

Bighorn Backcountry Standing Committee

Meeting Summary

Bighorn Backcountry Access Management

June 4, 2020 @ 9:00 **FINAL COPY**

Zoom Meeting

Don Livingston	Wayne Crocker	John Tchir	Eric Brownrigg
Laura Raivio	Doug King	Jim Duncan	Alan Ernst
Andrea McMillan	Lisa Schrader	Brad Jones	Ernst Bergmann
Dominik Kmet	Marla Zapach	Anne Hubbs	Dale Marshall
Barry Wesley	Loyal Ma	Simon Dyer	Paul Radchenko
Jamie Bruha	Michael Doyle	Grant Santo	

Chair

Don Livingston

Welcome/Introduction

AEP Reorg and New Roles

John is interim Lands Manager for public land approvals and rangeland agrologists for Bighorn/Edmonton District. Don is interim Director for the Recreation, Integrated Ecosystem Management South, which is from Smoky Lake to the USA border, BC to Saskatchewan. The whole scope for the Bighorn Backcountry ties in with the R11 Management Plan. Main changes were the splitting out of the Water Act and Environmental Protection Act under Regulatory Assurance..

The Minister's focus is to address land management as Crown land management that also wholly encompasses, Parks, vacant public land, grazing leases and dispositions.

There will be some legislative changes at some time due to the pending amalgamation with Parks to cover all designations.

More on Bighorn Backcountry trail monitoring: <https://www.alberta.ca/bighorn-backcountry-monitoring.aspx>

Don is back as chair for the Bighorn Backcountry committees. Looking at landscape across the board and hoping to be able to put some dollars in recreation. First time since 1995 we are able to move forward.

Proceeding in Recreation During COVID-19 Restrictions

Out on the landscape social distancing seems to be gone. No restrictions besides social distancing on public land. Parks are opening up. The toilets are being left to the operators, and contractors in place for the few we do have on public land. Witnessed a huge increase in public land use due to COVID-19 restrictions in National Parks and Provincial Parks. Places with cell coverage have people working in the camper, kids out of school. There's been an increase in RV sales. In the Bighorn Backcountry itself we have seen May long weeked every weekend. Huge increase in users and pressures on what little facilities we have out there, especially Abraham Lake area. FaceBook page commenting on crown land camping spots has every 2nd post saying "go to Abraham Lake". A lot of naievity coming across with many users not used to no facilities. Many vehicles in the bottom of Abraham Lake bed. Moving ahead social distancing restrictions are 50 people in a group outside. Enforcement is having a difficult time with people who are wound pretty tight. Add to that the fire ban and COVID-19 conspiracy theories. Social distancing is being practiced among staff.

May Long Update

Under the reorg, conservation officers formerly with Alberta Parks are now under the Environmental Enforcement Branch. Mandate is to work Crown land, grazing leases and still working through exactly what else.

It's been May long since March. Bighorn has been marketed a lot in social media. Social distancing has fallen by wayside. "Large family groups" whether family or not seems to be growing. Specific to May Long the Bighorn Dam was extremely busy with common infractions, no helmets. New folks running away. Lots were oblivious to the rules about not going down the powerline or into Terishshner. Target practicing onto the powerline and the main road.

Bigger issue was fires during the fire ban. Mostly new campers, folks who tried to educate themselves on Twitter and FaceBook instead of Government of Alberta sites. Number of charges to that. Abraham Lake area was insane, everywhere people could camp they would camp. Preacher's Point, Cline, Abraham Slabs, Allstones all just one on top of another, some people camping in ditches. Hummingbird and Cutoff were quiet on May Long. Busy basically since March, frustrating to say the least. Doesn't look like it's going to slow down anytime soon.

First Nations – On the long weekend a lot of campers were on the west side of reserve and confirmed that there were some people entering the reserve. We are on lockdown from COVID-19 but the general public are still coming in along the powerline, maybe the officers can help with that? People shouldn't be coming onto the reserve but it's almost an everyday thing now. Asking for help out that way. All reps on the committee can please talk to their user groups and give the reserve that respect. Thank you.

