

Bighorn Backcountry Access Management Plan Monitoring: Standing Committee

Meeting Summary

November 26, 2003
Rocky Mountain House

In Attendance

Jack Walker	Calvin Rakach	Loyal Ma	Mike Adolph
Deb Schroderous	Rob Hunter	James Brady	Nathan Moore
Dennis Schafer	Clarence Stewart	Jimmy Wildman	Christie Clark
Bob Haagsma	Kristin McKenzie	Harlan Dixon	Lorne Hindbo
Bonnie Brewer	Ken Zelt		
Yvette Choma	Don Livingston	Derry Armstrong	Eldon Bruns
Lisa Block	Ron Taylor		

Chairperson

Butch Shenfield

Regrets

Greg Mallo	Richard Smith	Jeff Willson	Bob Long
Rick Artzen	Derek Durocher	Philip Lacerte	Doug Ritchie
Cheri Adolph	Ken Schroderous	R.W. (Bobby) Turner	

Introduction:

Butch Shenfield thanked everyone for attending the meeting. Round-table introductions were completed, with individuals identifying their user group and their position of representative or alternate. The agenda for the meeting was reviewed.

Youth Member Application:

Youth Member Kristin McKenzie was introduced to the Standing Committee. Kristin completed the Youth Member application in 2003 while a high school student. She is currently attending her first year of college and is highly involved in the outdoors. Members welcomed Kristin to the Standing Committee.

Activities, Enforcement and Signing:

Generally, it appears that the Forest Land Use Zones and the Forest Recreation Regulations are being discussed amongst users. Recently the area has begun to see the

changing of the seasons from summer activities to winter activities. With the recent snow, users will be preparing for snow vehicle use that was not seen during this time in 2002 due to lack of snow. Currently, it is fairly quiet at Hummingbird Forest Recreation Area (FRA); however, snow vehicle use can begin on the Ranger Creek Trail, other trails and random sledding areas on December 1, 2003 and user numbers should increase.

During this year's hunting season, general compliance was good. A few problems existed with outfitters and recreational hunters driving on-highway vehicles on trails in the Kiska/Willson Forest Land Use Zone (FLUZ). The signs at Onion Lake and Canary Creek Trails regarding on-highway vehicles now have written descriptions (e.g., campers, trailers) with reflective lettering for better understanding and more visibility. Large rocks at Crescent Falls FRA, Onion Lake Trail, and Canary Creek Trail have been placed to prevent on-highway vehicles from proceeding beyond the signs.

Beam counters and infra-red counters have been placed in several areas. Some beam counters may be triggered by heavy snowfall, causing them to give false counts. These counters have been changed to infra-red counters that determine the date, time and user-type (e.g., mountain bike, off-highway vehicle, hiker). More counters have been purchased, and will be placed on trails to count off-highway vehicles and snow vehicles this winter. It was suggested that counter summaries could be posted on the Bighorn Backcountry website, which will be done after the down-loading and analysis is completed, probably by February 2004.

Volunteer registrations gathered at the Nordegg Ranger Station indicated a steady increase of use over the past five years between May and October on the Pinto Lake Trail. The number of unregistered users is unknown for this trail and other trails and areas in the Bighorn Backcountry. Volunteer trail survey boxes will be installed on various trails in 2004, with the hopes of capturing more user numbers.

Concern was raised regarding the Ranger Creek Trail and the Ranger Creek Random Sledding Area, and the sheep habitat. It was recommended that signs be placed indicating the random sledding area boundaries, and "Snow Vehicles Only" signs should be placed in this random sledding area. Sustainable Resource Development staff will look into placing these signs as well as determining boundaries of other random sledding areas with the support of snow vehicle users.

Hummingbird Forest Recreation Area Concept Plan

The draft *Hummingbird Forest Recreation Area Concept Plan* was distributed to all members for review and endorsement. The Hummingbird FRA requires future attention due to the number of users, and the present and future amenities. The Hummingbird FRA Concept Plan will provide a broad blueprint for future development of recreational facilities. The draft plan was prepared based on input from the Standing Committee in June and September 2003, and the Steering Committee in August and October 2003.

