

## **TERMS OF REFERENCE**

### **WEST BRAGG CREEK TRAILS MASTER PLAN: FOR BRAGG CREEK TRAILS ASSOCIATION**

**September 2022**

#### **BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT**

The West Bragg Creek (WBC) trail network is located within the West Bragg Creek Provincial Recreation Area (PRA) and in the Kananaskis Country and Sibbald Snow Vehicle Public Land Use Zones (PLUZ), situated in the Eastern Slopes and foothills of the Rocky Mountains within the Elbow River watershed. The WBC trail network is accessible through two staging areas. The WBC PRA staging area is approximately 9 km west of the Hamlet of Bragg Creek and approximately 40 km from Calgary, and the Fullerton staging area is accessed off Highway 66, approximately 40 km from Calgary. The WBC trail system is a popular year round destination for day-use outdoor recreation activities.

The West Bragg Creek area is designated as multi-use, encompassing non-motorized outdoor recreation, Indigenous traditional land uses, and tourism as well as land use dispositions including cattle grazing, petroleum extraction and forestry. The South Saskatchewan Regional Plan (2014, amended 2018) and Kananaskis Country Sub-regional Integrated Resource Plan (1986) describe the multi-use nature of the PLUZs. The Trails Plan will be consistent with these and other related plans and guidelines that facilitate recreation activity use and management within the West Bragg Creek PRA, Kananaskis and Sibbald Snow Vehicle PLUZs and the Kananaskis Improvement District. Any proposed changes and recommendations to the trail system will consider impacts on other land users, surrounding lands and communities.

In 1977, the Alberta Government created Kananaskis Country, incorporating recreation as a primary land use. In the early 1980's, as part of the Kananaskis Country capital construction program, 43 km of cross-country ski trails (and some hiking trails) were constructed or adapted from traditional travel routes and resource access roads. In 2010 the "All Season Trail Plan for West Bragg Creek" was approved. Trail construction and upgrades over the past decade has created the current network of 170km+ of authorized trails. Parking for the WBC network is at West Bragg Creek PRA (upgraded in 2017), and the Fullerton parking area and the Allen Bill and Station Flats parking lots in Elbow River PRA along Highway #66. Albertans value the area as a recreation and tourism destination, for the beauty of the natural landscape, the variety of well-maintained trails, and amenities such as accessible parking, washrooms, and a small warming shelter.

The West Bragg Creek trail network has been operated by the organization Bragg Creek Trails (BCT), in partnership with the Alberta Environment and Parks (AEP), Government of Alberta (GOA) since 2010. BCT is a non-profit organization registered under the Alberta Societies Act, and a Canadian federally registered charity. BCT has a formal Cooperating Agreement with AEP for the purposes of planning, building and maintaining

both winter and summer use on non-motorized trails and amenities in the West Bragg Creek area.

The West Bragg Creek trail network is used by the public for a variety of experiences:

- Walking;
- Hiking;
- Trail running;
- Bird and wildlife watching;
- Cycling: mountain biking and fat-biking, including e-bikes;
- Other commercial and non-commercial activities and events, including geocaching, orienteering, educational programming
- Cross-country skiing;
- Snowshoeing;
- Horse riding;
- Dog walking;
- Hunting and wild harvesting;

The West Bragg Creek area is also a cultural landscape used by Indigenous peoples to practice their culture, which includes harvesting food and medicines, holding ceremonies, and connecting to the land.

The level of trail use in the area has grown significantly over the years and the diversity of users and activities has expanded. While the expanded recreation opportunities are viewed as largely positive, they have spurred new trail management issues that need to be addressed. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and restrictions on activities in urban areas led to unprecedented volumes of use and a significant numbers of new users, many of whom are likely to return.

Ten years after the completion of the first All Seasons Trail Plan (2010) for the area, BCT and AEP are collaborating on updating the Trails Plan (see planning process below). The updated Trails Plan will focus on adapting the current network to better address existing recreation and tourism use, reflecting desired visitor experience and anticipated future demand. The new Trails Plan will also include recommended projects for environmental stewardship, education, signage, and other amenities.

