fishing & Fort Peck Lake

In the summer, marinas are filled with anglers looking to wet a line and pass the day on the water. Defined by sandstone formations, fields of grain and fertile river bottoms, Missouri River Country is a place where shorelines go on for more than a thousand miles and fish grow to more than 100 pounds. This is the land where men built a dam across the mighty Missouri River and created the largest body of water in Montana. This is the land of Fort Peck Reservoir, which boasts over 1,600 miles of shoreline (more than the California coast!) and an impressive variety of fish. According to the 2023 ITRR report, 8% of nonresident visitors who spent at least one night in Missouri River Country visited Fort Peck Lake during their trip, which shows how immense an attraction Fort Peck Lake truly is during all seasons. In the winter, Fort Peck Lake freezes over and makes way for some great ice fishing fun, which makes fishing a four-season activity in our region and opens up outdoor activities all year long for visitors. Summer water activities include fishing, tubing, water skiing, wake boarding and swimming, and during spring and fall, fishing and boating opportunities still abound. In addition to Fort Peck Lake, many rivers and dams in Missouri River Country provide fishing opportunities, such as Nelson Reservoir, the Missouri River, the Milk River and the Yellowstone River.

**Fort Peck Reservoir is over 1,600 miles of shoreline - more than the California coast!**

## Dinosaurs

Millions of years before the formation of the Missouri River in Montana, dinosaurs made this once-lush wetland their home. Northeast Montana has provided a wealth of world class fossil discoveries and, according to the 2023 ITRR report, 4% of nonresident visitors who spent at least one night in Missouri River Country participated in activities related to dinosaur attractions. Visitors can experience dinosaur digs at the Great Plains Dinosaur Museum in Malta and learn about the prehistoric nature of our dramatic landscapes. The museum also offers the public an intimate look into a working paleontological institution. Their *Brachylophosaurus* fossil, "Leonardo," is in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the "best preserved dinosaur ever found," and the museum has the best growth series of this dinosaur anywhere. At the Fort Peck Interpretive Center & Museum, visitors can view a life-size model of "Peck's Rex," a skeleton of a *Tyrannosaurus* rex found near Fort Peck in 1996. The Phillips County Museum features fossil discoveries from the nearby Judith River Formation, including a late *Brachylophosaurus*, one of the best-articulated dinosaur skeletons ever found. The Garfield County Museum displays a full-scale model of a Triceratops, which was found about 35 miles from Jordan in 1964.

## History & Culture

Our history is just as vast as the rolling landscape in Missouri River Country. Lewis and Clark history buffs come here to experience the landscape that has remained virtually unchanged since the days of westward expansion. Lewis and Clark may have been early visitors to Missouri River Country, but when they arrived, the region was already home to the Assiniboine people. Members of the Sioux Nation also call our corner of Montana home, and their cultural heritage continues to be celebrated today through such events as powwow and dancing ceremonies. Annual powwows are held on the Fort Peck Reservation, where traditional dance, song and tribal ceremonies can be experienced. Missouri River Country has many museums, cultural centers, visitor centers and historic downtown regions that attract travelers interested in history and culture to our corner of Montana.

## Outdoor Recreation & Wildlife

While we are most known for our hunting and fishing, there is a plethora of outdoor recreation opportunities in Missouri River Country. Hikers can enjoy total trail solitude in the Little Rocky Mountains, birders will be amazed by the uninterrupted views, wildlife viewing is plentiful, and boating and ATVing opportunities abound. RV and tent campers

make their way to Northeast Montana to take part in a Montana adventure found only here. According to the 2023 ITRR report, 24% of nonresident visitors who spent at least one night in Missouri River Country participated in wildlife watching, and scenic drives attracted 58%. Between four national wildlife refuges, the American Prairie, Fort Peck Lake and other riparian areas, and the elk rut areas, visitors have a myriad of opportunities to participate in wildlife viewing and scenic drives. Slippery Ann Elk Viewing Area is one of the best places to view elk in the fall, and visitors are consistently enamored with the raw nature found in Missouri River Country.

Bikers can stop in Glasgow at the Bike Bin at Smith Park, featuring a bicycle repair stand and bike wash station conveniently located near camping and showers at the adjacent Shady Rest RV Park.

In the winter, visitors can bring their cross-country skis and explore our wide-open prairies on the snow, which is a fun and unique experience for locals and visitors alike.

### Charming Communities

27 charming, small communities dot Missouri River Country, offering visitors authentic Montana character. Museums, outfitters and shops offer a taste of our history and culture. Visitors can pan for gold or go on a dinosaur dig based out of our communities, and then return to spend the night in our motels and cabins. We have three microbreweries in the region and many wonderful dining options serving up delicious burgers, steaks, locally grown produce and so much more. Visitors have the chance to experience local farmers markets in the summer and festivals throughout the year. One of the best parts of our region is the people who call Missouri River Country home and warmly share our beloved landscape with visitors.

### Affordability

Compared to other vacation destinations, Missouri River Country offers affordable options for travelers. Lodging, food and drink is less expensive in Missouri River Country than in our neighboring regions. Affordable and free activities like wildlife watching, hiking, museums, fishing and dinosaur digs are more abundant compared to other areas in the state, and we offer a family-based mentality. We know that our affordability is a great resource for travelers and plays a role in our attraction to visitors as they choose where to spend their hard-earned vacation dollars.

