

Bighorn Backcountry

Access Management Plan

Monitoring: Standing Committee

November 21, 2007

Rocky Mountain House Super 8 Motel

In Attendance

Mike Adolph	Cal Rakach	Derek Durocher	Roger Marvin
Sandi Phillips	James Brady	Lorne Hindbo	Loyal Ma
Dennis Schafer	Clarence Stewart	Brent Young	Doug Ritchie
John Evans	Kevin Wirtanen	Kevin Gagne	Justin Ellis
Yvette Choma	Wayne Crocker	Derry Armstrong	Chiara Feder

Chairperson

Don Livingston

Regrets

Bob Long	Rob Hunter	Philip Lacerte	Kristin McKenzie
Rick Artzen	Marvin Abraham	Jeff Baltzer	Dick Wymenga
Ken Schroderous	Elder Rock Abraham	R.W. (Bobby) Turner	Christie Clark
Jeff Wilson	Steve Taylor	Robin McDonald	Deb Schroderous
Bernie Schmitte	Ken Qually	Myles Jensen	Cory Wojtowicz
Rob Popowich			

Introduction

Don Livingston thanked everyone for attending the meeting. Round-table introductions were completed.

- Dick Wymenga is the new Clearwater County alternate, and
- Chiara Feder is representing the Fish & Wildlife biologist Anne Hubbs at this meeting and future 2008 meetings.

Activities, Enforcement and Signing

The summer was busy for the Bighorn Backcountry. A guardian was stationed in Nordegg and his key issues included off-trail use from motorized vehicles and concerns from residents. Several positive comments were received about his presence and his actions towards non-compliance.

Sign vandalism continues to be a problem. Vandalized and stolen signs are being replaced immediately, and heavier metal is being used for the sign posts.

Comments from the public are being considered for sign placements.

Alpha-numeric signs at trail intersections correspond to the Bighorn Backcountry brochure, and these signs are making a positive difference.

A letter and print material was mailed to all Nordegg residents regarding the Bighorn Backcountry and the expectations of the forest land use zones. Also included was information regarding the Coliseum Trail Staging Area being moved to the current wood debris area. The current wood debris area / new staging area will be cleaned by Clearwater County. The county is establishing a new wood debris area that will be available for use in the near future. The new portion of the Coliseum Trail from the new staging area is currently flagged and will be cut during the winter or the spring.

On August 8, 2007 the Bighorn Backcountry Monitoring Group staged from the Hummingbird Forest Recreation Area for a field day. Twenty-four members spent the day touring the area and viewing considerable volunteer efforts in the forest recreation area and on the trails. The Bighorn Heritage ATV Society work bee took place this same day, and some members joined the monitoring group field tour.

The Nordegg area was busy with summer violations. The Job Lake area has frequent violation issues, with the public reporting the violators. It was questioned if cameras have been installed in problem areas. Cameras have been installed in a variety of areas due to a variety of chronic issues.

For 2008, the focus will include legal designated trails and what is the definition of this term. Some old industry skid trails that are partially over-grown are become regularly-used trails due to improper and repeated use. These old skid trails are not suitable for recreation use due to inappropriate terrain, low areas, and wet conditions. However, repeated tire impact on the terrain is resulting in repeated use in an inappropriate area.

The Bighorn Backcountry is attracting people who may be inexperienced and unaware of what activities are permitted. It was suggested better signs and directions on the trails, and destination area kiosks with additional information, backcountry toilets, hitching rails and designated parking areas for off-highway vehicles. There is some concern with the backcountry kiosks or too many signs, and a wilderness setting. Kiosks with information may increase riding time without the construction of new trails. Some Alberta area trail track logs are available or in the process of being available.

Local RCMP members are now participating in backcountry patrols with Department officers. As part of the patrol, RCMP members are administering breathalyzer tests to off-highway vehicle users on trails if there is suspicion of alcohol use.

Upper Clearwater / Ram Trail Inventory & Plan

Derry Armstrong is currently working with Clearwater Country, Alberta Sustainable Resource Development and Alberta Tourism, Parks, Recreation and Culture to develop the Alexo / Saunders Development Node Concept Plan. The draft plan was presented to the public in August 2007. There is general concern with development in the west country and the draft plan will be revised from this input received. The next meeting is tentatively scheduled for February 6, 2008.