Taking into consideration the density of the existing trail network, impacts on ecosystems and the desire to maintain the safety and quality of recreation and tourism experiences, the revised Trails Plan is not intended to recommend significantly more kilometres of new trails. Although there is not an exact measure or definition of how many kilometres are acceptable, any additional kilometres of trails must deliberately address an issue related to safety, maintenance, environmental impact, activity demand, or visitor experience. The focus of the Trails Plan is on creating a comprehensive trail system to improve visitor experience and safety while minimizing environmental impact through maintenance, education, signage and wayfinding and environmental stewardship projects.

The intent of trail planning is to carefully plan, design, manage and maintain a trail system that will:

- Provide exceptional visitor experiences for trail-based outdoor recreation activities;
- Invite trail users to stay on authorized trails;
- Encourage a sense of place and stewardship;

- Increase awareness of natural environment and the cultural landscape through visitor experience and interpretive programming/signage;
- Provide for the most effective and efficient use of financial and human resources in the maintenance and management of the trails system; and
- Coordinate with other land uses in the area.

A healthy natural environment is the cornerstone to quality outdoor recreation experiences. The growing demand for recreational trails, the significant increase of summer activity use in wet or sensitive areas, and the specialized user trails in West Bragg Creek may result in unsustainable trail use and damage to natural areas. The potential environmental impacts from trails and trail use include erosion, trail widening, riparian area damage, declines in fish populations, changes in wildlife behaviour and altered vegetation composition from trampling and soil compaction. Building better, sustainable trails in appropriate locations is critical to minimize impact to the natural environment, while balancing activity and positive place-based experiences.

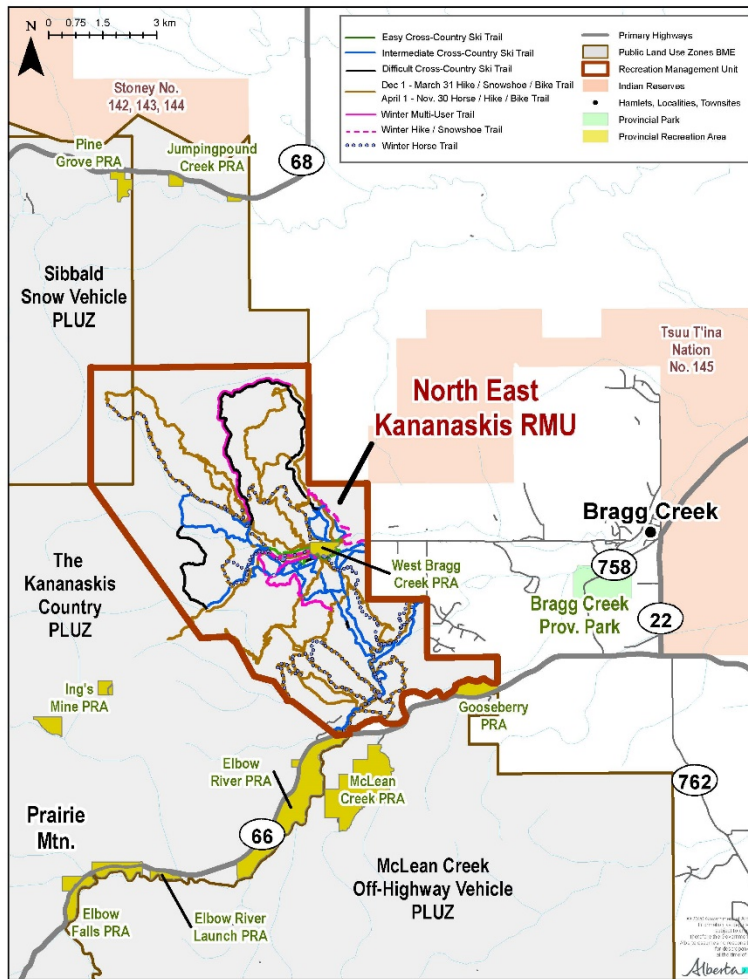
Trails that are well developed, managed and strategically marketed can become important local and regional economic drivers for adjacent communities, and valuable destinations that help to diversify and grow Alberta's tourism economy. A tourism trip occurs when a visitor takes an overnight trip, or a same-day trip of more than 40 km (one-way) outside of their home community. Maximizing the benefits of trail tourism requires destinations to provide high-quality and dependable trail tourism experiences, complete with the appropriate trail conditions, as well as the amenities and services that visitors expect. This is a highly competitive and growing market that requires such outdoor recreational opportunities be intentionally managed to promote relevant and enjoyable experiences.