### Wide-Open Spaces

There is more room to roam in Missouri River Country, and this is a huge draw for our visitors. According to the 2023 ITRR report, 77% of nonresident visitors who spent at least one night in Missouri River Country were very satisfied with our open space/uncrowded areas. Oxford University scientists used population data and analytics to find the true “middle of nowhere,” and their results determined that the top three spots were all in Missouri River Country: Glasgow took the top spot with Scobey and Wolf Point coming in second and third, respectively. *The Washington Post* published an article on Glasgow being “the middle of nowhere.” From that article, Glasgow gained momentum in the press with an NBC article that interviewed community members, and aired on NBC Nightly News. The American Prairie calls Northeast Montana home as well, and it’s a great place to view the plains and the animals who thrive here, including the national mammal, the American bison. We believe that our remoteness is exactly what certain tourists are looking for in a vacation—a place to escape from the city, get away from traffic and find themselves in the middle of nowhere (or in the middle of everything, depending on how you look at it).

### Dark Skies

Missouri River Country is one of the most remote regions in the country, with the closest major city being 4 ½ hours away. For this reason, our skies remain unpolluted by light and allow visitors to have a truly out-of-this-world experience beneath some of the darkest night skies and brightest cosmos in the lower 48. We believe that our dark skies are a huge strength and provide visitors with a unique, star-studded experience that is fun for families, couples and retirees alike. With the support of the Eastern Montana Initiative (EMI) grant, Missouri River Country, successfully partnered with other eastern Montana regions to create the award-winning *Trail to the Stars* campaign. This project includes a website, interactive map, event schedule, tips and programming to highlight 45+ excellent night sky viewing areas in the region. We continue to expand this program and are close to putting Brush Lake State Park on the map as a designated International Dark Sky Park. The project's funding is now uncertain following the termination of the EMI grant.

### Events

Our charming communities host a wide variety and large quantity of events each year, which provide visitors with an authentic taste of our region, all while boosting our local economies. In the summer, each of our eight counties host a fair, complete with concerts, rodeos and lively cowboy competitions like the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA) Xtreme Match Bronc Ride in Jordan. The PRCA Rodeo Circuit comes through Wolf Point, too, and we celebrate the iconic Wolf Point Wild Horse Stampede, the oldest rodeo in Montana. Tribal members from the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation head to Dodson in the summer to celebrate their annual Indian Relay—a horse race involving people switching horses while in motion for the chance at winning cash prizes. Pioneer Days in Scobey is a huge annual event where visitors can experience what life was like in the years of the pioneers, and local powwows provide insight into Native American culture and traditions. Exciting fishing tournaments, like the annual Montana’s Governor’s Cup Walleye Tournament on Fort Peck Lake in July, attract sportsmen and women from all over the world, who know there are trophy-worthy fish in our waters. What’s more, these events aren’t restricted to a single season; fishing is a year-round activity in Montana’s Missouri River Country, and those who partake in the sport understand just how special this makes our region. Missouri River Country is also home to multiple hockey teams—a popular sport in the region. Along with their indoor and outdoor rinks for public use, people can attend lively games during the playing season. For trip agendas and planning ideas, visitors can easily view Missouri River Country’s full events calendar on our updated website, and local businesses can add their events directly to the calendar as well.

### **1c. Opportunities: OPPORTUNITIES**

#### Amtrak

Missouri River Country is fortunate to have Amtrak stops in Wolf Point, Glasgow and Malta. We believe that a unique opportunity lies in attracting visitors to stop over in Missouri River Country on their way from the Chicago and Minneapolis areas en route to Glacier National Park. We also believe that there is untapped potential for families from cities to the east to easily access our charming communities and have authentic Montana experiences with less train-time than riding all the way to Glacier National Park. With that in mind, we believe it is worth exploring the potential of tour guide opportunities from these Amtrak terminal points to nearby attractions. This approach could promote overnight visits to local communities. We plan to research transportation options (such as Lyft, Uber and other driving services) that may be viable candidates for excursions from Amtrak launching points.

#### Cape Air Service

In 2023, Cape Air flights in MRC recorded a rise in ridership, marking a 1.3 percent increase compared to the previous year, 2022. Serving the regions of Glasgow, Wolf Point, and Sidney in MRC, Cape Air's flights have signaled a positive growth in passengers. As Cape Air continues to cater to the transportation needs of these communities, its expanding popularity underscores its significance as a vital mode of air travel within the MRC region.

### **Missouri River Country has some of the darkest skies in the continental United States.**

#### Dark Skies

Missouri River Country has some of the darkest skies in the continental United States. With our distance from major cities, most of our region is considered “dark sky” country, and we believe that this presents a big marketing opportunity. With the recent success of eastern Montana’s collaborative project, Trail to the Stars, we believe there is huge potential in positioning Missouri River Country as a must-go destination for astrotourism. Our award-winning campaign, Trail to the Stars has garnered attention from media outlets across the state as well as regional publications throughout the Pacific Northwest. Medicine Rocks State Park was listed as a designated International Dark Sky Sanctuary in 2020, though the pandemic stifled much of the coverage around this tremendous event. Luckily, with the Trail to the Stars campaign in full swing, we are focusing our efforts into certifying Missouri River Country’s Brush Lake State Park as a designated International Dark Sky Park. These incredible locations showcase cosmic events like the northern lights, meteor showers

and all-around breathtaking views of the Milky Way and other galaxies—which many travelers might not realize can be seen with the naked eye from Montana. Marketing these dark sky marvels presents opportunities to inform visitors of potentially unknown experiences in the state and provide a compelling reason to plan a trip to our region.

