Forestry and Trust Land Division

Recreational Use Rule Review:
Public and Stakeholder Outreach Spring 2026

Summary Report

This report summarizes the outcomes of public and stakeholder outreach conducted in the spring of 2026 to identify if there is an interest or need to update Montana's existing recreational use rules for use of state trust lands. More information about the recreational use rule review project can be found online at: https://dnrc.mt.gov/TrustLand/public-use/RecreationalUseRules

Outreach Method

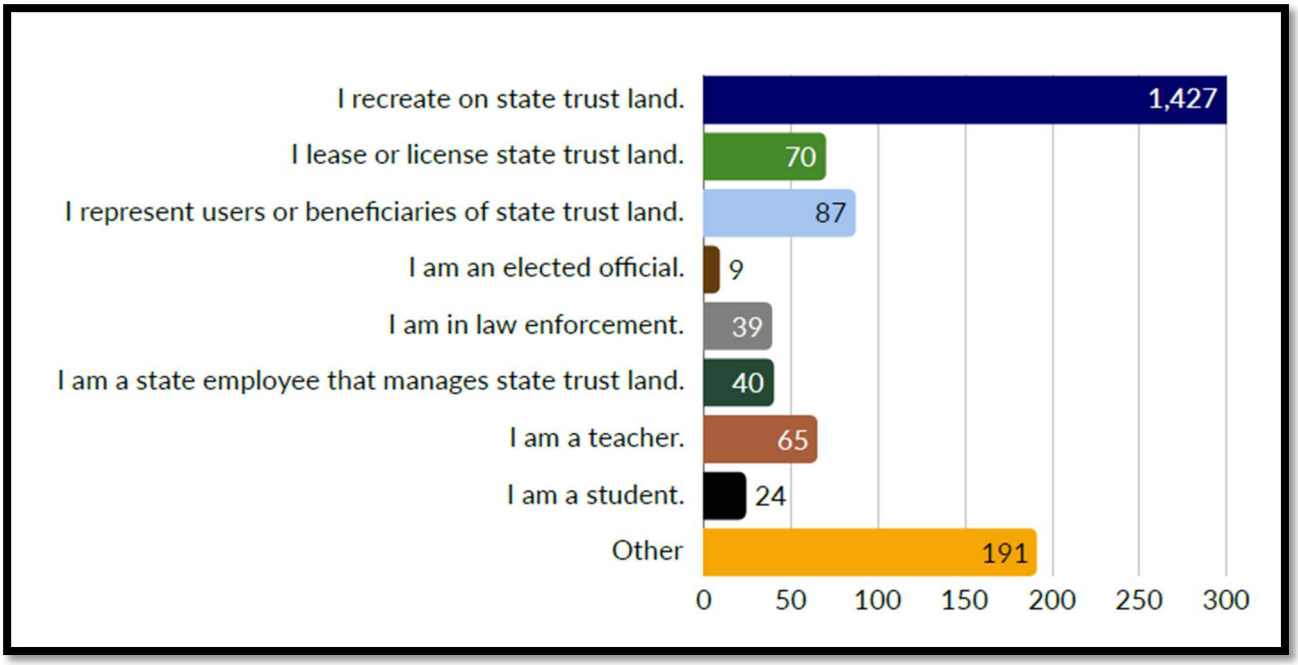
Public Survey

Throughout March of 2026, DNRC gathered user input through a public survey to help define the scope of any future rule revisions, gauge overall interest in changes, and identify topics that are most important to Montanans. The survey closed on March 31, 2026, with 1,582 responses.

