

Bighorn Backcountry Access Management Plan

Monitoring: Standing Committee

Meeting Summary
February 14, 2005
Rocky Mountain House Museum

In Attendance

Jack Walker	Calvin Rakach	Christie Clark	Philip Lacerte
Deb Schroderous	Mike Adolph	Roger Marvin	Lorne Hindbo
Dennis Schafer	Clarence Stewart	Loyal Ma	Steve Taylor
Derek Durocher	Robin McDonald	Ken Qually	Harlan Dixon
Yvette Choma	Derry Armstrong	Wayne Crocker	Butch Shenfield
Gary Mandrusiak			

Chairperson

Don Livingston

Regrets

Rob Hunter	Kristin McKenzie	Doug Ritchie	Myles Jensen
Rick Artzen	Ken Schroderous	Bonnie Brewer	Jeff Wilson
James Brady	James Allen	Earl Graham	R.W. (Bobby)
Turner			
Bob Long			

Introduction

Butch Shenfield thanked everyone for attending the meeting. Round-table introductions were completed.

Several new individuals joined the Standing Committee, filling representative and alternate positions:

- Steve Taylor, alternate for Eco Tourism
- Roger Marvin replacing Ken Zelt as the representative for Equestrian
- Harlan Dixon replacing Jimmy Wildman for First Nations
- Ken Qually replacing Bob Haagsma as representative for Clearwater County
- Earl Graham are replacing Cheri Adolph as alternate for Clearwater County
- Philip Lacert replacing Greg Mallo as representative for Fishing & Hunting
- Robin McDonald replacing Philip Lacerte as alternate for Fishing & Hunting
- Jeff Baltzer, alternate for Hiking

Activities, Enforcement and Signing

Several old signs have been replaced with new signs, particularly on the Canary Creek,

Hummingbird Creek and Onion Lake Trails. Several more new or replacement signs will be installed. Many signs are being vandalized or removed including metal signs on metal posts. Please contact the department regarding any vandalized signs or persons attempting to vandalize signs.

Many users are making an effort to locate trails. However, trail braiding and unsigned trapper trails may make trail identification difficult, particularly after recent snow. It was suggested to sign the appropriate trail, but this would result in thousands of signs in the Kiska / Willson Forest Land Use Zone. A symbol painted on a tree was also suggested. The department is reviewing small, embossed aluminum signs that can be painted to any colour. If the paint is removed from the sign, the embossing will remain.

The kiosk at the Hummingbird Forest Recreation Area is installed, including a thank-you sign to the volunteers. After spring thaw the thank-you sign will be moved to a separate post. It was recommended the kiosk include a sign indicating the non-compliance maximum penalty.

A total of four requests for Scalp Creek Trail permits have been received. Currently, snow conditions are not sufficient to permit snow vehicle access.

On the Clearwater Trail, illegal snowmobile use had taken place west of the Forty Mile Patrol Cabin. Olds Snowmobile Club developed and posted a sign with the logos of this club, the Alberta Snowmobile Association, the Alberta Off-Highway Vehicle Association, and Sustainable Resource Development. One-page flyers with a similar message were also given to local snowmobile and off-highway vehicle retailers, and hunting and fishing stores. Since the installation of the sign, no unauthorized snowmobile use has occurred.

In 2004, some Hummingbird Forest Recreation Area users were placing garbage at the Ram Falls Provincial Recreation Area (Parks & Protected Areas).

ACTION: Clearwater County will be approached regarding signs near forest recreation areas to indicate the location, hours of operation, and map location of waste transfer sites to encourage random campers to take their garbage to these sites.

ACTION: Clearwater County and the Solid Waste Authority will be approached regarding a walk-through swing gate at the waste transfer sites that have limited hours of operation.

ACTION: It was also suggested that backcountry guardians could talk to people about taking their garbage to waste transfer sites or home.

Hummingbird and Eagle Creek Forest Recreation Areas

The Hummingbird and Eagle Creek Forest Recreation Area Concept Plans were developed and endorsed by the Standing and Steering Committees in 2004.

Some work in the forest recreation areas has begun, based on these plans.

Hummingbird Forest Recreation Area

Hummingbird Forest Recreation Area Concept Plan identified a poor road, the requirement of new camping areas and closing of poor-quality camping areas, development of a better staging area and toilet facility requirements. During fall 2004, new camping areas were identified, funding was established, and the work project defined. A contract between the department and volunteer workers is being established. Campsite clearing and development will begin in spring / summer 2005, with the anticipation that better sites will draw people away from the poor sites located along the river. Signs and the kiosk were installed. Two manure deposit sites have been identified that may require small equipment to maintain. Future servicing of the manure deposit sites will be reviewed. The potential for wildfires is a concern and a fire hazard assessment will be conducted. Concrete curbs in the staging area parking lot were removed to facilitate snow ploughing for snowmobile access and the road is currently hard-packed snow.