### Conventions

Conventions and meetings have not been a focal point for our region, but we do acknowledge that these events are a huge economic boon to communities. For this reason, marketing and outreach from communities in Missouri River Country to host these events is a worthwhile endeavor that we will strive to support and assist as needs arise. For instance, Sidney is a great location to promote conventions due to their new motels and added capacity for visitors. The Cottonwood Inn & Suites in Glasgow is an excellent option for large gatherings, with most event needs accessible in a single facility. The Cottonwood operates as a hotel and houses an impressive restaurant, lounge and casino, pool and spa and fitness center. The convention center can accommodate up to 200 guests and contains multiple meeting rooms equipped with helpful technological amenities.

### Close Proximity Visitors

We believe that Missouri River Country can become a weekend destination for close proximity travelers, including flight traffic from Billings. According to the 2023 ITRR report, 18% of our non-resident visitors come from North Dakota. Our region offers a unique and affordable escape for families, couples and individuals looking to experience a different side of Montana, wide-open space and the authentic West. Visitors have the chance to attend new events, take part in outdoor recreational opportunities such as hunting and fishing, experience truly dark skies and so much more, all in a long weekend for those living in close proximity.

### Motorcyclists

We believe that the wide-open spaces and wide-open roads of Missouri River Country are a natural attraction for motorcyclists. This, combined with friendly communities, expansive natural areas, wildlife viewing opportunities and attractions along the way, make our region a perfect fit for motorcycle tourism. According to the 2023 ITRR report, 3% of nonresident visitors who spent at least one night in Missouri River Country entered Montana by motorcycle. In addition, 3% of visitors to the region participated in motorcycle touring, while 39% said they were interested in scenic driving. Each year, the Big Muddy Motorcycle Rally in Plentywood brings in many motorcyclists, and the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally in South Dakota is an excellent chance for motorcyclists to pass through, or make their way toward Missouri River Country on either end of their trip. For this reason, we developed specific travel itineraries for motorcyclists on our website, which allow for ease of planning and opportunities for multiple trips for visitors traveling by bike.

### Video

In this age, video is the best way to catch the eye of visitors and encourage them to spend their hard-earned vacation dollars here rather than anywhere else. We believe that better focusing on integrating video into our marketing campaigns and social media presence is a fantastic way to increase interest in, and visitation to, Missouri River Country.

### Repeat Visitation

ITRR indicates that in 2022, 86% of visitation to Missouri River Country comes from repeat visitors. This leads us to believe that awareness of our activities and attractions is lacking. When visitors experience our hunting, fishing, history, open spaces, nature and culture, they want to come back. We strive to attract first-time visitors, and once they experience our region, we believe they will spread the word to their home communities and come back again and again.

### Sleeping Buffalo Hot Springs

A very exciting opportunity lies in the newly developed Sleeping Buffalo Hot Springs and Resort. ITRR indicates that state visitors ranked “hot springs” as a reason for visitation to Montana, and we believe that spreading awareness of our remote hot springs has the potential to increase visitation to our region overall. It also has a fascinating history, adding another set of demographics to appeal to. The springs were discovered by accident in the early 1900s and have seen many changes over the years, acting as a sort of reference point for the history of the area. The facility has info online, photographs and other assets that follow the story of the springs for inquisitive guests.

## Brewery Tour

The craft beer industry has been rapidly growing over the past decade, and many tourists incorporate craft beer tours and tastings into their vacations. According to ITRR's 2022 report, 15% of visitors to the state visited a local brewery. After losing three of its craft breweries this past year, Missouri River Country is home to three craft breweries: Blue Ridge Brewing in Malta, Busted Knuckle Brewery in Glasgow and newest addition, Pleasant Prairie Brewing in Scobey. By marketing our breweries as an option for travelers and encouraging visitors to visit all breweries in the region, Missouri River Country can open up to a new type of tourist market.

## Rockhounding

Rockhounding and gold panning are two activities for which Montana is known, and Missouri River Country provides opportunities for visitors to have an authentic experience in both. Gold panning kits are available for rent in Zortman, where visitors can explore the Little Rocky Mountains and search for gold nuggets in the waters outside of town. Missouri River Country provides access to the Yellowstone River for rockhounding as well. We believe spreading awareness about these activities is a huge opportunity for garnering interest in our region.

## Dinosaur Digs

In Missouri River Country, visitors not only have the opportunity to learn about the paleontological history of Montana and to see fossils and replicas of dinosaurs, they also have the chance to be real-life excavators at the Great Plains Dinosaur Museum, where they can accompany experts on dinosaur digs. This opportunity is unique to a very limited number of places in North America, and we believe spreading awareness about this fun activity is a great promotion of our region.

