

Bighorn Backcountry Access Management Plan

Monitoring: Standing Committee

Meeting Summary

June 3rd, 2010 9:00 AM

Rocky Mountain House Provincial Building

In Attendance

Myles Jensen	Wayne Crocker	Yvette Choma	Cal Rakach
Clarence Stewart	Dennis Schafer	Bernie Schmitte	James Brady
Rick Artzen	Gord Sanders	Neil Godlonton	Don Terway
Mike Adolph	Brent Young	Ken Qually	Kevin Gagne
Lorne Hindbo	Roger Marvin	Paul Radchenko	Loyal Ma
Kevin Wirtanen	Dick Wymenga		

Chairperson

Don Livingston

Regrets

Rob Popowich	Rita Stagman	Chiara Feder	Phil Lacerte
Marvin Abraham	Elder Rock Abraham	Doug Ritchie	John Evans
Kristin McKenzie	Sandi Phillips	Rob Hunter	Bobby Turner
Bob Long	Jeff Willson	Steve Taylor	Jeff Baltzer
Derek Durocher			

Introduction

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

Bighorn Dam Area

Since the previous meeting the Bighorn Heritage ATV Society is working to have a cattle guard installed. This will permit side-by-side off-highway vehicles to safely cross the dam and access the designated trail network.

Don Terway, Hydro Operations Manager of the Bighorn Dam, was introduced. During the May long-weekend TransAlta employees at the Bighorn Dam picked up garbage, extinguished campfires and were confronted by unsavory users; these situations get worse every year. Vandalism and alcohol abuse by users was frequent. Employee safety is a concern to Translta.

TransAlta is open to the construction of a formal campsite. In the future the staff will not be stationed at the site 24 hour per day and the area will be secured with fencing and cameras. The county thanked TransAlta for initiating a campsite as an option for the public to use. It was suggested the installation of additional fencing in areas where off-highway vehicle use is not suitable. TransAlta is also creating new, visible signing.

The Department has charged users driving on-highway vehicles on trails and into the river. The Big Horn Reserve has concerns of users riding ad-hoc trails to access and drive in the reserve. Signing has been installed in an attempt to corral the free-for all activity. Counters are installed on designated trails.

Don Livingston previously met with TransAlta and discussed instrument locations, erosion, concerns of random off-highway vehicle use and signage. A proposed pamphlet would indicate expectations to users and safety concerns from TransAlta. Designated and hardened trails to the north of the Bighorn Dam area will alleviate some future use in the Bighorn Dam area.

Activities, Enforcement and Signing

The May long-weekend task force included members from the following organizations:

- RCMP
- Calgary Police Service
- Clearwater County
- Parks and Protected Areas
- Commercial Vehicle Enforcement
- Sustainable Resource Development
- Honourable Ty Lund.

Weather leading into the long-weekend was poor and may have been a factor regarding the decreased number of visitors. A total of 1071 tickets and 151 warnings were issued with that number not decreasing from previous years. Thank you to Sundre and Rocky Trappers Association and the other contributors for funding the garbage bins that were placed throughout the Clearwater Area. Volunteers who removed garbage during and after the long-weekend are asked to contact Don so that volunteer hours can be tracked. This year there was very little post-weekend garbage removal, possibly due to users in unclean camps being supplied garbage bags. On-highway and off-highway vehicles were seized by the RCMP and some vehicles are modified with specialized equipment to drive in fish-bearing streams. The Fall Creek area is a great concern due to the Bull Trout population and that it is located outside a forest land use zone without legislation. The Public Lands Act is being modified and this will give authority to areas outside the forest land use zones. The cabin belonging to the Caroline Snowmobile Club was vandalized.

There will be 3.5 seasonal enforcement staff (formerly provincial guardians) for this summer season. One staff member has duties shared with another division and has enforcement duties half the working week.

It was asked if the changes to the Public Lands Act will be advertised. The intent is to involve the public and generate conversation with the new regulations being finalized for December 2010. For the Public Lands Act:

http://www.qp.alberta.ca/574.cfm?page=p40.cfm&leg_type=Acts&isbncln=9780779749034

It was asked how volunteers can assist the Department with messaging. A casual message can be relayed from volunteers to individuals who are not compliant. In forest land use zones where legislation currently exists, photographs and details can be sent to Don for potential tickets. Some phone calls have been initiated through the Report-A-Poacher (RAP) phone number, with follow-up from an officer.

In heavily used hiking areas, three sets of bear poles will be installed. These areas include Landslide Lake, Allstones Lake and along the Cline River (Entry Creek intersection).

At the previous meeting it was asked if snow vehicle use could be extended until and including May 30th. Currently snow vehicle use is permitted until and including April 30th. This request was brought to the Steering Committee. The date of April 30th is parallel with forest land use zones south of the Clearwater Area. Concerns from Fish and Wildlife Division include ungulate calving season the end of May and that the ungulates may not be fully recovered from the winter months. At this time an extension for snow vehicle use until May 30th is not an option.

Cadomin Cave Closure

Cadomin Cave has been temporarily closed to lessen the risk of White-Nose Syndrome spreading to bats. A gate will be installed to permit the entry / exit of bats but not permit recreation or commercial access. Additional information can be viewed at:

<http://alberta.ca/acn/201005/2836993A4AEAF-EE47-FC23-758CD3C49BCF3049.html>
<http://srd.alberta.ca/BioDiversityStewardship/WildlifeDiseases/documents/White-NoseSyndrome-FactSheet-Jul2009.pdf>

Wapiabi Cave may experience the same closure. There is discussion regarding how to deal with a potential closure. Notification to commercial operators will be given when a decision has been made. Posters regarding White-Nose Syndrome can be supplied to commercial operators and retail outlets.

