

Bighorn Backcountry Access Management Plan

Monitoring: Standing Committee

February 20, 2008

Rocky Mountain House Super 8 Motel

In Attendance

Cal Rakach	Kristin McKenzie	Ken Qually	Roger Marvin
James Brady	Dick Wymenga	Clarence Stewart	John Evans
Phil Lacerte	Justin Ellis	Yvette Choma	Derry Armstrong
Chiara Feder	Myles Jensen	Jim Wildman	

Chairperson

Wayne Crocker

Regrets

Bob Long	Rob Hunter	Bernie Schmitte	Cory Wojtowicz
Rick Artzen	Marvin Abraham	Jeff Baltzer	Dennis Schafer
Ken Schroderous	Elder Rock Abraham	R.W. (Bobby) Turner	Christie Clark
Jeff Wilson	Steve Taylor	Robin McDonald	Deb Schroderous
Rob Popowich	Don Livingston	Mike Adolph	Derek Durocher
Kevin Gagne	Brent Young	Loyal Ma	Sandi Phillips
Doug Ritchie	Lorne Hindbo	Brent Young	Kevin Wirtanen

Introduction

Wayne Crocker thanked everyone for attending the meeting. Dick Wymenga, Clearwater County Alternate was introduced to the group. Round table introductions were completed.

Activities, Enforcement and Signing

Late in fall 2007, a few offences occurred at the Coral Creek area. Next month, individuals will be appearing in court resulting from illegal activities. Charges involve off-highway vehicle use on trail used by trappers in the Coral Creek area and hunting of Bighorn Sheep. In the Upper Clearwater/Ram Forest Land Use Zone some off-highway vehicles are using trails frequented by trappers, as these trails are not signed by the trappers. The two trappers who have posted signs are not experiencing unauthorized use by other off-highway vehicle users who are genuinely lost.

Concerns include the following:

- individuals hunting and fishing are required to know the regulations, and those travelling in Bighorn Backcountry also need to know the regulations;
- a trail identification problem and solution was identified several years, but most trappers are not posting signs to help alleviate this problem;
- a genuinely lost individual is a different circumstance than an individual who is knowingly non-compliant;
- the government should “*get the big stick out*” for offenders as the Bighorn Backcountry has been legislated for five years with five years of education with signs and brochures, and
- off-highway vehicle use on trails during the winter months becomes an issue when off-highway vehicle tires damage the snow-groomed trails.

The Coliseum Trail Staging Area is moved to a new location in the northeast corner of the Nordegg North Subdivision. The trail leading from the former staging area travels through private residences due to acreage lot sales. Clearwater County has moved the public burning area from the northeast corner of the Nordegg North Subdivision to the northwest area. Signs will be installed to indicate the new staging area and the new non-motorized trail.

The Department has received letters from different users regarding specific trails for specific users. The Nordegg area trails are becoming an issue in regards to different users on the trails at the same time. Clearwater County is not interested in enforcing these issues within the Hamlet of Nordegg, due to having only two officers for the entire county. Don Livingston has met with the county to discuss recreation trails that lead from or into Nordegg.

In 2007, TransAlta approached Don regarding their concerns of public safety, damage to the Bighorn Dam area and garbage remaining. Lawyers from both the Department and TransAlta are looking into the liability of public users on TransAlta’s Water Development Licence (WLD). Due to a 2007 fatality at the Brazeau Dam, there are considerations of closures to specific areas and a formal recreation development node.

A forest land use zone sign is required at the east entry into the Kiska/Willson Forest Land Use Zone. However, difficulties are being experienced with permission from Alberta Transportation and the number of words permitted on a sign.

Upper Clearwater / Ram Trail Inventory & Plan

As the forest recreation area concept plans are completed for this time, trail planning within the forest land use zones is the next process. The purpose of a plan is to assess the trail conditions and identify management approaches. In 2007, the standing committee chose the Upper Clearwater/Ram Forest Land Use Zone as the area to begin trail planning. As a group, the standing and steering committees must decide on an approach or direction.

A trail inventory was completed in 2007, and Derry Armstrong distributed the results. Trail inventory was completed with measurements, locations, routes, identification of problems, surface materials, and special features including destination areas.

The inventory process was a collaboration of both office documents and field inventory. A total of 40 trails were inventoried, with 33 trails being inventoried in the field. Assessment conditions are classified as GOOD, OKAY and POOR and include the following considerations:

- many trails exist around the Hummingbird Forest Recreation Area;
- many trails lead to destination areas;
- specific areas have a combination of POOR trails and GOOD trails;
- GOOD trails are generally located in higher areas and on well-drained soil;
- POOR trails generally include trail braiding, erosion on steep slopes and wet ground conditions;
- definite changing use patterns exist where there is decreased traffic and camping a far distance from staging areas and increased day rides on trails close to staging areas;
- some trails or trail sections have lack of maintenance;
- some trail inventories are incomplete, and
- recommendations from the inventory process include trail plan preparation to address management, completion of the trail inventory, and inventory of non-traditional trails including river routes, dog sledding, vertical trails and mountain bike trails.