## Fort Peck Reservation-Turtle Mound Buffalo Ranch

When the Missouri River Country Board of Directors toured the Turtle Mound Buffalo Ranch, we were very impressed with the ranch and the possibility of creating a partnership between the Fort Peck Tribes and Missouri River Country. We will explore options to help both entities and bring more visitation to Northeast Montana.

## Beyond The 49th Parallel

This brand-new international partnership between South Saskatchewan Ready in Canada and Missouri River Country will build a tourism trail between our destinations. We have created a brand and a website and purchased the domain, [beyondthe49thparallel.com](http://beyondthe49thparallel.com). We plan to create compelling campaigns that showcase the unique beauty of each other's location. An emphasis will be placed on our similarities; impressive and highly noted night skies, our scenic stretches of prairie fields and rock formations that seem to be composed of "living art." As we play on the similarities of these distinct regions, we will also point out attractions that can only be found in one another's destinations. We will encourage travel to our regions by creating engaging itineraries for visitors. This partnership will primarily focus on targeting vehicle travel between our destinations, as we continue to find ways to address our ongoing concerns of limited air terminals in our region. We are incredibly excited about this partnership and hope to welcome many more Canadian travelers into Missouri River Country as this opportunity unfolds.

## The Great Wide Open

Montana's Great Wide Open: Badlands to Breaks to Beartooths provides road trip inspiration and information to visitors seeking a unique travel experience that encourages discovery of the many treasures to be found throughout the four easternmost tourism regions of Montana. Three distinctive types of terrain anchor this vast part of the state — the badlands, the breaks along the Missouri River and the Beartooth Mountains — and the Great Wide Open itineraries give travelers potential paths to explore them all.

Great Wide Open is a collaboration of Central Montana Tourism, Montana's Missouri River Country, Montana's Yellowstone Country and Visit Southeast Montana.

## Talking Trail

Talking Trail is a user-friendly app, designed to function as a self-guided tour platform throughout Missouri River Country. The app utilizes handy features such as interactive maps (showcasing points of interest in MRC), expert-led interpretive information for sites, interesting bits of history and stories, and internal admin tools to easily track progress and report analytics. We are currently promoting the new app to our social media audience, encouraging them to download the app and visit the points along the Talking Trail. We have also created a landing page to guide our visitors throughout the region as a new marketing strategy to reach the modern-day, digital nomad traveler.

## Trail to the Stars

The award-winning Trail to the Stars campaign, which received press coverage state, and regionwide. With 45+ dark sky viewing destinations throughout Eastern Montana available on an interactive map ([trailtothestars.com](http://trailtothestars.com)), viewers can easily create their own personalized dark sky adventure. Moving forward, we plan to continue promoting and developing Trail to the Stars, as well as applying for certification for Brush Lake State Park to become a designated International Dark Sky Park. We hope this will drive astro-enthusiasts to this location in Missouri River Country. This project was previously funded by the EMI Grant. We are hoping to find alternate funding so promotion of this project can continue.

## Three Phases of Travel

It is easy to fall in love with Missouri River Country. Our rolling sea of prairie stretches for miles below big blue skies that come to life with stars at night. Missouri River Country will follow the state's three-phase travel strategy of *inspiration*, *familiarity* and *action* to provide world-class experiences and unforgettable memories.

Stunning photography of our landscape *inspires* people through advertising and social media. It is hard to see bright green landscapes and giant blue skies and not want to learn more-or come see it for yourself! Our open spaces and abundance of wildlife and recreation activities will draw interested visitors and make people want to learn more about Missouri River Country.

Once we have hooked people into wanting to learn more, we will *familiarize* them with our region through information about activities, lodging, events and opportunities. Using print marketing, trade show opportunities, social media outlets (ie: X—the platform formerly known as Twitter-Facebook and Instagram) and informational blog posts, we will provide information to our interested visitors. We recently built a state-of-the-art website that is responsive to mobile devices and will serve as an immeasurable tool in delivering the message about opportunities in Missouri River Country to the public.

We will spark *action* by informing potential visitors of unique experiences in our region, using exciting campaigns to pique their interests. Through genuine and personalized hospitality—a strong suit of smaller communities—we will encourage travelers to return year after year. From the moment of interest to their last day of vacation, Missouri River Country staff and marketing teams will provide nothing but excellent information, service and resources. The new website is proving to be a huge asset in ensuring that visitors have an encore experience in our region, and our informational print materials, such as travel guides, hunting and fishing guides, brochures and maps, will help visitors experience all that Missouri River Country has to offer. In addition, promoting traffic to the chambers in Missouri River Country will enable us to have a hands-on approach to facilitating the experience of our visitors.

## **1d. Potential Challenges:**

### **CHALLENGES**

#### Drive-Through Status

Missouri River Country has historically been and continues to be a drive-through region, meaning that visitors are “just passing through” to destinations with more widely recognized icons. In 2022, 76% of visitors to Missouri River Country came in a truck or a car. In 2023, 23% of visitors were only passing through. 45% were coming for



vacation/recreation/pleasure. We must continue to educate travelers about the many activities and points of interest throughout the region. We will continue to employ marketing strategies aimed at captivating the attention of travelers passing through our region, enticing them to extend their stays. Our approach targets millennial travelers, often referred to as "Anywhere Travelers," who seek authentic and immersive local experiences in less conventional or off-the-beaten-path destinations.