Caves in Southern Alberta may experience closure. The Bighorn Backcountry Standing Committee does have commercial users who frequent the cave.

Trapping Impacts from Prescribed Burning

Trapping Alternate Neil Godlonton and Representative Gord Sanders presented information regarding the effects of prescribed burning and fur harvesting. In forested areas where slopes are not too steep, this is good habitat for fur-bearing animals. Prescribed burns are short-term events with positive outcomes but may be destructive to fur-bearing habitat. Riparian areas tend to recover fairly quickly and are good areas for beaver populations. Thick reforestation is good for many fur-bearing animals including rabbits and their predators. Trappers need to know prescribed burning dates so martin boxes, remaining in trees to gather forest scent, can be removed. Some Registered Fur Management Areas are small in size and a prescribed burn may greatly affect a large portion within this area.

In the Blackstone / Wapiabi area prescribed burning is a concern as natural reforestation will take considerable time and will remove the food source of martins and their habitat of dead trees. Sheep wintering areas also need to be considered including loss of vegetation and loss of trees for protection. Prescribed burns in the areas of Smith Creek and the drainage of the Wapiabi Creek are concerns.

The Department was commended for the educational communication to trappers prior to the 2009 prescribed burns. In the area along the North Saskatchewan River and south, there is concern of a prescribed burn around the Registered Fur Management Area. Access is limited and considerable trail maintenance has been completed by the trappers. A prescribed burn in this area would have a significant impact on the Registered Fur Management Area.

The Department thanked Neil and Gord for bringing forward the information. A fire that occurs naturally can burn very hot. However, depending on the landscape and the slope a prescribed burn tends to have hot and less hot spots. A prescribed burn tends to be mottled and different than the naturally-occurring fire in the Dog Rib area. The mottled and less hot prescribed burns tend to be better for fur-bearing habitat than naturally-occurring fires as the later fires tend to severely alter habitat.

Prescribed Burning and Fire Regime Analysis

Completed this year was the prescribed burn in the South Idlewilde area. This is the second year in a row the meadows were burned.

A Fire Regime analysis was commissioned and completed to better understand causes of forest fires, their size, frequency and intensity. Old photographs, sample plots, existing evidence of fire on trees (fire scars, burnt stumps, charred debris) and archival documents were used for research.

Within the R11 Forest Management Plan (Bighorn Backcountry) it was concluded that ecosystems historically regulated by fire cycles every 80 years are now critically departed and have missed an entire fire cycle. The greatest deficits, 2.5 fire cycles missed during the fire suppression era, were found in the low elevations and warm aspects of the North-Saskatchewan, Clearwater and Red Deer valleys. Naturally-occurring fires before the fire-suppression era were very large in size and the R11 area is far overdue for a considerable amount of fire.

Mountain Pine Beetle

The Clearwater Area remain well in regards to Mountain Pine Beetle infestations, and the areas of concerns are the northeast slopes due to the amount of pine forest. The cold temperatures in autumn and the beginning of the winter may have resulted in significant beetle mortality. Northern Alberta winters tend to be colder than those in B.C. and this climate tends to increase the beetle mortality. It is unsure of the potential effects of the beetle in forests of Jack Pine.

Open Floor

The Bighorn Backcountry Standing Committee was nominated for the Government of Alberta Emerald Award in the category of Shared Footprints. Friends of the Eastern Slopes (FOES) has been nominated for the Government of Alberta Emerald Award in the category of Not-For-Profit Organization, *Protection of Eastern Slopes Environment from Damage from Recreational Users*. The awards will be presented to winners on June 10, 2010.

Standing Committee Fixed Accommodation alternate is seeking a replacement. Myles Jensen will contact campground operators and inquire if there is interest.

Ministries are proposing the establishment of a Delegated Administrative Organization (DAO) for planning and operations of the provincial trail systems. This organization would oversee the trails in the province. It is anticipated this proposal will be sent to cabinet in June and could supply funding for trail maintenance. It was asked if a portion of the off-highway vehicle registration fees and fines from tickets could be routed to a fund for trail maintenance. Currently some fines are dispersed to the Streamwatch program.

Alberta TrailNet will unveil the second map of the Northern Rockies. It was suggested this map be distributed to the standing committee members. This map indicates the designated trails and not all the trails.

LiDar (Light Detection and Ranging) data is available for the Ghost Forest Land Use Zones and much of the Clearwater Area. It offers very detailed and accurate elevation information and can be helpful as a trail planning tool to avoid wet and inappropriate areas. It was suggested a presentation be given at the next standing committee meeting.

The 2010 Bighorn Backcountry brochure was released to the public prior to the May long-weekend with thanks to Gwen Edge for her assistance. The website has been updated with the 2010 brochure information with thanks to Anton Brereton for his assistance. On the website, the old photos have been replaced with an update slide presentation of new photos. Thanks to Heather Hemphill for creating the presentation.

Friends of the Eastern Slopes will install large signs in the forest recreation areas regarding horses being tied to trees. Non-compliance may result in education and a ticket.

It was questioned if the term and provincial signs stating "Texas Gate" could be replaced with "Cattle Guard" signs.

Bighorn Backcountry Field Day: August 19, 2010 at the Bighorn Dam area. Details will be given closer to the date.

Bighorn Backcountry Standing Committee meeting: October 21, 2010. Location of the meeting will be announced closer to the date.