Improper highline use resulting in dead trees is a concern for this area. Horses tied to trailers would permit vegetative recover and keep horses away from tree roots. Designated horse storage areas with raised gravel beds and metal poles situated away from trees would prevent tree roots from being damaged. Large corrals would permit the use by many people and horses could also be tied outside the corral. Geography and soil will dictate the best system for each area and more than one type of system will give users the options.

Eagle Creek Forest Recreation Area

Eagle Creek Forest Recreation Area Concept Plan identified that the area was generally in good shape, but too few sites were available for the number of people using the area. Recommendations included the development of additional sites, fixed fire rings, road improvement and fixed equestrian sites. Work on some new campsites and road gravelling is planned for 2005.

Bighorn Backcountry Brochure Update

A re-print for the Bighorn backcountry brochure is scheduled for late spring.

Suggestions for the re-print of the brochure included the following:

- Concern of improper highline-use is resulting in vegetative damage and tree death. It was suggested to remove the current sketch and replace with a photo of horses tied to trailers. Some re-wording of the highline method was suggested, as well as describing other options. The differentiation between backcountry and forest recreation area use could be described.
- Equestrian site maintenance should be described, including raking and leveling of disturbed ground, horse etiquette, manure removal including manure disposal sites and manure removed from the site.
- Waste transfer site and locations would encourage users to remove garbage.
- Wildfire reporting phone number and website to be updated.
- Wildfire prevention information for off-highway vehicle users to be added.

- Travel Alberta and tourism agency phone numbers and websites for contact information of commercial operators could be added.
- *Respect the Land* information could be added.
- Description of the forest recreation areas and service facilities available could be added.
- 1:50,000 map numbers could be overlaid.
- Under the legend, remove bold of dotted black line for trails.

Any recommendations for the re-print of the brochure are to be sent to Yvette Choma.

Forest Recreation Area Concept Plans

In November 2004, stakeholders met regarding the Cutoff Creek, Blackstone Gap, and Crescent Falls Forest Recreation Areas. Draft concept plans were developed and distributed to the Steering Committee members for comment. The draft plans were presented to the Standing Committee for input and comment. Revised plans will be presented to stakeholders for comment and then the three concept plans will be presented for final endorsement of both the Standing and Steering Committees.

ACTION: Upon approval of the new concept plans, priorities for work of all five forest recreation areas will be prioritized.

Cutoff Creek Forest Recreation Area

The Cutoff Creek Forest Recreation Area has a parking area with toilet facility, and a north and south trail traveling southwest to the Clearwater River area. These trails lead to a legislated area with no facilities. This general area includes the Upper Clearwater / Ram and Kiska / Willson Forest Land Use Zones and Sunpine's Forest Management Area.

Current use for this area includes recreation and commercial equestrian and wagons, guides and outfitters, on and off-highway vehicles, mountain bikes, snowmobiles, and trappers. Sunpine has far-future harvesting activities that will develop future logging roads and increase use in the area. Most current activity focuses on the staging area and informal camping along the creek and inside the staging area.

The north trail is an old and wide seismic line, popular with on-highway vehicles, off-highway vehicles and recreation and commercial wagon use. It is heavily used and this has resulted in many low and wet areas in an already naturally wet area. The south trail is an old roadbed, with a bridge removed across a creek. This removed bridge deters many equestrian and off-highway vehicle users.

The area access from Highway 734 is on a Clearwater County road and the current bridge eliminates the transportation of heavy equipment. The north staging area is too small for the number of users, with camping compounding this problem. The two forest land use zones boundaries are imaginary lines that do not follow natural boundaries which creates enforcement problems.

Suggested recommendations for this forest reaction area include the following:

- Some public land outside the Bighorn Backcountry is currently under the Clearwater Forest Recreational Trail Initiative. This initiative should be

contacted to consider the recommendations for Cutoff Creek Forest Recreation Area.

- A better and drier campsite be identified for development to supersede the current east site.
- The east staging area should accommodate 15 to 20 truck and trailer units
- Prohibit camping in the parking area, to enable more vehicles to park
- Provide proper camping area for 25 sites near the existing staging area
- Gravel campsites and equestrian facilities, and provide toilets facilities
- Review the fire hazard potential of the area
- Identify a recreation site near the Clearwater River that is well-drained and set-aside for future and long-term use
- Encourage Clearwater County to improve the access road
- Suggest the boundary between the Kiska / Willson Forest Land Use Zone and Sunpine's FMA be moved to the east and bring that area into the forest land use zone. Timber harvesting and oil and gas exploration would remain
- Suggest the boundary between the Upper Clearwater / Ram and Kiska / Willson Forest Land Use Zones be moved to follow the Clearwater River and not an imaginary line. Forest land use zone boundary changes require a legislation change, and stakeholders would have to agree with this approach.
- Creation of a loop to join the north and south trails
- On-highway vehicle users would be contacted through the Clearwater Forest Recreational Trail Initiative

Blackstone Gap Forest Recreation Area

This forest recreation area is located near the Blackstone Provincial Recreation Area (Parks & Protected Areas) and outside the Blackstone / Wapiabi Forest Land Use Zone. This is currently an informal staging area with some camping. The long access road was originally developed for resource exploration and will become a primary road for future timber and oil and gas extraction. Any improvements to the forest recreation area will affect the provincial recreation area.