### Accessibility

While being located in “the middle of nowhere” is a strength of ours in terms of providing visitors with uninterrupted solitude with nature, this continues to be a challenging factor for Missouri River Country. Some of our towns are 4 ½ hours driving distance from any major city and accessing our region by air service is difficult. We are fortunate to have Essential Air Service in Sidney, Wolf Point and Glasgow, but while these flights are beneficial, our challenge is getting them to connect with other flights. They are small planes that can only accommodate nine passengers and fly solely into Billings. Rental cars are also a challenge here in Missouri River Country. Although car rental service is still limited in the region, Sidney, Wolf Point and Glasgow currently offer services for visitors. Increased car rental service to our region was an initiative in our Resiliency Plan.

### Infrastructure

Infrastructure is one of Missouri River Country’s biggest challenges. In certain months, roads to attractions like UL Bend National Wildlife Refuge and Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge are impassable or closed, and ruts in roads can deter tourists from visiting certain areas. Maintaining motels, cities and roads will continue to be an issue in our region with limited funding. Lack of revenue from camping on federal property and primitive camping also remains a challenge.

### Access to Information

We know that once people are in Missouri River Country, they fall in love with our wide-open spaces, friendly communities and access to outdoor recreation. However, compared to other parts of Montana, information about Missouri River Country is harder for potential visitors to get ahold of. With limited funding and numbers of people, getting the proper representation can be challenging. According to the 2023 ITRR report, 28% of nonresident visitors who spent at least one night in Missouri River Country used information from search engines, 9% used no sources, and 4% used friends or relatives living in Montana. Our redesigned website is working to combat these gaps in information by adding pages specific to activities, events and accommodations as well as updated blogs to inspire visitors. We also know that word of mouth from friends and family living in Montana is important to visitors, so increasing Montana residents’ awareness of Missouri River Country is also important for spreading information about the many opportunities found in our region. It is also worth noting that the Montana Residents: Attitude Towards Tourism survey, taken by Missouri River Country residents over the past three years has shifted from a sentiment of not seeing the full value of tourism promotion to an increase in understanding the benefits of destination marketing for their communities. This is encouraging for our future outreach strategies within the region and shows that education is crucial for residents to understand the positive effects of responsible tourism promotion.

### Gas Prices

Unstable gas prices present challenges for all travelers. We know that people are eager to get out and explore whenever they get the opportunity, but this could be a challenge they face when planning. At this time, we don’t know the impact that it will have on travel to Montana, and specifically Missouri River Country, but it is a concern.

### Funding

One of the significant challenges facing MRC is the scarcity of funding, which severely impacts our ability to market MRC as effectively as we would desire. With limited financial resources, we find ourselves constrained in our promotional efforts, hindering our ability to raise awareness about the vital services and opportunities we offer. Despite this challenge, we remain committed to overcoming it by actively seeking out funding opportunities to support our marketing initiatives. We are dedicated to collaborating with Destination MT to leverage any available funding opportunities that can help us effectively market our region. By partnering with Destination MT and exploring various

funding avenues, we aim to maximize our marketing efforts, reach a broader audience, and ultimately enhance the visibility and impact of MRC within our community and beyond.

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## **2. Briefly describe how your destination aligns with the Montana brand or describe the Brand strategy for your DMO.:**

Missouri River Country is a distinct region unto itself. The wealth of opportunities for adventure amidst the spectacular, unspoiled nature can't be overstated. We offer big water recreation, wildlife viewing, prairie topography, wild country paleontology and uncluttered views that go on forever. On top of outdoor recreation, we have 27 vibrant and charming small towns, some of the darkest skies and brightest stars in the lower 48 and sprawling landscapes that give you more fresh air to breathe and more room to roam.

- **Pristine, Natural Landscapes:** Missouri River Country has some of the most spectacular river breaks, badlands and unspoiled landscapes. If Lewis and Clark traveled through today as they did 200 years ago, they would still recognize much of what they viewed back then.
- **Small-Town Charm and Western Welcome:** Our small towns are filled with friendly, welcoming people. Expect a hand wave as you drive through each community, and make sure to save time to stop in for some of our signature hometown hospitality.
- **Extraordinary Adventures and Genuine Hospitality:** Whether it's hiking the badlands, visiting our museums or spending time on the lake, Missouri River Country has what it takes to have a breathtaking experience. In the evening, visitors can hang out with friendly locals at one of our breweries and enjoy Missouri River Country's hospitality.

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**Destination Marketing:**

**Destination Management:**

**Destination Stewardship:**

**Destination Development:**

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

#### GEOGRAPHIC

Strategically targeting certain geographic markets will enable Missouri River Country to stretch the impact of our marketing dollars. Missouri River Country will target the following geographical markets, which provide our current base of visitors and potential for increased visits by high-value, low-impact tourists: Minnesota, Washington, California, Wisconsin, Wyoming, Idaho, Colorado, South Dakota, North Dakota, Texas, Oregon, Michigan, Saskatchewan, Canada and Alberta, Canada. We also know that many Montanans visit Missouri River Country as a close-to-home, quick trip in our state. When it comes to Montana residents, we market the chance to fall in love with Montana all over again in a fresh, new region of the state. North Dakota ranked first for nonresident visitors to Missouri River Country in 2023.