***Action – All representative take back Barry's information to your respective users groups to not trespass on First Nations reservation lands and allotments.**

Bighorn Dam – How to Corral Activity

Use and education at the dam is nonstop. Due to COVID-19 restrictions less hands on with brochuers and would like to see more exposure on social media. This FaceBook page is drawing people out to the area in hordes, people who have never been before with the attitude that Crown Land means "I can go wherever". TransAlta can close the road and access at anytime. Met with TransAlta and we are back to square one, talking about formalized camping and looking at a scaled-back version. Money might be granted to FEOSA, at minimum for some toilets. We want to sit down with First Nations and TransAlta again to work out some impacts. The sheer amount of activity has been the worst due to the volume of people out now and we are concerned about the July 1st trail opening to OHVs. BHAS is concerned about what is going to happen to the trails if they are still wet. Looking at trails at both Hummingbird and the Bighorn Dam prior to opening and will the volunteer trail

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maintenance group will ask to keep them closed if wet. Still trying to complete the work they wanted to last year but couldn't because it was too wet. We want to get our own social media out to get the correct info out there. TransAlta spent \$1 million fixing the dam face and are very concerned. They want to tap into social media as well. Need to put some good, big informational signs to explain the erosion people cause and also to address the First Nations concern about OHVs riding down the powerlines to the reserve. Trail deadends that's why the it's closed.

Equestrian – With all the moisture are the trails a lot wetter than usual? A – There is still a lot of snow back there right now. Rescued two hikers at Farley lake and they said the avalanches are going steading. Landslide/Lake of the Falls slides have been taking out mature timber. Coliseum still has chest deep snow. South Ram still has a metre of snow. Environment Canada flew to the Job measurement station and they said the snow is the highest in years. Going to have a big flush here yet and ground conditions are going to be softer than we've seen in the past.

Even on Rail Trail there's been some washouts

Signage / Activities

Recreation got seasonal staff - 1 Land Management Tech, 2 Maintenance Service Workers, 1 Recreation Education Officer. Three of the four people returnees. A preliminary look at corridor for signage is showing a lot of our signs and infrastructure have disappeared. People are even moving big boulder barricades or going around them. Worried about putting signs up and then they are gone. Haven't even been able to get to Hummingbird, Cutoff and south sites. Presently crews working on rail trail washouts and erosion control.

Going forward we are definitely doing some roadwork and repairs at Preacher's Point. Some funding to FOESA, may have to use some of the funds for gravel. Finalizing more funding dealing with parking for bubbling and toilets at the dam. TransAlta is asking for Clearwater County to grade the portion of the Bighorn Dam road that goes down the hill. Looking at toilets at Bighorn damsite. Close to Hoodoo Creek Alberta Transportation is repairing erosion and have created a laydown yard. We want to use that as a bubbling parking lot in the future. At Abraham Slabs build a parking lot, toilets and camping sites. Hoping to go ahead pretty soon.

Noticed one site a Hummingbird where someone put a memorial in a camping stall. We treat them with sensitivity but it does turn into an enforcement issue. You do need approvals to put that on public land. This one is right in the campsite so it makes it awkward for others to use the site.

Toilets – we've been installing hand sanitizer dispensers and ran out at Cutoff. Still need to do Cutoff and south. We are supplying the hand sanitizer for these dispensers. We can actually account for all the toilets been cleaned this year!

First Nations – Regarding the long weekend forgot to mention that west of the reserve close to Windy Point parking, garbage had been piled there. Pretty sure not the only place they are doing that. Always windy there so it will travel far and wide. Also had new-to-area people come onto the reserve so we have arranged patrols. They were not from here and didn't know there was even a reserve there. Really need to educate people that the reserve is there.

It was pointed out to Alberta Transportation that once there is a traveler garbage bin people put all their garbage there. For some reason people will also leave their big bags of camping garbage there outside of the small bins instead of taking it all the way out to dispose of properly. Someone camped on the cliff at Windy Point and used the memorial table as his own personal camping table. Garbage/human waste issues all over the area especially with all the tents, so it being addressed.