Considerable trail inventory was completed in the Upper Clearwater / Ram Forest Land Use Zone (FLUZ). The future information will be used to prepare a trail plan that will assess trail conditions and problems, and set priorities for future maintenance and construction. As part of the trail plan, a decision will be required for each trail (i.e.) is the trail in need of maintenance or should it not be considered a trail.

Trail inventory includes the following:

- trail measurement characteristics;
- surface materials;
- assessment of problems;
- general assessment and conditions, and
- digital track;
- vegetation;
- special features;
- photographs.

The next step will be completion of a trail map based on the digital tracking.

Overall, there appears to be a change in trail use. In previous years, backcountry trails located a considerable distance from staging areas were frequently travelled. However, recent years indicates less backcountry camping and trail use, and more recreation vehicles in the staging areas with more frequent shorter day excursions.

Summer Project Update

Friends of the Eastern Slopes presented the 2007 summary of projects completed. The financial donations did not include time and labor costs of this association's volunteers and other volunteers. Due to excessive tree damage in all areas, the organization recommends users tie horses to their trailers or high lines between trailers. The installation of tie facilities should be located outside the tree areas. Horses should never be high lined to the trees. Friends of the Eastern Slopes presented the Bighorn Heritage ATV Society with a \$3000 cheque for future trail improvements.

The 2007 Clearwater Area Project Report was presented. For additional hard copy or email copies, please contact Wayne Crocker. It is noted the partnering of stakeholders and stewards with the Department is inspiring and essential for work projects. Thank you to everyone who has volunteered to make 2007 a successful year. Areas receiving work projects in 2007 include the following:

- Eagle Creek Forest Recreation Area;
- Cutoff Creek Forest Recreation Area;
- Bighorn Dam area;
- Bighorn Campground, and
- Hummingbird Forest Recreation Area and associated trails.
- Nordegg area;
- Cow Lake;
- Struble Lake;

It was suggested a spring workshop for trail volunteers and the Department.

It was asked if the legislation regarding Highway 734 could be changed to permit off-highway vehicle travel. Some portions of Highway 734 are within the Bighorn Backcountry. As this highway is a secondary highway the legislation is provincial and not a county by-law.

R11 Prescribed Burning

A successful capping unit burn was completed in the Blackstone Gap area this year. This capping unit now creates a safe zone for containment should a future fire be in this area.

The Upper North Saskatchewan River prescribed burn was not as successful as planned, due to the weather. This prescribed burn is being completed in conjunction with Parks Canada. This prescribed burn will be assessed for spring 2008.

The Hummingbird area was not included in the R11 prescribed burning plan. There is a proposal for a capping unit burn for this area. Volunteer efforts in regards to trail maintenance and structures will be located and identified, with efforts to protect these structures from fire

Trappers

Trappers are being encouraged to post signs within their traplines. These signs indicate the trail is for trapline use only, and is not a designated trail. Trails for trapline access may become snow-packed and some users believe these snow-packed trails are the designated trails.

NOHVCC and Education & Trails

In November, Department staff attended a meeting chaired by the National Off-Highway Vehicle Conservation Council (NOHVCC). This meeting gave staff the opportunity to gather and exchange ideas with this American organization, other Alberta Government participants and stakeholder groups. Classroom and field components focused on the following:

- the “wants and needs” of the users;
- system planning and design;
- United States Travel Rule Overview, and
- volunteers and stewardship work on trails and in staging areas.
- education resources;
- effective trail management;

It was asked if committee members would join a spring workshop to include volunteer stewards. Kevin Wirtanen will contact those individuals interested in attending this workshop.

The increased use at the Bighorn Dam area is a concern to TransAlta Corporation, the holder of the water development licence. The off-highway vehicle community and the Department have made many attempts to curb non-compliant use. However, many problems exist including human waste, non-compliance on trails and small children riding in areas where recreation vehicles are parked. Selected members of the monitoring committee asked to attend the upcoming meeting between the Department and TransAlta Corporation.

A definition of designated trails is required, with sustainability and quality of trails also being addressed. A “tot lot” with a perimeter fence and picnic tables for seating may address the situation of small children riding in inappropriate areas.

Bighorn Backcountry Extreme Adventuring & Via Ferrata

At a previous committee meeting, extreme adventuring and its increase in the area was discussed. Currently, commercial permits and standards for training are not required for commercial operators in areas other than areas of Tourism, Parks, Recreation and Culture or Commercial Trail Riding. Paddle Canada and the Association of Canadian Mountain Guides (ACMG) offer certification courses open to the public. The Bighorn Backcountry would be a natural progression for commercial permits and a set standard of training for commercial operators. Currently, Tourism Parks, Recreation and Culture in Rocky Mountain House issues 10 annual permits for climbing, hiking, canoeing, kayaking and camping. The time frame per permit is three hours of administration and four hours of enforcement. In the Kananaskis area, over 100 guiding and instruction permits are issued per year. Three staff are involved with administration and compliance of these permits.