#### PSYCHOGRAPHIC

Missouri River Country will target the visitors that present a high impact and opportunity, such as history and culture buffs, hunters and anglers and the families or couples that are interested in the many things Missouri River Country has to offer. Many visitors seek hunting and fishing opportunities here and bring their families to visit museums and/or to recreate around the lakes, rivers and streams. Other families follow the Montana Dinosaur Trail throughout our region.

The permanent RVers aged 50+ are becoming popular in our area as well, as these travelers love to get away to wide-open spaces and stay in our campgrounds. When the state “Montana” is mentioned, people get excited—we see this consistently at our trade shows and in reactions through social media. The beauty of Missouri River Country is in the expansive outdoors, authentic charm and quiet, peaceful solitude.

## DEMOGRAPHIC

In addition to geographic targeted marketing, Missouri River Country strategically targets prime demographic groups who have an inclination and reason to visit our region. Strategic marketing includes social media posts, ad placements and trade shows.

### Hunters & Anglers

This group includes hunters and fishermen and women from Montana and other states who would visit Missouri River Country for specific recreational opportunities. This demographic is heavily skewed as an affluent male audience. Census statistics suggest that 15% of the general U.S. population 16+ years of age go fishing, and 10% of that same demographic hunt. These people most likely come into the region to recreate and do not travel elsewhere in the state once they are here. 9% of visitors to our region listed hunting as an attraction while 5% listed fishing.

### History & Culture Buffs

This group includes adults 30+ years of age who are traveling with or without children. These travelers are interested in a variety of history, arts and culture and are likely to visit at least one historical site during their vacation. They will most likely pair their trip to include other historical regions of Montana. According to ITRR, 9% of visitors to our region listed Lewis and Clark as an attraction to Montana.

### Couples

This group includes adults 30+ years of age without children. These people are interested in history, culture, arts, museums, soft adventure, wildlife viewing and birding, dinosaurs and scenic attractions.

### Traditional Family Travelers

This group includes adults traveling with children. These travelers participate in scenic driving, nature photography, camping/hiking, museums, wildlife viewing and birding and dinosaur activities. They are interested in creating a relaxing and memorable experience together.

### RV & Camping Travelers

This group consists of adults traveling with or without children. These travelers participate in camping, hiking, visiting historic sites, sightseeing, photography, wildlife viewing, birding, outdoor recreation and dinosaur activities.

### Outdoor Enthusiasts

This group consists of adults who are traveling with or without children. They enjoy participating in outdoor activities such as camping, hiking, biking, fishing, hunting, birding, wildlife watching, dinosaur activities, ATVing, motorcycle riding and water recreation.

### Sports Travelers

This group consists of adults 25+ years of age traveling with children to sporting events such as basketball, baseball, hockey, football and track and field.

## **3b. What research supports your DMO strategy? :**

- Institute for Tourism & Recreation, University of Montana, 2023
- Future Partners
- Skift Megatrends
- Montana Residents: Attitudes Toward Tourism 2022
- Institute for Tourism & Recreation, University of Montana, 2022

- “[Stairway to the heavens: astro-tourism on the rise worldwide.](#)” [LonelyPlanet.com](#)
- Amtrak Train Routes. [Amtrak.com](#)
- Agritourism is growing in America. [SustainableAmerica.org](#)
- “[80 Percent of Americans Can’t See the Milky Way Anymore.](#)” [NationalGeographic.com](#)
- “[Local Food Trend Keeps Farms at Center of Tourism Strategies.](#)” Skift
- “[Tourism on Tap: Beer Related Travel.](#)” Travel Weekly
- Monthly reports from Zartico

### **3c. What are your emerging markets?:**

Missouri River Country has isolated the following emerging markets that we believe are a perfect fit for our attractions. We plan to market directly to their travel desires and needs.

#### Young Outdoor Enthusiasts

This market includes young travelers between the ages of 18-30 who are interested in traveling for outdoor adventure. These travelers are more likely to camp at least one night of their trip, and they are looking for access to hiking, climbing, water sports, wildlife viewing, photography and camping experiences. These users are also highly active on social media, so we believe that targeting these audiences within our drive markets through social media channels will be an impactful way to reach this group.

#### Retirees

According to the 2022 ITRR report, a high number of couples ages 65-74 are traveling through Missouri River Country. We believe that retirees are a great group to target, as they are traditionally financially stable, traveling without children and looking to engage in soft adventure and historical and cultural experiences.

#### Amtrak Riders

Missouri River Country has three Amtrak stops in Wolf Point, Glasgow and Malta. We believe that a unique opportunity lies in attracting visitors to stop over in Missouri River Country on their way from the Chicago and Minneapolis area en route to Glacier National Park. We also believe that there is untapped potential in families from cities to the east who can easily access our charming communities and have authentic Montana experiences with less train-time than riding all the way to Glacier National Park.