The draft concept plan was reviewed, beginning with the cover letter to Alberta Sustainable Resource Development (SRD), followed by the *1.0 Introduction* and *2.0 Background*. Sections *3.0 Planning Directions* and *4.0 Existing Conditions* describe the potential development recommendations from Standing and Steering Committee members, and the assessment of the current situation. Section *5.0 Potential New Sites* is a record for future reference to describe why development did or did not occur.

Section *6.0 Concept Plan* will include both currently existing and new sites, with sites to accommodate both tents/smaller units and larger units. A maximum of 130 units will be accommodated, with new sites being built prior to closing and reclaiming less-desirable sites. It was suggested to sign the closed sites as being “reclaimed” rather than “closed” for user information of the sites. The FRA will be more rustic than a Provincial Recreation Area (PRA), with users responsible for site clean up and removal of their garbage.

Staging Areas for parking and unloading will be in a central area with toilets and information signs, and will not permit camping in the parking area. The gravel pit (DRS 010012) will be ploughed for winter parking, as the road west-bound into the FRA and further west-bound will not be ploughed. Permanent toilets will require approval, as only portable toilets have currently been approved. Three permanent toilets and three tanks have been made available for installation by a user group, keeping in mind the ground is not yet frozen.

Sites F, G, H or J will be developed as new campsites, with all sites requiring toilets and H or J requiring an equestrian water supply. Toward the west, Sites A, B and C were favored as tenting sites, with B being appropriate for possible lockers and poles for food storage and hanging. The design of the “typical campsites” provides economically built campsites and the opportunity for a large group to have individual sites but still remain together. The intent is to place fire rings in the open and away from vegetation, and deter users from putting horses in the trees. Some sites will have facilities for specific users (i.e., tenting, equestrian), with specific provisions for encouraging use (i.e., hitching rails, gravel tent pads). A set of standard designs will be used throughout the FRA (i.e., toilets, hitching rails, etc.).

In section *7.0 Other Recommendations*, the Wildlife Corridor recommendation states that the wildlife corridor is very important. The valley tends to pinch around the current FRA, and it is important to keep overnight camping outside the corridor, as facilities in the more critical part of the corridor will not be expanded. It was recommended between the period of December 1st to July 1st, no overnight camping should be permitted in the west portion of the FRA for wildlife conservation. Overnight activities are the main concern, but travel through the area would be permitted on the trails. Closure may also be dependent on the harshness of the winter season and the movement of the wildlife. Page 13 *Wildlife Corridor*, second paragraph could have the word “will” replaced by the word “may.” Concerns were raised that this would conflict with spring campers and meeting participants debated whether the impacts were significant enough to warrant closing the area for that time period. After some discussion, it will be taken back to the Steering Committee, but no consensus was achieved to implement this closure.

Concern was raised regarding roadside corridor sanctuaries and wildlife corridors, and it was confirmed that regulations differ between the two. Wildlife corridors are used in the context of areas where wildlife commonly travel versus a corridor sanctuary that is a legal closure of an area for hunting.

Concern was raised regarding equestrian users not having appropriate or enough campsites available during the months when off-highway vehicle traffic is not permitted.

Concern was raised regarding Commercial Trail Riding (CTR) operations, and past wildlife problems (i.e., bears shot in camp, wildlife attraction to salt blocks). Currently, the wildlife are tolerable of the human presence, but future CTR operations and possible operator change and expansion may become a concern.

Page 13 *Circulation Trail*, the concept is to have all trails connected and offer alternate access to trails other than using the road. A few areas would require development to encourage users off the main road, and a detailed inventory is required.

Guardian Site building is in place near the staging area, and is to be used by SRD staff on patrol.

Page 14 *Commercial Outfitter's Base Camps* will encourage a single site.

Road Repairs have been completed by Clearwater County, and speed limit signs are in place. The county is commended on the excellent work completed and the promptness with which they addressed a deteriorating condition.

Page 15 *Manure Collection* will be designated sites that are convenient for users to encourage use.

Stock Watering and Potable Water indicates that areas far from the creek may require wells to be drilled.