Comments from the standing committee include the following:

- The trail classifications of GOOD, OKAY and POOR are not objective and it was questioned if we have a solid government template for trail inventories. Other Canadian and non-Canadian templates have been reviewed with a provincial vision of an objective trail assessment and a public data base.
- There is frustration resulting in the making the decisions after the inventory is completed.
- Complete the field inventory of current trails and also the non-traditional trails. Continue to update the maps and brochures with the new inventory information
- Net loss or gain of trails: did these trails previously exist and were not on the map? Much linear disturbance exists and are these current listed as trails or are promoted as trails although are unsuitable as trails? What do we want for trails for the various user groups?
- It needs to be considered that a clearing in the trees being may not be the best trail, and consider where we want users to travel. Some traditional pack trails may not be currently used but may be a higher and drier better trail than the current wet and low trail. Therefore, determine what should be the primary trail and what should be the secondary trail. Consider repair, reclamation or moving of secondary trails to better locations.
- Continue with monitoring plots and add some new plots due to new trails, reconstruction of existing trails and watercourse changes on trails.
- User conflicts may be resulting from different expectations, due to lack of information regarding trail experiences. Therefore, possibly recommend the experiences that a trail can provide to a user.
- Despite signs installed by First Nations, off-highway vehicles continue to travel on First Nations land without authority and vandalism may result. It was suggested to inform the public where they can travel rather than where they cannot travel.

- In regards to TrafX counters on trails, recommend the Department decides appropriate re-set dates for counters, to ensure data can be compared year-to-year on the same dates. Also assess and monitor fish and wildlife information as it is always changing. Collect data for a baseline to be used for future references in the monitoring and impacts on fish and wildlife. The R11 Forest Management Plan and data survey should be considered when assessing fish and wildlife. Methodology to collect data should be developed.
- Consider the impact on fish and wildlife when considering trail locations, both on land and waterbodies. Some referral maps for sensitive areas and guidelines on operations are available.
- Trailhead signs and directional signs at major intersections are necessary.
- Information or interpretative signs: we need to determine the balance between information and the wilderness setting and the financial cost of interpretative signs. These signs may increase the saddle time for riders, without adding additional kilometers of trail. Information at a trailhead may be mentally lost by the user after time on a trail and the final approach to a destination area without an interpretative sign. Interpretative signs may be a place to tell of the area's history and better the experience for new-comers to the area.
- Trails inventoried and defined as OKAY or POOR require attention and how to get these trails maintained to a GOOD standard.
- Appropriate heavy equipment may be better than hand labor as fewer hours are required, fewer people are required, and volunteers are less prone to burn out. Ensure the equipment is the correct size for the job required. Both Parks Canada and Tourism, Parks, Recreation and Culture use equipment and helicopters to build and maintain non-motorized trails. Timing restrictions for use of heavy equipment may be required due to the season and ground conditions. Also consider wildlife concerns including timing restrictions, calving seasons, etc.
- Completion of work can be achieved through partnerships between users. However, the government needs to contribute more funds to "*get the job done right.*"
- Many trails frequented by equestrian users are not being maintained. It was questioned if equestrian users and motorized users would work together on maintaining non-motorized trails. Previously, Friends of the Eastern Slopes donated funds to motorized organizations, and other organizations have access to heavy equipment. Prior to 2002, some current non-motorized trails were accessed by motorized traffic. It was questioned how to repair non-motorized trails.
- There is a lot of trail maintenance and repair required. Priorities need to be established.
- When building trails, a standard must be established. Recreation Corridor and Trails Designation Program is seeking a set of standards for all types of trails. Caution is advised if using the word "standards" and possibly the word "guidelines" should be used. The users on the trail need to be considered in regards to trail width, as well as the possibility of multi users on the same trail at the same time.

- It was questioned the options if a trail is very POOR: close it? utilize the funds and manpower in another area? If a trail section is closed it should not be left in disarray and should have some attempt of reclamation. The word “reclamation” should be used in place of “closure” to inform the users of volunteer and reclamation efforts.
- In regards to self maintenance, permission should be given to remove a fallen tree or add some rocks in a soft area. This should be explained as a self maintenance trail.
- On-going maintenance is recommended. Routine and small problems that are not repaired or maintained become large problems. The Adopt-A-Trail program is a good way to encourage routine maintenance. It was recommended to follow the same principles and collaborative discussion used for the forest recreation areas.
- Liability coverage for volunteer stewards only requires approval of the Department. Kevin Wirtanen is involved in this project. Some organizations were tired of waiting for the government to approve liability coverage, and paid for their own liability insurance. Tourism, Parks, Recreation and Culture has such a volunteer agreement that has been in place for 20 years.
- In the actual document, trails need to be “*viewed as a clean slate.*” Problems can be anticipated with the removal and addition of trails in the future. Planning will be different for each area.
- It was asked where to insert comments regarding trails that were formerly loop trails and are now one-way trails. Could this be addressed in this document as well as the five-year review.
- It should be included the liability of volunteers and the procedure of a trail being chosen as a trail.
- On the front pictures of the document, change some of the photographs.