#### Craft Beer Enthusiasts

Craft beer tours are becoming increasingly common, with some larger breweries serving as the single reason visitors take trips to specific areas. The Brewers Association found that 18% of craft beer drinkers visit three or more out-of-town breweries each year. Montana has the third most breweries per capita of any state in America, and we believe that promoting Missouri River Country as a brewery destination to the craft beer market would increase visitation to towns where craft breweries are present.

#### Made in Montana Shoppers

Local, sustainable crafts and products are on the rise, and visitors appreciate the pride of local craftsmen and women. We believe that by promoting the Made in Montana artisans and goods in our region, we can attract visitors to seek out our fairs, markets and shops.

**Compared to other vacation destinations, Missouri River Country offers affordable options for travelers.**

#### Astrotourists

According to an article written in 2023, in ScienceLine by Callie McMurray, 80% of Americans can’t see the Milky Way anymore due to light pollution according to a 2016 study, and astrotourism is on the rise worldwide as city dwellers or people living in densely population areas long to see the uninterrupted night sky. Since Missouri River Country has some of the darkest night skies in the country, we should be putting a strong emphasis on promoting this feature of our region for astrophotographers, star enthusiasts and outdoor recreationalists. With the recent success of eastern Montana’s collaborative project, Trail to the Stars, we believe there is huge potential in positioning Missouri River Country as a

must-go destination for astrotourism. Trail to the Stars has garnered attention from media outlets nationwide, statewide and regionally. We plan to use this momentum to highlight the trail and our region. We are also continuing to focus efforts into certifying Missouri River Country's Brush Lake State Park as a designated International Dark Sky Park. Promoting visitation to Hill Ranch Oasis, a bed and breakfast near Mosby, will allow visitors who would prefer to sleep indoors the chance to take in the uninterrupted skies—an opportunity specific to this particular place as opposed to other accommodations in towns.

### Agritourists

Agritourism centers around tourists who come from cities and want to get a taste of rural farming and ranching communities. Agritourism is one of the fastest-growing forms of global tourism, with an economic impact of more than \$1 billion in many U.S. states and countries, and we believe that Missouri River Country is a no-brainer for agritourism activities in the state of Montana. Agritourism activities that can be found in Missouri River Country include farmers markets, horseback riding and shopping for local honeys, breads and other handcrafted items. We believe our small, charming rural communities make us an ideal travel option for agritourists. All eight counties in Missouri River Country are home to an annual county fair, where opportunities for agritourism abound, from rodeos, 4-H competitions and petting zoos to live music and dancing and so much more.

### Digital Detox Travelers

We are living in the age of technology overload, and we believe that promoting our “no cell service, no worries” attitude toward travel can be a huge attraction for digital detox travelers, a group of people looking to get away from the over-stimulation of our digital world. According to the 2023 ITRR report, 70% of nonresident visitors who spent at least one night in Missouri River Country said that they were very satisfied with Montana's open space and uncrowded areas. With more room to roam and more time to disconnect, Missouri River Country is a natural fit for these visitors. Here in Missouri River Country, you can “unplug and reconnect.”

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

- 1. Increase year-round visitation.**
- 2. Raise awareness through outreach about the benefits of tourism among Missouri River Country residents.**
- 3. Provide information to travelers about available attractions within the region, how to access those attractions and ways they can fully immerse themselves and explore the area.**
- 4. Facilitate the implementation of the MRC Resiliency Plan.**

Our **first goal** is to increase year-round visitation by marketing Missouri River Country and everything the region has to offer, including shoulder season activities and attractions. As an organization with a strong focus on destination marketing, a large portion of our budget will be allocated to this goal. We'll use a range of tactics to market Missouri River Country and increase visitation, from traditional paid media to joint ventures and cooperative marketing. We'll continue to work on building our photo/video library to support all marketing methods and collaborate with community leaders and DMOs on future opportunities.

Our **second goal** is to raise awareness through education/outreach about the benefits of tourism, and we'll do this by engaging with our community business owners, leaders and stakeholders throughout the year. Tactics for this goal rely heavily on community involvement and education. We'll create and distribute educational materials, attend chamber meetings (and encourage board members to do the same) and attend the Governor's Conference on Tourism and Tourism Advisory Council meetings.

Our **third goal** goes hand-in-hand with our first goal; in addition to increasing visitation year-round, we want to inform visitors of ways they can access the region and enjoy all of its existing community attractions and outdoor recreation

opportunities. These projects fall under our role as a Destination Development organization. Tactics will include product development, website development for niche markets, further work on Montana’s Trail to the Stars, trip itineraries and promotion geared toward our Canadian travelers and showcase points of interest in Missouri River Country using Talking Trail—the self-guided tour app, equipped with expert-led information, unique stories and interactive maps. Previously, these programs received support from the EMI Grant, which is now unavailable. Identifying new funding sources is necessary to sustain these programs.

Facilitating the implementation of the MRC Resiliency Plan is our **fourth goal**, expressing our commitment to bolstering our community's resilience in the face of challenges. This entails orchestrating the seamless execution of the plan's strategies and initiatives, ensuring that every aspect is meticulously addressed and effectively put into action. By fostering collaboration among stakeholders, allocating resources efficiently, and monitoring progress closely, we aim to fortify our region's ability to withstand and recover from adversity, ultimately safeguarding the well-being and prosperity of our residents.

