

The Montana Standard

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Commission may extend river restrictions

By the Associated Press

HELENA (AP) -- The state Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission has decided to ensure that temporary regulations to prevent overcrowding on two popular rivers can remain in effect while work continues on developing a permanent plan.

Commissioners on Thursday agreed to start the process of renewing the regulations that have been in place for two years on the Big Hole and Beaverhead rivers. Had they not made that decision, the regulations could have expired in May.

The commission's action gives it the option of maintaining the existing management plan while a special advisory committee continues work on developing recommendations for handling the increasing problem of overcrowded rivers statewide. That project is expected to be finished in the spring.

The regulations allocate specific days and places on the rivers for residents, commercially guided float trips and out-of-state anglers. The idea was to give locals a chance to float the river without being bothered by a fleet of nonresidents.

But some Dillon-area legislators and fishing outfitters have complained that the restrictions hurt local business. Those same concerns were raised before the commission Thursday.

Rep. Diane Rice, R-Harrison, wanted the commission to let the regulations expire. "The world won't come to an end," and businesses could benefit, she said.

Rep. Debby Barrett, R-Dillon, said the weekend restrictions on out-of-staters has damaged the local economy, with some business owners reporting declines of 40 percent.

But Larry Copenhaver of the Montana Wildlife Association said the management plan has been good for Montana anglers and should be extended until the River Recreation Advisory Council comes up with possible guidelines for managing social problems on the state's rivers.