Activities – We were approached by the Wildlife biologist that a research student is looking at using cameras on the Bighorn Dam trails and other trails within Bighorn, and outside Bighorn to see the effects from humans and motorized use and how wildlife reacts. We brought up the suggestion of looking outside of Bighorn Dam and the non-motorized trails as well. Is an interesting bit of study. The cameras would be out to start in July for a span of two years. Bio – primary goals include how linear features are used by people. This may be of use in future trail

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planning. Another goal is how does wildlife respond to motorized use from a behavioral perspective. One thing to think about design is to have a control area, not just seeing that wildlife moves if a quad comes along. It is a two year project.

Currently the University of Saskatchewan has cameras in Cutoff and 40 Mile regarding feral horses. Can use that to see responses to horse and wagon and motorized too.

Bio – If you are interested in particular pieces of information just ask and we can pass that on.

First Nations – Have you consulted the Stoney Nation on this project? Infringing on treaty rights, we do hunting up here and if you put cameras up people are going to feel disturbed by it. Would recommend that you work with the Stoney so that they know where the cameras are located.

***Action - Don/Barry to discuss after the meeting.**

Since 2002 we have used cameras for enforcement and resource management and have been able to charge folks for infringement. It is noted on the brochure that cameras may be used.

FOESA – What is the reason behind the cameras/trail/wildlife? More wildlife east than west of Nordegg so what's behind this? Don't really agree with it. A – we've used cameras for a long time. It's not a focus on the Bighorn Dam area to say "they didn't see an elk so it was the quads moved them away". Also to focus on areas where we do know there is wildlife now and gauge their reactions.

Bio – Technology has improved. For environmental monitoring and wildlife monitoring it is cost effective and non-invasive with lots of projects going on across the province including in the National Parks, who have cameras out every 10km. This study is not targeting the recreational use. There is a knowledge gap regarding human usage effects. We do have cameras at the dam and it's interesting to see all the cougar, rabbits, lynx.

Dale – There is research at Ya Ha Tinda where they capture the elk, tag them and send them out to the grizzlies. Lots of animal loss due to predators.

Bio – We will be looking at the effects of predators on prey activity. Predator/prey and predator/human use interactions.

Peppers Lake Trails – Rehab/Conditions

Part of the UCP commitment is to increase Cows and Fish program. We do have an agrologist working on that program. In the Elk Creek area hoping to work with allotment holders about watering areas and get the cattle out of the stream.

Old discussions for years about this area and Peppers trail sustainability and damage on these trails. Going east from Peppers Lake it follows Peppers Creek to the trunk road. Used ROM mapping to indicate a suitable location for a motorized trail reroute, showing wet and dry areas. Trout Unlimited is wanting to reclaim a lot of the trail along and across Peppers Creek. In viewing the ROM - green is good ground, red is the worst, yellow is marginal ground. We did find some discrepancy in the mapping where its showing rock but is actually wet ground. Most of the trail is showing a majority of bad ground for trails. Running into very wet conditions. All in all you have a pretty crappy area to do summer motorized. This is kind of the last spot in the Bighorn Backcountry that we needed to get to. There is a potential to do some reroutes and we could look at this down the road. Still on the radar for the to do list when we have the capacity to look at it again in the future.

One more trail discussed over the years is a closure to summer motorized on Canary Creek. Discussed moving the trail over the mountain along Sickman's Flats using programs between ROM and another elevation mapping system. Very high country and looking like not a great possibility for a motorized trail in that area. Unless someone comes forward with another idea we are looking at putting this to bed.

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Plans for connectivity with Rail Trail and the CTI is working with Sundre Forest Products at Meadows. Still looking at using some resource roads and potential to have OHVs in some Parks areas. Also working with Alberta Transportation regarding using portions of the trunk road for connectivity. Looking at a pilot project to link a bunch of these things together. For 18 years not really any issues at Hummingbird and Cutoff.