The next steps include the following:

- Derry will consider these comments as he prepares a draft trail plan;
- the draft trail plan will be presented to standing and steering committees;
- the standing committee will make recommendations to the Department, with the Department making the final decisions;
- the R11 Forest Management Plan document should be considered;
- the Calgary office is writing the plan for the Panther Corner Forest Land Use Zone.

Nordegg Area Access Management

Due to the ever increasing number of trails in the Kiska/Willson Forest Land Use Zone, seasonal guardians will begin an inventory of the trails and linear disturbances. Adopt-A-Trail members will be asked to use a GPS when working on their trail maintenance.

This summer, a seasonal guardian will be placed in Nordegg.

Trails to Rails Program

Clearwater County has set aside funds to develop the rail line from Nordegg to Rocky Mountain House as a multi-use trail. There is the potential for funds from the Government of Alberta. Generally, the trail line is in good shape, with liability issues regarding the trestles or lack of trestles.

May Long Weekend 2008

Enforcement agencies have begun planning for the long weekend. The Alberta Off-Highway Vehicle Association has requested the closure of the Bighorn Dam area during this weekend, in favor of protecting the efforts of the volunteer trail stewards. It was asked what would be considered an acceptable window of closure and advanced notice required if weather and ground conditions were acceptable for travel. It was recommended a decision be made well in advance and not the last minute, due to enforcement requirements and time frames for information being given to the public. Due to this annual problem, timing restrictions may be required to protect the efforts of the volunteers and the trail. This area is easy to sign due to the bottle-neck entry to the trail. With displacement being an issue, it was asked if the Department would consider an area of larger closure. The standing committee recommended the Bighorn Dam area be closed for the May Long Weekend 2008. As all users have an impact on the land and especially on inappropriate trail conditions, it was recommended this area closure include motorized and non-motorized users. A communications plan will be required. These recommendations will be brought forward to the Department. Further communications will be brought to the standing committee members so user groups may be contacted with appropriate information. It was asked if the wording could be brought to the members by April 15, due to an upcoming meeting for a user group.

Five Year Review

Rob Popowich is currently working on the terms of reference. It needs to be ensured that items of present day are captured in the five-year review process.

Open Floor

The Department has a booth at the upcoming Red Deer Sportsman Show. This year, the booth will be shared with staff from Fish & Wildlife Division.

It was requested to obtain STARS landing sites for the Cutoff Creek, Eagle Creek and Hummingbird Forest Recreation Areas and the Bighorn campground. Wayne will check with Parks Canada regarding the Bighorn Campground, and with province regarding the public lands areas.

The trail and area frequented by campers near the South Ram Lookout has become a problem area in regards to remaining garbage and many overnight camps. It was asked if this area could be designated a day-use area without overnight camping. All motorized and non-motorized users could leave horses and off-highway vehicles in a designated area and proceed on foot to the destination area. This area is not a destination area if campers are in this area overnight. This same request is similar to the area near Hummingbird Falls where established but inappropriate campsites were moved away from the falls to a more appropriate area. A more appropriate remote camping area could be promoted, rather than promoting random camping in every area. There is concern that staging areas with facilities for camping will not be used when other random camping areas are promoted. A balance is required.

Weeds and excess hay in the manure disposal site at the Bighorn Campground and Eagle Creek Forest Recreation Area continue to be a problem. Friends of the Eastern Slopes spent \$5000 in 2007 to maintain the manure disposal sites which contain mostly hay. This situation may become a problem in the forest recreation areas. Guardians are talking to users, but the standing committee requests the support of the Department in regards to enforcement and tickets for non-compliance. Tremendous education has been done in five years, with considerable funds spent on services and facilities for users. However, volunteer organizations are "*not winning the lottery*" to maintain these services and facilities and these organizations can do only so much with current funds. User fees with funds directed towards staging area and trail maintenance would accommodate these costs. Volunteer organizations feel the same people participate in the membership and funding drives, but more is required. Excess signing and the appropriate message is always a concern. Signs posted inside toilet facilities seem to be successful. It was recommend to post informative points that include the costs and new facilities contributed by volunteers.

Despite signs, newsletters and information as outlined in the Bighorn Backcountry brochure, horses are still tied and highlined to trees. The result is dead and dying trees. Electric fences are also used, but these are not permitted in the forest recreation areas. A great improvement has been noticed at the Bighorn Campground where horses are not allowed to be tied or highlined to trees. Some of the treed area has been roped off, signed as "protected area" and is not used by the public. Volunteer organizations have only so much money to spend on public educational tools, installation services and maintenance of these services. If users are not compliant despite the five years of education, it was suggested enforcement actions may be required. It needs to be considered that the Bighorn Backcountry and the forest recreation areas are always getting busier, and forest recreation areas need to be protected for the future generations.

Signs in the Bighorn Reserve continue to be vandalized or removed without authorization. Off-highway vehicle users with alcoholic beverages is also a problem.

The next meeting will be held on June 4, 2008.