**It is critical to note that this DMO Plan and the goals of this plan represent the optimal strategy for the region. However, its implementation and results could be influenced by the available budget.**

**5. Define and describe your overall objectives. Objectives are formed from your goals. They are logical, attainable steps to achieve the goals and are able to be measured.:**

**Objectives/Metrics/Evaluation:**

OBJECTIVES	MEASURABLE METRICS FOR SUCCESS	REPORT THE METRIC ACHIEVED	EVALUATION OF SUCCESSFUL METRICS
<p><b>Objective #1:</b> Market Missouri River Country and everything the region has to offer, including shoulder season activities and attractions.</p>	<p><b>(The continuation of these methods and their success is contingent upon budget availability)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase overall bed tax by 2% from FY 24</li> <li>• Build photo/video library by five photos</li> <li>• Receive at least 5,000 leads</li> <li>• Participate in at least two joint venture opportunities</li> </ul>		
<p><b>Objective #2:</b> Enhance our digital presence and offerings.</p>	<p><b>(The continuation of these methods and success is contingent upon budget availability)</b></p> <p>Increase metrics by % listed from FY 24</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase social impressions by 5%</li> <li>• Increase website visits by 3%</li> <li>• CTR of 1% or above</li> <li>• Increase email opens by</li> </ul>		

	<p>1%</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expand website content for niche markets (i.e., reaching out to tribal communities to map out ways to recreate responsibly and respectfully on or near reservation land)</li> </ul>		
<p><b>Objective #3:</b> Engage with business owners, community leaders and stakeholders about the impact of tourism.</p>	<p><b>(The continuation of these methods and success is contingent upon budget availability)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attend at least two chamber meetings and/or leadership classes in the region</li> <li>Create/update and deliver educational materials to all eight counties, including the Fort Peck Reservation, outlining funding and economic impacts of tourism</li> <li>Attend Governor’s Conference on Tourism and Travel Advisory Council meetings and implement one or two ideas or best practices learned from these meetings</li> </ul>		
<p><b>Objective #4:</b> Create and promote products that enhance visitor experience.</p>	<p><b>(The continuation of these methods and success is contingent upon budget availability)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continue partnership with Southern Saskatchewan to market our cross-border campaign, Beyond The 49th Parallel</li> <li>Continue to partner with other regions on The Great Wide Open Campaign</li> <li>Continue to partner with other communities across eastern Montana</li> </ul>		

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to develop Montana’s Trail to the Stars</li> <li>• Showcase points of interest in Missouri River Country via a self-guided, expert-led, interactive “Talking Trail” tour app</li> </ul>		
<p><b>Objective #5:</b> Facilitate the implementation of the Missouri River Country Resiliency Plan.</p>	<p><b>(The continuation of these methods and success is contingent upon budget availability)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage communities to participate in the Main Street Program and get each community on a level playing field</li> <li>• Investigate options to boost rental car availability within the region.</li> <li>• Invest in the development of attractions and experiences in a balanced way across all counties in the region.</li> </ul>		

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**Budget Form:** FY25 DMO Budget.xlsx

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**DMO Budget:**

**Montana's Missouri River Country**

<b>Allowable Method</b>	<b>Amount Budgeted</b>	<b>% Budgeted</b>	<b>Amend +/-</b>	<b>Updated Budget</b>	<b>% Budgeted</b>
Administration	\$25,380.00	20.00%	\$0.00	\$25,380.00	20.00%
Agency Services	\$6,000.00	4.73%	\$0.00	\$6,000.00	4.73%
Cooperative Marketing	\$6,000.00	4.73%	\$0.00	\$6,000.00	4.73%
Earned Media/Tourism Sales	\$1,000.00	0.79%	\$0.00	\$1,000.00	0.79%
Education/Outreach	\$5,000.00	3.94%	\$0.00	\$5,000.00	3.94%
Joint Ventures	\$7,000.00	5.52%	\$0.00	\$7,000.00	5.52%
Opportunity Marketing	\$100.00	0.08%	\$0.00	\$100.00	0.08%
Paid Media	\$18,431.00	14.52%	\$0.00	\$18,431.00	14.52%
Marketing Personnel	\$25,000.00	19.70%	\$0.00	\$25,000.00	19.70%
Product Development	\$1,000.00	0.79%	\$0.00	\$1,000.00	0.79%



Travel/Trade Shows	\$1,000.00	0.79%	\$0.00	\$1,000.00	0.79%
Visitor Services	\$25,000.00	19.70%	\$0.00	\$25,000.00	19.70%
Website Development (Online, Website, Mobile)	\$6,000.00	4.73%	\$0.00	\$6,000.00	4.73%
		0.00%	\$0.00	\$0.00	0.00%
		0.00%	\$0.00	\$0.00	0.00%
<b>TOTAL BUDGET</b>	<b>\$126,911.00</b>	100.00%	<b>\$0.00</b>	<b>\$126,911.00</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Revenue Projection	\$126,911.00
Funds not spent during previous fiscal year	\$0.00
Rollover Funds at Commerce	\$0.00
Allocated Following Audit	\$0.00
<b>Budget increase total</b>	<b>\$126,911.00</b>

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**Narrative Evaluation:**