Decommission of Some PRAs and the Effect on Bighorn Backcountry

In our new area, there are 102 sites total. The only actual decommissioned site is the North Ram that is washed out. The rest of the sites are looking at partnerships on how to run these. Some had already been turned over to Clearwater County. 7 Mile is on the list with FOESA.

The Minister's intent is to look at crown land management across the board. PRAs could come under a Government reservation area, a PLRA or vacant public land. If vacant the possibility is there for someone to come in with another usage. Our recommendation is to put them as PLRAs so we can set them up to maintain usage for camping.

Clearwater County has already put in a letter of interest in taking over sites along the Rail Trail at Harlech, Chambers Creek and Shunda Viewpoint. Aylmer and Coal Camp FOESA has some interest in the Wildhorse near Ya Ha Tinda and 2 sites on Coal Camp road. We want to keep them available for camping and still and hope to have them involved in the proposed camping pass where partners could access some of the that income to cover maintenance and upkeep. Rocky ATV Club has expressed interest in helping to operate some sites. All in all these sites will not be sold. If someone partners in a site it does not create sole use only for that particular group, they still have to be open to the public.

The PRAs proposed for change are all recreation sites and were not ones that contributed to conservation value. The idea is to have them stay available to Albertans in some form. Looking at using some of these sites for connectivity.

Hiking – There are 20-30 sites in Clearwater County. Any data on usage at these sites? With the overusage of the area west of Nordegg that we've been talking about, if no one takes them over we aren't providing better options. A – Overall the current size of some of the sites don't lend well to large RVs or allow OHVs or equestrian. We are getting a ton of use on the landscape and other random sites are free, so if we keep the PRA sites in the system and available, the expectation is that if we can roll them into the camping pass they will have considerably more use than they are getting now.

Don't want to see them out of the camping system. These partnerships will still have them available to the travelling public.

The Bighorn Creek campground is on Parks Canada land. We still have the ability to have some rules enforced there and it stays within the provincial land base.

FOESA – One set of rules to cover the entire province would help, regardless of the designation.

Eco-Tourism – It's quite frustrating and concerning about Abraham Lake area. People come here and don't know how to act and what to do. It needs more enforcement. Needs the recreation areas that should be used as a means of reducing the pressure for random camping. All of these are in relatively sensitive habitat and those individuals going there will be effecting all areas. It all boils down to money and need to look at the user principle. They are using a resource and they should be willing to pay for that. The revenue that comes out of that should be sufficient to repair and prevent things from being destroyed more. All users should pay, not just random camping.

Don Livinston – You are absolutely right. We need to get information out and we need to prevent offsite use. For example the Bighorn Dam has a reasonably sustainable trail system but unsustainable camping.

Jamie Bruha – Trails Act Update – I spoke at the last meeting about the Trails Act and felt close to doing an engagement with the public, and then the optimizing Parks announcement came out. We want to reach out to

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Albertans about recommendations regarding a Trails Act and we want to be asking those very questions. This summer will be very telling to the public with the usage. Waiting on approval to engage with the public which was delayed by the pandemic. We are briefing up and are still aligned with a user-pay system.

The Minister holds a lot of esteem for this group and the support goes a long way.

Equestrian – Regarding user pay. It sounded like you wanted a Bighorn user group, but it needs to be province wide. Have been seeing other areas having trouble keeping up with wet trails and overuse.

Don Livingston – Thoughts for the user fee is provincial.

First Nations – Most of these trails are ancestor trails. If a user fee is put in place my people would have to pay a fee to use our own ancestor's trails. Treaty rights allow for hunting rights, harvesting medicines.

Jamie Bruha – Part of the initial work that we did addressed not having a fee for First Nations rights to use the land. The different areas that are affected by any fee overlapping these usage areas has been captured and addressed.

