

# Bighorn Backcountry Access Management Plan

## Monitoring: Standing Committee

October 3, 2011 **FINAL COPY**  
Super 8 Motel - Rocky Mountain House

### In Attendance

Wayne Crocker	Gordon Sanders	Jim Duncan	Dick Wymenga
Laura Raivio	David Finn	Myles Jensen	Don Rilling
Carrie Nugent	Simon Dyer	Rita Stagman	Trevor Tarnowski
Robin McDonald	Cal Rakach	Michael Doyle	Kevin Gagne

### Chair

Wayne Crocker

### Introduction

Everyone thanked for attending the meeting. Round-table introductions were completed.

Youth representative Kirstin Mckenzie has stepped down and we have contacted the Outdoor Education instructor at David Thompson High School in hopes that one of the students there will take the opportunity to become involved. No names have come back to date. There is also a new Hiking representative, Simon Dyer, who will be replacing Derek Durocher. New Staging Area / Trail Adoptee representative is now Michael Doyle from FOESA, replacing Murray Hagel. We are still awaiting word on replacements for First Nations representatives and positions for alternates under an assortment of groups.

### Activities, Enforcement & Signing

This has been a particularly busy summer with September Long Weekend being no exception. People were out in droves with lots of off trail violations and craziness. Many tickets were written with court cases looming. We are at our lowest number of people when it comes to enforcement, but more tickets have been issued with fewer officers. We will be down to one guardian until the end of the month and will have no seasonal staff for the winter.

Bighorn Dam was especially busy with a guess at about 300+ units. Compliance was not bad while in the location and lots of checks were completed. Four new trails were discovered and signs were posted to indicate 'not for usage'. These trails indicate lots of people wanting to go to the preacher's cabin and along the North Saskatchewan, but the trail is too close to the cliff edge with only about 1 foot grace. The others are dead ends or run parallel to existing trails already designated in the area. Trees were actually removed and it was reinforced that no trails are to be constructed in the PLUZ by the general public without approval.

SRD will have a booth at the Red Deer Sportsman’s Show in March 2012. It will be a great opportunity for education allowing for public exposure to PLAR, Q&A, pamphlet disbursement, etc. We do not currently have a booth at the Rocky Trade Show for land use. In the past it’s been mainly attended in a forestry/timber aspect.

**PLAR / PLUZ, PLRA’s**

On September 12, 2011, the Public Lands Administration Regulation (PLAR) came into effect. Policies, procedures, etc. are being developed and information will be communicated. Once fully in we will have tools to address many different occurrences.

There is also a 14 day rule for being on vacant public land in effect and a permit or special authorization would be required for any further stay. Unsure at this point if there are any leniency clauses to this in relation to trapping. This does not apply to First Nations if pursuing treaty rights. No camping within 1 km of any Public Lands Recreation Area (PLRA) or Provincial Recreation Area (PRA). Any commercial activity on public land needs authorization (i.e. guides & outfitters, poker rallies, etc.) Vacant public land means there are no active dispositions for the area and are located in the green zone.

The only tickets able to be issued at present are long information tickets that come with a mandatory court appearance. With the new PLAR there are no specified penalties listed and SRD is unsure how long it will take to get these included. We are in for some changes as a result of the change of premier.

<b>Old Wording/Acronym</b>	<b>New Wording / Acronym</b>
FLUZ – Forest Land Use Zone	PLUZ – Public Land Use Zone
FRA – Forest Recreation Area	PLRA – Public Lands Recreation Area
Forest Recreation Regulations	PLAR – Public Lands Administration Regulation

SRD attended the first PLAR training session but there are still a lot of questions to be answered before any further training can be completed.

There was a ‘rave’ that took place that was given a permit. When the permit was applied for the description of the event was “a music event for family and friends”, but apparently ended up being something else. They were also not to interfere with other camping. This becomes a violation.

The permits help in tracking what is going on and allow for SRD to send people to another area if needed. Is a group being charged for cleanup? Hoops to jump through to receive a permit include \$2 million liability insurance and they need a plan to prove it’s compatible with the use of the area, a map of where they are going, authorization if using a road or disposition. Groups have been declined when there is too much of an impact, like when we’ve had too much rain on trails for example. There are currently no fees associated with these permits similar to what Parks has in place. Numbers of people and events are going up and up and currently we only

have one person reviewing usage and issuing permits. Enforcement is done by anyone on the task groups, dependent upon the type of charge needing to be laid.

### **Prescribed Burn Update**

Prescribed burning is a direct function of the R11 Plan and fire is a primary disturbance mechanism. It has been gauged that an annual disturbance of 3000 ha a year on the landscape is required to maintain a balance. We adopt 50% of this number to wildfire and 50% to planned fire. Each prescribed burn is planned to average 600 ha in size. Currently there are five burns that are approved and 9 to 11 more that are in various stages of proposal.

2011 update – on May 15<sup>th</sup> Alberta had a high fire hazard with strong winds throughout most of the province. This created a number of significant events, most notably at Slave Lake, Red Earth Creek and Fort McMurray. In the Clearwater area we had about a dozen starts. Shortly after this time we received rain, wet and humid weather on an ongoing basis ending any chance of prescribed burning (June/July/Aug). Finally September built into a hazard and gave us a chance to proceed. Fall is historically a better time for fire application but at the same time is a conflict with other users.