AEP and BCT are committed to including the participation of both individual activity users, stakeholders organizations, with an interest in the broader trail system area and the community. The Planning Committee will draw information and advice from a variety of sources in the development of the plan: GOA policy; BCT Strategic Plan; the results of activity user surveys; traffic and trail use counter sources; and feedback sought from stakeholders, Indigenous and local communities and the public through the planning process. The Trails Plan will underpin the future planning and design of trails in West Bragg Creek, and further provide the framework to help BCT and AEP provide for and manage competing uses while protecting valuable natural ecosystems.

## **PLAN AREA**

The Trails Plan area is constrained to the North East Kananaskis recreation management unit (RMU), an administrative boundary for the purposes of recreation planning and management (see Figure 1). The trail network is within Kananaskis Country on provincial Crown lands; the primary WBC staging area and 5 km of trails are within West Bragg Creek Provincial Recreation Area (PRA) and additional staging areas, and the rest of the trail network are located within the Kananaskis Public Land Use Zone (PLUZ) and the Sibbald Snow Vehicle PLUZ.

**Figure 1 Trails Plan area**



The landscape of the trail network consists of forested ridges, valleys and wetlands. Elevations vary from 1400m in the valley bottom to 1700m at the highest ridge top. Forest cover on slopes is primarily lodgepole pine and spruce with some aspen poplar mixed in. Valley bottoms have more diverse vegetation, including various grassy or shrubby meadows or wetland vegetation. The meadows, wetlands and riparian zones along the creek drainages provide some of the most important wildlife habitat in the plan area.

Mammals include black and grizzly bear, cougar, bobcat, lynx, wolf and coyote, as well as deer, elk and moose and many species of smaller mammals. These include at least four members of the weasel family, red squirrels, rodents, mice and voles. Available bird data indicates at least 111 species occur in the plan area. An overview of the known environmental considerations and historic resources are included in Appendix B and C.

The West Bragg Creek area includes a large portion of the Bragg Creek drainage, as well as portions of the Ranger Creek and Iron Creek drainages, which are all tributaries of the Elbow River. The southern boundary is the Elbow River and Highway #66, while the eastern boundary is marked by the Kananaskis Country boundary. The northern boundary is the Bragg Creek-Moose Creek watershed divide, and the western boundary

is an approximate line that follows the lower eastern slopes of Moose Mountain to the boundary of trail planning areas maintained by the Moose Mountain Bike Trail Society (MMBTS) in partnership with AEP. The Trails Plan will consider linkages to the other trails networks and may make recommendations to improve trail connections but approval of these is outside of the scope of the plan.