Boundary recommends Highway 734 (Forestry Trunk Road) in the east to the unnamed creek in the west, and north side of the river to be included in the FRA. Within the boundaries of the FRA, users cannot hunt or discharge a firearm, or dress game. Concern was raised with current hunting areas surrounding the FRA, and it was noted that hunting could be permitted with some restrictions. It was recommended the Steering Committee look at the FRA boundary, and several members of the Standing Committee will meet with some Steering Committee members to resolve this issue. It was noted that the FRA regulations are to protect the users from the potential wildlife altercations inside a recreation area, and for safety concerns as a popular gathering area of people where discharging firearms may pose a hazard.

Section 8.0 *Priorities* are listed as high, medium or low by the Steering Committee.

Appendix defines background information used for the preparation of the concept plan.

Ron Taylor will lead the service implementation (i.e., toilets, signs), and members are to forward volunteer equipment, products, etc. to Ron for implementation. Four Standing Committee members will meet with Ron to discuss the service requirements and implementation. A set of standards for services requires development, and there is concern whether future maintenance of these services can be sustained.

A formal document will be developed to ensure maintenance funds and/or maintenance work to be completed in the future.

Friends of the Hummingbird or Bighorn or a similar group is required, and this group will need to evaluate the management of fund raising, maintenance schedule for services, etc. It is possible a contractor could be hired to collect fees, maintenance funds, etc. A permit system for users was discussed, that could be based on the number of different uses of the individual. Concern was raised that First Nations may not want to pay fees or permits and it was not clear whether they should.

Endorsement: Subject to final editing of the document based on the above discussion, the concept plan received endorsement from all members present. On Page 15, the recommendation of the FRA boundary and the boundary line on the concept plan map will be blocked out and re-considered based on the recommendations of a subcommittee led by Eldon Bruns. The subcommittee will consider the impact of the boundary location on hunting activities. In the concept plan, it was recommended to put a border around the topics of hunting and critical wildlife periods, as these issues require further discussion to resolve. The issue of seasonal camping closures will be reviewed by Steering Committee members for resolution, with consideration for spring campers.

Off-Highway Vehicle Presentation

A video of proper off-highway riding was presented to the members. The video presented concerns of watershed crossing, travel on a trail, and other ethical concerns.

Ya Ha Tinda/Scalp Creek Proposed Trail

The proposed trail near the Ya Ha Tinda Ranch and into Scalp Creek Natural Area was discussed. This trail was approved with the original Bighorn Backcountry Access Management Plan with conditions that users would require a permit for any off-highway vehicle and/or snow vehicle use, within a timeline of January 1st to April 30th. This area has a high population of elk, deer, bears, cougars, and other wildlife. Wildlife winter range and related behaviors, as well as high elevation poses significant challenges to implementing this route. Overall concerns remain the conflicts between users and the environmental impact.

The trail timeline would ease conflicts with summer users and fall hunters.

Scalp Creek Natural Area contains pockets of permafrost that require protection. The trail in this area would be restricted to the old access road surface, which alleviates much of the natural feature protection concerns. This same old roadbed provides access on the north portion of the trail, while development of some new trail would be required in the south half around Ya Ha Tinda Ranch.

The draft ***Ya Ha Tinda to Scalp Creek Trail*** was reviewed, and the following concerns and recommendations were brought forward:

- *Conditions*, Item 1 it was suggested that “dusk to dawn” criteria replace actual hours. Set times on the permit could also be based on the sunrise/sunset table.
- Item 2, the minimum group of five units will encourage user peer pressure to abide by the regulations of the permit. There is concern that some people do not understand the critical nature of wildlife issues. A maximum number of units will be listed, and clarification will be required on the maximum number of units per permit, and the distance between units when traveling. It was suggested to place conditions on a sign at the parking lot, and have a brochure given with the permit.
- Item 9, snow pack is desired to prevent erosion of fine and shallow soils, with snow vehicles preferred over off-highway vehicles (i.e., quad) due to the tires of an off-highway vehicle. Stumping would also be required for off-highway vehicle use but not for snow vehicle use. It was agreed for the first year of the trail, only snow vehicles would be permitted on the trail. It was also mentioned with a snow-vehicle-only trail and designation to enforce an Alberta Snowmobile Association (ASA) permit, funds could be re-directed to trail maintenance from the ASA. This would require approval from the minister of SRD.
- Items 6, 7 and 8 could be combined into one point.
- Under *Guidelines*, Item 1 indicates the need to monitor and evaluate the trail after each permit use and prior to the next permit, to ensure trail and wildlife recovery.
- Item 3: Closure due to bear or wolf kills would persist until the carcass is naturally cleaned up or naturally removed.
- Item 5 indicates prolonged cold weather may alter permit availability.
- Item 6 indicates compensation is not available to investing user groups should the trail be closed.
- Under *Trail Enhancement/Development*, Item 1 indicates trees will act as a screen for noise and traffic.
- Item 7 will allow for passing on the trail, and allow snow to fall through the tree canopy on to the trail.
- Item 9 indicates hand or horse cuts are acceptable, with the possibility of a track hoe. Dozers will not be acceptable. It was suggested that an off-highway vehicle could be used to remove timber once the trail was packed. Details of specific equipment can be worked out with the inspecting forest officer.