Sheep and elk hunters at Ya Ha Tinda were a concern. SRD took a horse trip to meet people and educate about prescribed burning. Signs were posted on the main trails to ensure everyone was notified. Values at risk were identified and assessed (i.e. old trapper's cabin and buildings at Ya Ha Tinda) and sprinklers were set up to eliminate damage.

On Sept 12, ignition commenced at the south end of the burn site with 90 ha burnt the first day. Opening day for elk season resulted in a delay of operations. Sept 22 the area was re-entered and ignition continued on the south side with 120 ha burnt. In the end there was about 400 ha burnt in total and it was considered a huge success.

Issues? The biggest was trophy elk. People wait 10 years to get a draw and it is usually a once in a lifetime hunt so that is felt to be ruined by helicopters flying around. Burnt over trails? Usually the user response is expected to some degree to help re-clear a trail.

Next year SRD will be concentrating on capping units to the north at entrances to strategic passes. The hope is that by completing these burns fire can take a more historical function and SRD can let burns go naturally.

### **Kelowna – OHV Campground & Design**

Members of SRD and Parks visited the Bear Creek Trail System to get ideas that may help in planning for the area around the Bighorn Dam site. BC deals with their areas through a division called Sites and Trails BC and are currently about five years ahead of us when it comes to recreation involvement. Their campsites are quite rudimentary but the trail systems are planned and maintained. They work with volunteer groups, trail specific machinery, and there is collection of user fees with the money going back into the sites. There are lots of km of trail and it is well-signed but with limited infrastructure. They also have a contractor hired to plan and oversee the trails in this system. The most important takeaway from this meeting is how important the trail system is when it comes to planning a destination site.

Was there a lot of existing trails in prior to planning at Bear Creek? Yes, high impact trails existed and a network of other trails. New trails were planned, others blocked off and signed and the public was educated to stay on designated trails. The idea was to increase the saddle time for the users. Most trails for this area were designated dirt bike and shared, size was generally 4 ft. in width. They have specialized equipment for making the trails and lots of good signage.

SRD has volunteers but no mechanism to support them monetarily. That's where BC is ahead of the game.

### **Bighorn Dam Area Concept Plan Update**

A draft plan is currently being developed based around feedback received at the August 10th group focus session held at the Bighorn Dam site and Snow Creek PRA. Alberta Parks anticipates having a draft plan for a proposed facility development at the Bighorn Dam site completed sometime early in the new calendar year. There will be an opportunity to review the draft proposal and provide further feedback to Alberta Parks.

Alberta Parks confirmed with the group some of the key comments that were heard during the focus session and outlined some of the design elements that will be incorporated into the first draft plan including:

- The BHD development should be family oriented OHV campground.
- The campground would at a minimum supply fire wood, powered sites, and washroom facilities.
- Trail system would have to be managed and sustainable. Density and extent of network needs to be explored a bit more.
- The draft plan will include an area for a service centre next to the main hwy entrance that would regulate and monitor usage and provide services that directly support the OHV campground.
- Considerations for shoulder season and winter camping opportunities will be included in the plan.
- Type of campsites will split between 1/3 single, 1/3 double, 1/3 4-5 units. 1-2 group sites.
- Camping in lower area along river will be included into the draft development proposal but will require a public education component for a emergency evacuation plan for the site coordinated between Alberta Parks and TransAlta.

Some issues and possible solutions that have been identified early in the facility planning include:

- Existing volunteer supported trail network to south of Dam only has around 60km of trails, must look at ways of linking other trails and expanding existing. Scope of project will include exploring opportunities to extend trail network and developing new opportunities for riding within the proposed new facility zone with things such as youth training areas. Studies show that people coming to a destination-type facility stay an average of three days. We would require about 60 km of trails per day to keep people from getting bored and trying to go off-trail. Here people tend to like to get to a destination and see the scenery as opposed to just riding round and round.

- Explore opportunities for dedicated equestrian trail out of Bighorn Dam or options for developing or diverting use to a different site as there is an issue with trail sharing between equestrian and OHVs.

Enforcement – The GOA is looking at implementation and staffing as well but this will probably be an internal govt. issue.

### **Edmonton Recreational Update**

- Land Use Framework: Draft Lower Athabasca Regional Plan has been released. Though unapproved at this point, it provides some insight into the importance of recreation and how recreational/tourism values might be included in future plans. Among the notables is the inclusion of the need to develop a regional trail plan.
- Public Land Administration Regulation: Came into effect September 12th. Encourage a look, particularly at part 2 and part 9. Regulation available on Alberta Queen's printer. FAQ's available on SRD website.
- Provincial delegated trail authority initiative: Together with revising Alberta Parks Legislation, this initiative remains very high on TPR's priority.
- Recreation and Tourism Management Strategy: Land Use Framework deputy ministers were presented with potential policy options on September 19th. Provided a new Cabinet is also receptive to these recommendations this potentially clears the way for next phase work with recreation communities.
- Alberta TrailNet Mapping Initiative: Grand Alberta South map to be released this month.
- TPR Recreation Data System: TPR is conducting Recreation and Tourism Features Inventory workshops in Lethbridge, Medicine Hat and Canmore to support future recreation and tourism planning

### **Future Vision for Bighorn Backcountry**

We have been awaiting direction in this area and in looking at the big picture, when the initial plan was done we did it without a future vision. We were more intent on getting the area set out. We now need to look at the future usage of the Bighorn Backcountry, percentage of sites, etc. If there is an agreement between Alberta Parks and SRD then we can hopefully start to get some direction on opening/closing of trails and trail classification. Lots of items are working in the background and leading us to what this vision will be. Ultimately we are waiting for the new Premier.