Currently, an informal campsite exists, with some first nations ceremonial use, and possibly some graves. Users include commercial equestrian, commercial outfitting, trapping, dog sledding, first nations, fishing and hunting, mountain biking, hiking and off-highway vehicle use. An upgraded access road would see increased use in this area, and its pro-active placement will be critical for recreation.

It was questioned what would become of the old road and bridge when the new road is re-aligned. This current road belongs to Clearwater County.

ACTION: Future plans for new and existing roads will be confirmed with Clearwater County.

Trail and camping opportunities east of the gap (along the road) require identification.

Crescent Falls Forest Recreation Area

This forest recreation area is near Crescent Falls Provincial Recreation Area near the Bighorn River. The staging area is popular for hiking, equestrian, cross-country skiing

and ice climbing. The general area is popular for off-highway vehicle and snowmobile use. Some random camping exists along the access road.

Bighorn Canyon Development Node is identified for commercial activity and the Big Horn Indian Reserve has a community plan for tourism, recreation and community development. The TransAlta Utilities Bighorn Dam area receives heavy random camping and off-highway vehicle staging.

The road to the forest recreation area is narrow, with a small staging area to accommodate five to six vehicles. This size is inadequate. It is recommended to increase the size of the staging area and not permit camping. A toilet facility could be accommodated in the staging area. A wider and better-quality road could be developed. It was questioned if a parking area at the road fork could be developed, located approximately 0.8 kilometres before the current forest recreation area.

It was recommended equestrian backcountry users could stage from the current-existing equestrian staging area in the provincial recreation area. There are concerns in the provincial recreation area of off-highway vehicle unloading that may be alleviated with signs to redirect off-highway vehicle users to unload in the Bighorn Dam area.

ACTION: Revise draft concepts plans and present recommendations to interested stakeholder groups. Present revised plans to the Standing and Steering Committees for endorsement.

Standards for Commercial and Non-Commercial Users

In December 2004, the department met with Commercial Trail Riding operators and Guides & Outfitters to discuss recommendations for a draft set of standards for operations. Meeting summary notes will be sent to all Standing Committee members.

Existing standards, including those of federal parks, will aid the department in developing standards for public land. Standards will require more maintenance for facilities and trails, but will be better for all users.

Trappers and Alberta Trappers Association Proposal

At the September 2004 Standing and Steering Committee meeting, the Alberta Trappers Association gave a presentation and requested that trappers and their partners have off-highway vehicle access on their fur management areas 365 days per year.

Currently trappers, partners, wives and children under 18 years of age are permitted off-highway vehicle access one week prior to the trapping season until one week after the trapping season. Trappers may apply for special permits outside the trapping season for special projects (i.e.) transporting shingles for cabin re-roofing.

The Steering and Standing Committees reviewed the proposal and several comments were received. The department also reviewed Bighorn Backcountry open house questionnaires and comments from a trapping local division.

The following concerns were brought forward:

- Permission for only one user group to have unlimited off-highway vehicle access
- Enforcement difficulties, as the department will not know when trappers are accessing their fur management areas. The general public will be frequently contacting the department regarding illegal off-highway vehicle use
- Off-season permits may be requested from the department should projects need to be completed during the summer months
- Registered fur management holders can have unlimited partners. Off-highway vehicle permits include wives and children under 18 years of age

Based on the above, the decision was made that registered fur management areas holders, their partners, wives and children under 18 years of age will be permitted off-highway vehicle travel in their areas one week prior to the season and until one week after the season. Special permit outside the season will be requested from the department, if projects require the transportation of heavy supplies. It was questioned if two to four weeks could be given, in place of one week. The Alberta Trappers Association is currently drafting and reviewing a definition of “active trapper.”

The department drafted a Trappers’ Annual Operating Plan and this was taken to the local Alberta Trappers Association meeting for review. The annual operating plan would enable the trapper to outline potential annual activities, rather than the current month-by-month activities that require approval. New trail development will still require department authorization for trail monitoring and enforcement.

Trapper signs on trails must be installed, as the public may believe these higher-used trails to be an authorized off-highway vehicle trails. Trapper signs on trails would inform the public that the trail is for a specific registered fur management area. These signs could have the Alberta Snowmobile Association, Alberta Off-Highway Vehicle Association and Sustainable Resource Development logos located on the sign to show approved endorsement. Trappers do not want to “advertise” their cabins and bait stations, due to potential vandalism and liability.

Dual Sport Bikes

Currently, dual sport bikes are registered for on-highway use but are permitted on both street and trail. Current legislation does not permit on-highway vehicles on trails. This item of dual sport bikes being permitted on trails should be reviewed this spring.

The next meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, May 31, 2005.