The Via Ferrata on Mount Stelfox is a vertical climbing trail installed by the David Thompson Corridor Climbing Association (DTCCA). To ensure the safety of the Via Ferrata, simulated drop and lift tests were completed. The test site remains in place and the association will return after winter to complete more tests. Test results can be viewed on the following websites: www.dtcca.ca
www.coe.ca.

The association has printed a book of vertical trails, and Department trail counters indicate ice climbing is the most popular winter sport in the Bighorn Backcountry. It was recommended the association maintain a regular maintenance record of the Via Ferrata and the simulated tests.

Miscellaneous

As previously requested, Bighorn Backcountry brochures were distributed to all Rocky Mountain House real estate companies. There was no response from the area Welcome Wagon. The Department's seasonal guardian has been instrumental in personally distributing an assortment of brochures to Red Deer, Calgary and Edmonton businesses. A more formal inventory of vertical trails should be considered.

Small blow-out maps for the Hummingbird, Cutoff Creek and Bighorn Dam areas have been printed. Special thanks to Gwen Edge for her artistic talent. These maps will be contained in a mailbox at the appropriate kiosk. Should visitors not have a Bighorn Backcountry brochure, these maps indicate the appropriate trail network with additional information on forest land use zones, *Respect The Land*, and emergency contacts.

In September, many Department staff were brought together to work the Red Deer Sportsman Show. Over 13,000 people attended the show, and the following comments included:

- field officers are doing a great job but there are too few compared with the large number of visitors;
- concerns of how busy it is becoming on public land;
- many comments regarding garbage and vandalism, and "*how can I help?*"
- greater understanding of mountain pine beetle and the prescribed burn areas.

Other Edmonton and Calgary trade shows for 2007 and 2008 include the motorcycle shows, boat & sportsman shows, and snowmobile & ATV shows.

Open Floor

It was asked if an upcoming Bighorn Backcountry Standing Committee meeting could be held in Nordegg. Centre for Outdoor Education would like to host this meeting.

The five-year review is currently underway. The terms of reference are being completed

Considerable maintenance is being completed in the Panther Corners Forest Land Use Zone. This is determined by the recent reviewing the monitoring plots.

Wayne Crocker will be meeting with trail stewards to discuss the Scalp Creek Trail. This trail requires a permit for travel and the trail has not held sufficient snow to permit snow vehicle travel. Trail maintenance is being completed by a local snowmobile club.

It was questioned the regulations regarding off-highway and snow vehicle designated trails located outside the forest land use zones. Currently, there is no legislation regarding these trails. There is a larger provincial initiative with regards to legislation that will cover all public land outside the forest land use zones.

The provincial Recreation Management Program is seeking to shift the recreation use of public lands from its current random use to focusing recreational use to managed trails. The program is exploring how the department will achieve this shift. In addition, the program is working to formalize its process and requirements for accepting, reviewing and approving trail proposals for lands outside of forest land use zones.

It was questioned how the grizzly bear study will affect trail closures. Industry roads with on-highway vehicle access pose considerably more killings than off-highway and snow vehicles on trails. Opportunities to find solutions to solve wildlife concerns must be discussed. Trail closures due to the Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan are to be determined.

The South Ram Lookout area receives considerable vandalism and remaining garbage. It was asked if this lookout camping area could be designated for day-use only. Services including a backcountry toilet and tie rails will be installed.

At the Bighorn Campground, the Eagle Creek and Hummingbird Forest Recreation Areas, a considerable amount of hay is being put in the manure piles and increasing the cost of maintenance. It was asked if hay could not be permitted in these areas. Yes, a sign can be posted and a fine for violation. Equestrian stakeholders are asked to take this concern to their groups, and this will also be asked at the upcoming Commercial Trail Riding meeting.

It was suggested the rules of the forest recreation areas be posted inside the toilet facilities. This has been done on campground and day-use areas and is very successful.

Improper highline technique continues to be a problem in staging areas, resulting in tree damage. Alternatives to a highline need to be considered and installed.

The upcoming Bighorn Backcountry Standing Committee meeting is scheduled for February 20, 2008.