Concerns were raised regarding the potential damage from equestrian use, and that the trail will be highly scrutinized. It was suggested to entirely use the old trail, rather than build portions of new trail; however, the old trail passes onto the Ya Ha Tinda Ranch and the federal government is not receptive to this idea. Signs indicating “Stay on the Trail or Permission Revoked” were suggested. The Alberta Snowmobile Association (ASA) has such signs that meet their national standard and could likely be used.

Eagle Creek Forest Recreation Area

Derry Armstrong is requesting input from members. Several members will contact Derry directly, so he can begin designing a concept plan, which can then be presented at the next Standing Committee meeting.

Dual Sport Definition

The handout *Dual Sport Motorcycle Use in the Bighorn* was distributed and discussed. Concern was raised that a dual sport motorcycle meets the full definition of an off-highway vehicle, in regards to curb weight, tire pressure, wheelbase and width. However, legal use of a dual sport motorcycle would require a change in the Forest Recreation Regulations, which refers only to an off-highway vehicle registration. After a discussion covering what differences of impacts could be expected, this topic will be referred to the Steering Committee with the possibility of amending the regulation. The Steering Committee will need to confer with adjacent SRD Forest Areas that may be affected by such an amendment, followed by provincial review for support.

Bighorn Backcountry Website

The Bighorn Backcountry website was reviewed. Under “Monitoring” and “Before and After,” photos depict trail conditions prior to repair and after repair. Photos of this same nature could be placed on the website. Please send photos and a small description to Yvette Choma.

The Premier’s Award

Alberta SRD is applying for a Premier’s Award for the Public Relations and Communication portion of the Bighorn Backcountry Access Management Plan. Lisa Block is preparing the document to be submitted in January 2004. In June 2004 it will be announced if the application has been successful.

Off-Highway and Snow Vehicle Use

The use of off-highway vehicles on trails with snow, and subsequent snow ruts was discussed. There are safety concerns of dog sleds and snow vehicles being flipped or damaged when riding or crossing these snow ruts. As this is mainly a conflict or potential conflict between off-highway vehicle users and snow vehicle users, those members of the Standing Committee will discuss the timing or snow conditions when off-highway vehicles should not be using the trail.

Public Consultation of Users

A short presentation was given regarding the Big Horn Campground near the Ya Ha Tinda area, and the problem of tree mortality due to incorrect horse high-lines or horses being tied directly to trees. Posters of proper high-lines with diagrams are posted in the campground and outhouses, but some users do not take note. Also, trail braiding is an issue, and Friends of the Eastern Slopes is working with the federal government regarding this issue.

A member of the Friends of the Eastern Slopes interviewed users at the Hummingbird and Eagle Creek FRAs and the Ya Ha Tinda area between July and September, 2003. From interviewing users and walking these areas, the following points were brought forward for planning interest:

- the majority of users interviewed desire multi-use facilities and multi-use trails;
- manure disposal or manure collection areas in convenient areas are appropriate;
- it should be made known that horses are not to be fed in the trees, as feed remains on the ground after the user leaves the site;
- when designing the campground, horses require a designated area away from the trees;
- incorrect high picket lines or horses being tied directly to trees may result in tree death.

The next meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, February 25, 2004.