Rescinding of 1976 Coal Policy

In recent weeks the 1976 coal policy has been changed. The big issue was classification of certain lands that didn't allow for open pit mines. In the Bighorn Backcountry, there are two types of coal: coal for heating and then coking for making steel. Coking coal is where the desire is now. Majority of the coal in the Bighorn Backcountry area is mostly heating. During the Martin Nordegg days there were freehold mineral rights and there are still some. Through the Bighorn Wildland Park proposal those would still be honored if the holder chose to develop them. Towards Sunkay and Mouse Flats there was some interest at one time. In 2009 there were two coal companies, Ram Coal and Black Eagle Coal, looking around where the North and South Ram Rivers' meet and around Tay River. Both operators were looking at a small open pit mine and then chasing the seam underground. Coal development is not some thing that we regulate, it is through the AER. Within the Bighorn Backcountry not a whole lot of interest. If they are really looking at anything with environmental impacts it would be a few years. More likely may appear around the Coal Branch, Marshy Bank area.

Freehold in the Blackstone / Wapiabi – those were done in the Martin Nordegg days and are held by a numbered company. It's for heating coal in that area, so not likely. They are from a long time ago and they would still be honored unless GOA bought them out.

Eco-Tourism - Leases surrounding Crescent Falls have been sold and are owned. Don Livingston – We don't have any info as it's through AER but we'll dig in and check those. Thought those were just applications that were thrown in but we will check if there is actually license sold. Will get info and send it back to everyone.

Hiking – I don't believe we'll see a coal mine on the outskirts of Nordegg in the near future. No one would want a rec lease sitting on top of a potential coal mine. Hopefully as those leases come up to be retired they'll be returned to GOA.

UPDATE: The coal interests near Crescent Falls are a valid coal application held by one company. The company is Oros Coal, and the application was put forth in November of 2011. The status is Application with the following conditions: limited exploration may be permitted under strict control only. This is not a Lease. A Lease means that they have approval and can start operations. Through the dissolving of the coal Policy this company will have first right of refusal to have the application turned into a Lease. If turned into a lease then they will have to start to pay rent. A lease doesn't mean there will be eminent development. Further information can be found here:

<https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/fcd6d925-6f08-490c-a55d-335542a81df7/resource/4356687b-4281-49a4-9c00-8bdda69353a1/download/energy-coal-information-bulletin-2020-02-coal-policy-rescission.pdf>

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Eco-Tourism - Where are we at with the NSRP? It has not been finalized. This GOA wants all the regional plans done. The pandemic has slowed things down.

Jamie Bruha – The GOA is still very eager to get the plans done. Involves a lot of engagement and public input. Right when COVID-19 hit it had to take a bit of a backseat. Still a priority but looking at the timing and scope, they are not wanting it to take as long again as it has been.

Eco-Tourism – There will be consultation? Jamie Bruha - Regional planning process as a whole has RAC advice and then consultation on the plan itself. Equestrian – There was a concern when the Bighorn proposal came out and the RAC advice was touted as being followed, but that is not what it was. Will they re-engage on the RAC advice? Jamie Bruha - We don't have the direction yet. In terms of the engagement once they come up with their strategy on how they want to do it, we will be told. The biggest change from earlier was using the RAC advice for a portion of the west country as opposed to NSRP as a whole. Can send information to the group.

2020 Funding Possibilities / Plans Within PLUZ

This year we have money towards dirt work at Preacher's Point. Parks helping with ideas in place already. Partnership with Clearwater County on Rail Trail. Money to FOESA to work on toilet issues around the dam, bubbling sites, Preacher's Point and dirt work. Jumping on the parking opportunity by Hoodoo Creek. Don't really have an operating budget. Mandate is to work with partnerships. Hoping if the stars align to have the Taunton Trestle covered to provide connections.

Bear bins at Allstones and Landslide Lake, more thrones, improvement of campsites are all be put on the list depending on funding.

Hiking – Regarding bubbling there are concerns about safety and education? Parks and AEP have received a number of action requests, Clearwater County raised some concerns. Things got taken out of proportion a little bit regarding the bubbling. The ice does not hang 10 feet, so you fall and you're gone. Slip, trip and fall is an issue, parking along the highway is an issue for safety. Have spoken with Clearwater County and TransAlta. Pursuit Adventures uses the area quite a bit and has a good safety program. All the issues of people driving on the lake.