### **Early Trail Closure to Summer Motorized**

OHV summer motorized and winter motorized have been in discussions for years on the timing for trail usage. Initially timing was set up for no usage during calving season. Since then they've haggled back and forth and came up with summer motorized closed April 30<sup>th</sup>, open July 1<sup>st</sup>. Then it was changed to closed March 15<sup>th</sup> as it currently sits. A letter from the AOHVA (Alberta Off Highway Vehicle Association) and ASA (Alberta Snowmobile Association) have requested that the closure of trails to summer motorized in the Upper Clearwater / Ram PLUZ at Onion Lake, Ranger Creek and Scalp Creek be changed once again to be February 1<sup>st</sup>. This is supported by both associations. We will honour this decision and make the changes to the brochure.

### **Change of Trail Usage**

The volunteer through Adopt-A-Trail, who adopted the old Clearwater Horse Trail, has expressed concerns. It is currently a multi-use trail but he is requesting that it be changed to non-motorized. This trail is not very friendly to OHVs as they can only use portions and is a dead end for them. This was put forth to Steering, Standing and now Steering again with no prior objections so movement was to agree to change as such.

Summer motorized representative voiced concerns and was strongly opposed to the change to non-motorized. It is a good trail to come in from the trunk road to a couple of fishing spots. Large concern over what is felt to be no benefit with the steady loss of OHV trails while the OHV clubs are consistently doing a lot of work. The clubs feel like they are putting in enormous effort already, there's just not enough numbers. A question was brought up as to a request for additional trails that was submitted by the OHV group a few years back and where that is sitting today? SRD will bring this to the Steering Committee and check as to the status of that request.

Kiska/Willson – there's no money, no volunteers and no enforcement, how do you keep from closing the trails? If a volunteer group willing to put in the time and effort in that area were to come to SRD the suggestion box would definitely be opened. It is a good argument by the OHV crowd that trail numbers are dwindling, potentially there is room for that group. Suggestion that all groups, motorized and non-motorized need to maintain the trails and that it should become part of putting something back in. Perhaps have SRD organize a yearly gathering of volunteers from all user groups and to pick the trail that will get worked on that year, different one the next year, etc.

Result of discussions – this issue for the Old Clearwater Trail will be brought back to Steering and be looked into further prior to making any decision. Possibility to have a single point destination similar to Bench Camp? Summer motorized rep. would agree to that.

A request was put forth to close the Kidd Creek / Joyce River Trail due to bighorn sheep in the vicinity at the last Standing meeting and was brought forth to Steering. By closing that site, however, you also close off two loops. It was suggested that we put up counters but we already have had them and know the usage. Unsure of the impacts to the sheep but wonder if any impacts are due to the usage or to the large number of sheep permits given for that area. Would like to see ideas to turn it into a corridor to prevent people from veering off. Something that keeps the machines on the trail but doesn't prevent the sheep from getting across. Also need to take into consideration that volunteer groups have put a lot of effort, time and money into that loop. Possible winter closures as there is very little use in the winter? F&W to look into why so many permits are being given at that site. We need more information prior to making any decision. Perhaps some signage describing why it is a critical site would help. Will be looking at this carefully and bringing to next Steering meeting.

### **CTR Trail Maintenance**

Designated equestrian trails are not multi-use, how to perform maintenance? Small equipment would be allowed to come in to perform maintenance duties only and could be signed as such so that there is no public misconception. SRD has been encouraging the CTR holders to put something back into their trails, so far it's been mostly chainsaw work.

### **FOESA Update**

\*\*Update given – please see attachment.

Ya Ha Tinda. – trail signs are planned. Would prefer natural looking markers with directions and distances on trails around the ranch. Any signs on public land need authorization.

Hummingbird – cleanup manure and hay, spread gravel under the highlines. Pile manure at the drop off site. Vacuum the outhouses.

### **Open Floor**

Is there any plans for signage, markings for trails around Nordegg? Nordegg is located right at the northwest corner of the Kiska/Willson PLUZ and there are trails that connect up from Nordegg to the SRD trails.

Signage on the highway for entering the Bighorn Backcountry? Would like to see something large and hard to miss. SRD has tried but Transportation did not want it in their right of way. Any signage they would allow would make the sign useless as it would be too long to read while driving by. We would have to somehow get it away from the right of way yet still visible.

**Next Standing Committee Meeting Date – February 6, 2012**