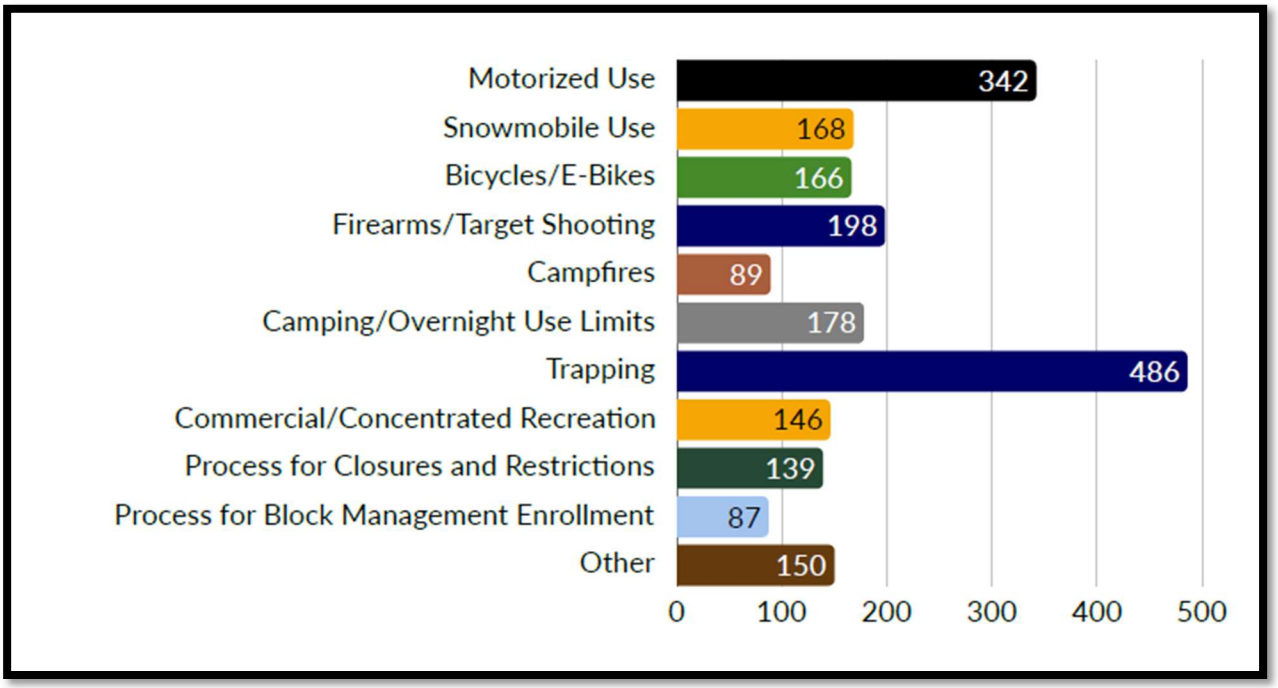
The department endeavored to capture feedback and sentiment from across demographics to ensure survey results meaningfully represented the diverse interests of state trust land users across the state. The survey contained optional demographic questions to help measure the effectiveness of our outreach.

Statistics and Demographics

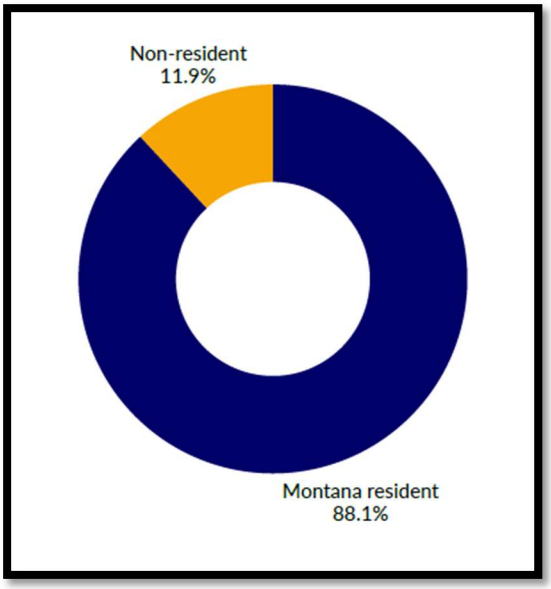
Analysis reveals that most respondents (nearly 80%) are either somewhat or very familiar with the current recreational use rules for state trust lands, and a majority are in favor of some modification of those rules. Those responding were from all over the state, primarily Montana residents, and generally informed about the trust mandate to generate income from state trust lands to help fund public schools. Nearly all respondents (90%) identified that they recreate on state trust land, and 70 (4%) identified as lessees of state trust land.



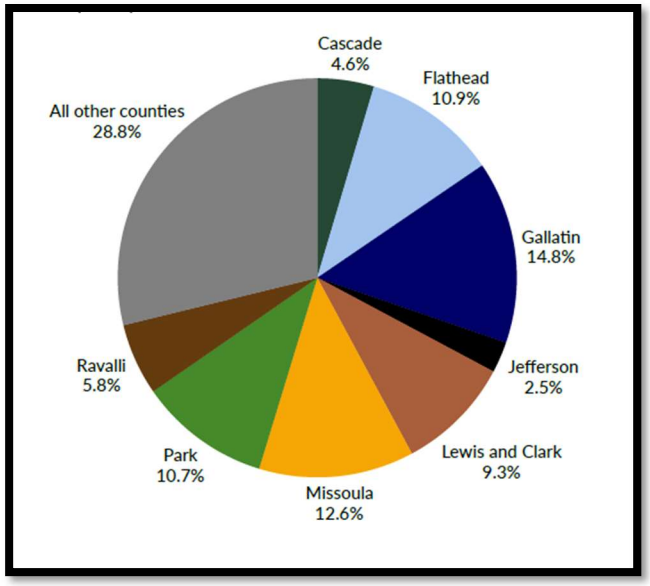
How survey respondents report currently using state trust land.