The PLUZ covers the whole water development licence. Unless it's allowed to drive on the lake, we can prevent it. Driving on the lake bottom in the spring when it's low, we don't want to allow that. Focus getting people into the safe spots.

Concept for off-timing for bed and shore of the lake. PLUZ regulations do apply so can be done via signs and notices to limit access to those areas. At least 80 people down there getting stuck in the mud, vehicles leaking fluids, can see some vehicles abandoned and if left there they would need to be pulled out the next year when the water recedes again. High risk and trying to do some education but need to be directed not to travel onto the lake bed and shore areas for both their own safety and damage to bed and shore. Feedback?

Consensus on good messaging – April 1 to December 31, no vehicles on lake bottom

Eco-Tourism – Confirms what we need is more official camping sites. We do need lake access in the winter but they don't need access in the summer. Restrictions based on the time of year does make sense.

Expanding gravel pit parking at Pinto trailhead to facilitate this as well. Bighorn Backcountry Standing Committee support helps us go ahead.

Part of the problem on all these websites is that they say "Abraham Lake you can camp wherever you like". We need to get the proper information out there. A lot of the people are uninformed and they take that rhetoric from these sites and compound the problem.

First Nations – Support restriction for going onto the reservoir. For safety purposes in the winter time. Pursuit has been very busy there as well as other companies. If we can set out some form of restrictions we might save

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some people's lives. Regarding the random camping in summer, we do ceremonies and sometimes they get cut off and disturb those ceremonies.

Yes we want to try to develop more appropriate rustic camping spots.

Backcountry Trail Sustainability in Alberta – Capital and Maintenance

Jamie Bruha – When we do get the go ahead for engagement we will be in touch with the group and any help on getting the message out will be appreciated.

Out of PLUZ Items

Working with CTI at Meadows, looking at connectivity to trunk road and potentially the Bighorn Dam. That would keep us away from Stoney First Nations land. Rail Trail hoping to finish from Nordegg to Saunders.

James Pass project is going to continue. A bit more approvals with end of July-Aug as our window of opportunity. Should be done within a month and then we will sit down with FOESA to proceed. Andrea has completed First Nations Consultation. This month looking at the crossings and we need to change parts of the trail to avoid archeological and cultural sites.

Open Floor

FOESA – More work done in the last couple of months than in a long time. Panther - extended parking across from PLRA, outhouse complete. Need gravel for highlines, ran out of material, spoke to Lisa about that. Eagle – put in gravel, waiting for grader to move boulders. 7 Mile - moving onto camp kitchen, need more gravel. Hummingbird - put in highlines, ongoing maintenance. Close to \$100,000 spent so far.

Connect with Wayne if you have a to do list for our people on the rec crew.

Equestrian – Trail sustainability. Maintenance on the Panther Wagon Trail, wondered who was responsible for maintaining that? First part was flood restoration money. Who responsible to maintaining after?

***Action – Don/Wayne get back to Doug with maintenance.**

Mountain Biking – Working with Frontier Lodge on those trails and the work around Fish Lake. Update on Baseline: They've been getting lots of people coming asking about that area. Top half of the mountain is gone, going back out and cleaning up some of the trails after logging and will hear back. Top half is unusable, bottom half is still good. Firesmart – asked if they could put on the markers to show where you are? People are getting lost on that trail. Some of the signs do show where you are at.

***Action – Don/Wayne to bring up with Agriculture and Forestry.**

Showed pictures for plans at Meadows. Maintenance on Rail Trail wrapping up today for the short term. Best chunk will be from Beaverdam to Harlech.

First Nations – Bighorn – Lockdown currently on until probably end of this month and then will see what happens. Sundance coming up on south side down by the river on June 25th. Don Livingston - With all these people coming out have you seen campers going on the allotment? Yes – we can't seem to control that.

Next Bighorn Backcountry Standing Committee Meeting – THURSDAY, OCTOBER 8, 2020

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