## **PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES**

The **purpose** of the West Bragg Creek Trails Master Plan is:

*To enable a high quality, all season, sustainable<sup>1</sup> non-motorized trail system in the West Bragg Creek area of Kananaskis Country while maintaining biodiversity<sup>2</sup> and watershed integrity.<sup>3</sup>*

The **objectives** for this trails plan are:

1. To describe summer and winter recreation and tourism use, evaluate user experience and demand in the area and assess the existing trail system to identify issues and gaps. This will recognize the unique recreation experience and features of the West Bragg Creek trail network, relative to the recreation opportunities in the larger region and other parts of Kananaskis Country.
2. To describe a comprehensive trail system. This includes changes to the trail system and facilities to improve safety, the recreation experience, minimize impacts to the environment and manage conflicts among recreation activity types (including seasonal, single use trails, and directionality on trails, where needed), while considering volunteer and financial sustainability.
3. To improve the maintenance and management of the trail system, including the system of signage and wayfinding, strategies to reduce the environmental impact of trail use, and actions to educate and communicate with trail users regarding responsible trail use and trail etiquette.
4. To develop strategies and actions to improve the visitor experience and minimize conflicts between recreation users, and between recreation and other land users and nearby landowners.
5. To identify opportunities for future planning processes to improve trail connections across the region, in collaboration with other recreation groups.

## **PRINCIPLES**

The following principles will guide the planning and management of the trail system:

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<sup>1</sup> Sustainable is defined as ability to be upheld. An adapted definition from 1987 Bruntland Report is "meeting our own needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Simply put, the trail system should be able to be maintained over time without harming the environment, cultural and historic sites, and within available human and financial resources.

<sup>2</sup> Biodiversity or "biological diversity" is defined as the assortment of life on earth – the variety of genetic material in all living things, the variety of species on Earth and the different kinds of living communities and the environments in which they occur.

<sup>3</sup> Watershed integrity is defined as "the capacity of the watershed to support and maintain the full range of ecological processes and functions essential to the sustainability of biodiversity and of the watershed resources and services provided to society" (Flotermersch et al., 2016).

## **Biodiversity and Watershed Integrity**

- The trail system and individual trails are designed and maintained to minimize negative impacts on biodiversity and watershed integrity, considering both site specific environmental issues and cumulative effects.

## **Alignment with current regulations, plans, policies and guidelines**

The plan and trail system will be consistent with the following:

- Provincial Parks Act and regulations;
- Public Lands Act and regulations;
- Trails Act;
- Plan for Parks 2009 – 2019;
- Alberta's Tourism Framework (2013- 2020);
- South Saskatchewan Regional Plan (2014, amended 2018);
- Kananaskis Country Recreation Policy (1999);
- Land use plans including the Kananaskis Country Subregional Integrated Resource Plan, area grazing management plans, Forest Management Plan (Spray Lake Sawmills);
- Kananaskis Country Provincial Recreation Areas and Bragg Creek Provincial Park Management Plan (2012);
- Government of Alberta's Policy on Consultation with First Nations on Land and Natural Resource Management (2013; and guidelines 2014);
- Alberta's 20-Year Strategic Capital Plan;
- Rocky View County policies;
- Kananaskis Improvement District policies and bylaws; and
- Any other existing legislation, policies, standards and guidelines for development of trails, protection of vegetation, water and watershed, fish and wildlife sensitive species, including federal legislation, regulations and processes where applicable.

## **Safe, Sustainable and Enjoyable Trails**

- Intentional trail design, maintenance and management will enhance public safety, trail sustainability and visitor enjoyment.
- Adequate trail opportunities and a positive visitor experience will be provided for existing activity types, based on an evaluation of recreation use and future demand.
- Investments in the trail system must be sustainable and implementable from an environmental, social, economic and operational perspective.

## **Trail Management**

- Most existing trails are expected to remain on the landscape, although some changes or alterations will occur over time. Decommissioning of unsustainable and redundant trails will occur.
- Best practices in trail planning, design, construction and maintenance will be employed.
- Trail signage and wayfinding will be designed to enhance public safety, visitor experience, minimize conflict among users and educate users on trail etiquette and environmental stewardship.