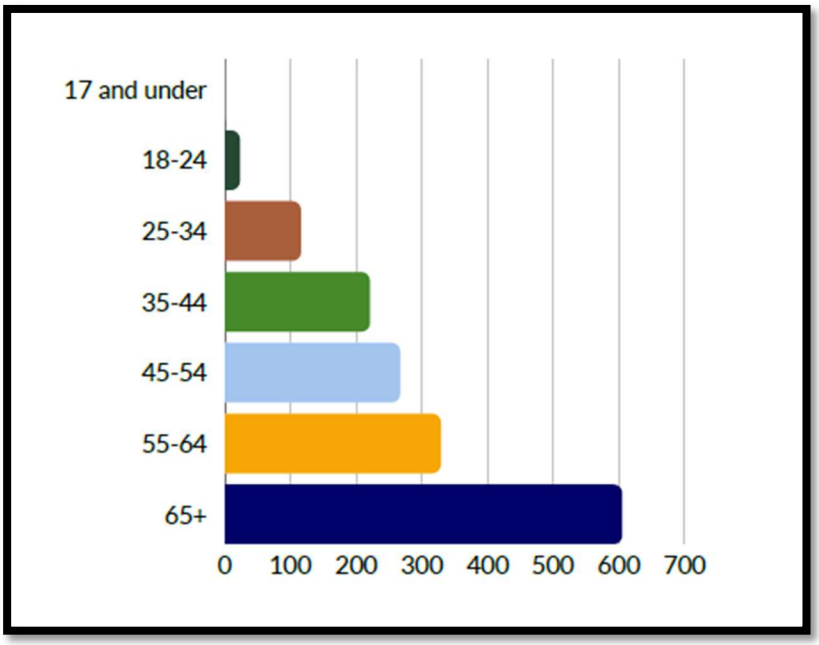
Areas identified by survey respondents as needing attention in future rule changes.



Resident status of respondents.



County of residence for Montana respondents.



Age of respondents.

Identified Gaps

Press Release Limitations

DNRC announced the public survey through their newsletter, by direct email to stakeholder groups, and through social media postings. A press release was also issued to all news outlets in Montana and the release was ultimately published by a number of statewide newspaper publications but was not run in the Lee papers and was not a headline story. DNRC assumes that there may have been more survey responses had the press release been more widely published.

Lessee Engagement was Low

4.1 million acres of the 5.2 million acres managed by DNRC are leased for agriculture and grazing (79%). Because leased land is open to recreational use (subject to legal access and closures and restrictions), lessees are a significant stakeholder in recreational use rules on leased land. However, only 70 respondents identified as lessees of state trust land.

Stakeholder Meetings

In April and May of 2026, DNRC met with stakeholders to discuss their perspectives and round out the identified gaps. Stakeholders included groups that represent hunter access, angler access, general recreation access, lessees, law enforcement, and land managers. The feedback from stakeholder conversations was compiled and analyzed along with the public survey results.

Findings

The survey responses and stakeholder conversations reflect a public that deeply values recreational use of Montana's state trust lands. Feedback for some of the key topics was split on position, but across nearly all topics, respondents repeatedly called for greater clarity, consistency, and equitable enforcement.

Outside the Scope of Rulemaking

Some of the topics identified by respondents were outside the scope of DNRC's recreational use rules, because the topic is in statute or is managed by other agencies. For example, the department received comments pertaining to legal access, including access by aircraft and corner crossing; however, legally accessible state land is defined in statute and would require legislation to change. Another example is the significant volume of comments requesting that trapping be banned in Montana; wildlife management in Montana is under the purview of the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) and their associated boards. All public comments have been shared with FWP for their awareness.

Additionally, some comments encouraged better communication and coordination with other land management agencies. Although those sentiments are outside the scope of rulemaking, DNRC is committed to enhancing communication and outreach, as well as coordinated rules and messaging opportunities.

Themes Identified

Through the public survey and stakeholder conversations, the department sought to identify topics related to recreational use of state trust land that are most important to Montanans. Several topics were identified, and sentiment was often split on preferences for action. The following themes emerged for DNRC recreational use rule consideration:

- Camping and Overnight Use
- Electric Bike (e-bike) Use
- Target Shooting
- Snowmobile Use
- Motorized Use/Road Use
- State Trust Land Enrollment within Block Management Agreements
- Trapping License Process
- Special Recreational Use License Process

Administrative/Land Management Process Themes

- Abandoned Property and Vehicles
- Categorical Exclusion Clarification in Accordance with Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA)
- Process for Recreational Use Closures Process for Road Management on State Trust Lands
- Compliance Language and Administrative Cleanup Opportunities

Next Steps

DNRC is currently reviewing the identified themes.

In August of 2026, DNRC will release a follow-up public survey to target public interest and sentiment on the identified themes. The survey results will help inform the scope and scale of a potential rulemaking project.

In late summer of 2026, DNRC will begin meeting with stakeholders and may form working groups to review public feedback and develop potential rule language.

No formal rulemaking will occur prior to the legislative session. If DNRC initiates formal rulemaking to change recreational use rules, it would occur in the spring/summer of 2027. The Land Board has decision-making authority on advancing and finalizing any rulemaking.