## **Stewardship and Collaboration**

- Planning, development and maintenance of these trails will continue to be done through a collaborative, partnership approach between AEP, BCT, volunteers, stakeholders, Indigenous governments, and other land users. An environmental stewardship ethic in trail users will be encouraged and stewardship activities in partnership with other groups will be pursued.
- The multi-use nature of public lands will be reflected in the plan and communicated to trail users.
- A variety of government and non-governmental resources (e.g., volunteers, donations, contributions in kind) will be brought to the development and operation of the trail system.

## **PLANNING ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

The following issues, concerns and opportunities were identified as part of scoping the Trails Plan Terms of Reference. These items help frame the need for the planning effort and will shape the recommendations and options presented in the plan.

### **User Experience**

- Congestion occurs on some multi-directional and narrow trails, resulting in safety concerns, frustration and conflicts between users.
- Equestrian use is long-standing in the area and equestrian users have indicated a preference to have year-round trails dedicated for their use.
- The existing network has not adapted to all activity types and volumes of visitor use that have evolved over time. Users have identified a need to enhance the existing network to improve user safety and enjoyment through:
  - Additional connector trails to create variety, shorter loops and improve dispersion of users across the network;
  - Additional guidelines for directionality and activity restrictions on some trails; and
  - Additions to the network to separate activity types or allow for alternate routes to address safety and conflict between users.
- Users would like better access to and from the other staging areas, namely Station Flats along the Elbow Valley Hwy 66 and Sibbald Trail Hwy 68.

- Variable speeds by different activity types are a safety issue on some trails, particularly on downhill routes for mountain biking.
- Uncontrolled dogs pose a safety risk to users, particularly where there are children and high speed activities.
- The existing signage and wayfinding system is not consistent and clear. It has led to confusion and frustration by users and a potential safety risk.
- Users indicate a desire to have additional trail types, amenities and facilities (such as hiking only trails, picnic tables along the trails, water source, cell coverage, bike washing station).

### **Environmental**

- Some trail segments are unsustainable (ongoing erosion, wet areas) and need rehabilitation or removal/decommissioning.
- Climate change will impact the trail network through altered snow retention, and increased risk of floods and fires.
- Increasing volumes and speed of traffic to the West Bragg Creek parking lot has been attributed to more vehicle collisions with wildlife on the rural roads near Bragg Creek. Education of visitors to West Bragg Creek is needed.
- Winter-only trails are being used in the summer, creating permanent tread and leading to damage to sensitive environments (i.e., wetlands).
- The linear density of trails in the area, the increasing volume of users on the trails and the presence of off-leash dogs impact wildlife behavior and the available core habitat (habitat away from the edge effect), which is needed for many species of wildlife.
- Trails within riparian habitats may affect aquatic environments and fish populations. All trails should limit the number of water crossings and avoid riparian areas. There is concern about the need to design the trails to allow for beaver coexistence.
- Trail use is leading to spread of invasive and non-native species of plants.
- Sensitive species like fescue and limber pine are declining in the area.
- Small litter and waste, like food packaging, human and dog feces, and dog bags are left on and near the trails.

### **Economic**

- Trail-based events draw visitors to the region, increase the visitor spending in Bragg Creek (e.g., accommodations, food, beverage, fuel) while also introducing people to the region and increasing the likelihood that they will return and/or inspire others to visit.
- Tourism operators use the trail network for guided services like mountain bike/ski lessons or nature exploration programs.

### **Communication and Education**



- Need for additional users' awareness of respectful trail use, highlighting the trail etiquette (such as activity and seasonal restrictions) as indicated on the trail map and users' codes of conduct.
- Need for additional user education to build awareness and understanding of the multi-use activities that occur in the West Bragg Creek trail system area.
- Need for additional user awareness of the difference between the regulations for the Public Land Use Zone and Provincial Recreation Area and trail etiquette represented on the activity and seasonal restrictions marked on the trail map.
- Bragg Creek community residents would like to have greater involvement in the development and management of the trail network.
- Users desire additional interpretive programs on Indigenous culture and connection to the land and environmental education.

### **Operations and Management**

- User damage to cross country ski tracks requires additional time and resources for maintenance and creates safety issues for skiers.
- Grazing, forestry and petroleum operations occurring throughout the area are active and require access and ongoing communication.
- Emergency management protocols need to be clear for West Bragg Creek, to ensure appropriate response during emergency situations such as recreation use accidents, and extreme weather events (flooding, wildfires).
- Increasing use of the trails and potential changes in wildlife behaviours are leading to wildlife/ human encounters that pose a safety risk.
- Increase in use of some trails has led to braiding, widening of and damage to trail tread that requires additional maintenance and remediation.
- The ongoing operations and management of the trail network is dependent on the financial and volunteer sustainability of BCT.
- The parking lots at Fullerton and West Bragg Creek are at capacity during busy weekends year-round. The high volume of users is affecting user experience and resulting in increasing requests for additional management strategies to control parking and traffic to the area.
- Unauthorized trail building has occurred within the trail network. These trails are not sustainably designed, do not consider historic, cultural or environmental constraints, and require time and resources to address.

### **PLANNING PROCESS**

Ten years after the completion of the first All Seasons Trail Plan (2010) for the area, BCT and AEP are collaborating on updating the plan and producing an updated version.

As part of the planning process, representatives from the following organizations have been invited to form a Planning Committee:

- Alberta Environment and Parks
- BCT Board members

- Local trail users or group representatives including:
  - Cross-country skiing
  - Snowshoeing
  - Hiking
  - Mountain biking
  - Winter fat biking
  - Trail running
  - Equestrian
- Conservation/Environmental
- Rocky View County
- Indigenous Governments
- Local industrial users of Crown land
  - Grazing
  - Timber
  - Petroleum

This Committee will provide input, advice and endorsement of the plan. All members of the Committee will be invited to speak for their area of interest, with the expectation that they are prepared to listen respectfully to all other members and adhere to the process.

In collaboration with the Committee, AEP and BCT have drafted the Trails Plan Terms of Reference. The Terms of Reference will be the subject of the first phase of public, stakeholder and Indigenous engagement in December 2021 – January 2022, with feedback received through an online survey and interactive map.

AEP, BCT and the Planning Committee will draft the plan for public, stakeholder and Indigenous engagement in Spring/Summer 2022. Based on comments and input received, the Planning Committee will consider final amendments to the plan prior to it being submitted for formal approval by AEP and BCT.

**Table 1 Phases, Methods and Timing in the Planning Process**

Phase	Methods	Timing
<b>Scoping/ pre-engagement</b>	BCT and AEP will work with the other members of the planning committee to develop the Trails Plan Terms of Reference, which will clarify the plan scope, topics/issues to be addressed and will be the subject of preliminary public engagement. The recreation use and experience surveys and the engagement on the BCT Strategic Plan are also used to develop the Terms of Reference.	January - November 2021
<b>Preliminary engagement</b>	Feedback on the Terms of Reference will be sought from the trail users, stakeholders and Indigenous communities through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- An online survey (Talk AEP).</li> </ul>	December 2021- January 2022

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Interactive mapping to better identify site specific issues/options.</li> <li>- Opportunities to engage or learn about plan development at kiosks at WBC and Fullerton parking area (Trail hosts)</li> </ul>	
<b>Develop the Plan</b>	Based on the preliminary feedback, BCT and AEP will work with the Planning Committee to develop the draft plan.	January 2021 - September 2022
<b>Draft Plan Engagement</b>	The draft plan will be circulated for public comment through the Talk AEP website and linked from BCT website. An online survey will be used to receive feedback that will be used to inform changes to the draft plan.	September 2022
<b>Release Final Plan</b>	The final plan will be posted to Talk AEP and BCT website. Included in the plan, or as a separate document, will be details on how public and stakeholder comments were addressed/considered.	Winter 2022/23

## IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation of the plan would occur over a period of years as funding and/or other resources are secured.

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