

Bighorn Backcountry Access Management Plan

Monitoring: Standing Committee

Meeting Summary

February 25, 2004

Rocky Mountain House Museum

In Attendance

Jack Walker	Loyal Ma	Doug Ritchie	Jeff Wilson
Deb Schroderous	James Brady	Bonnie Calf Robe	Lorne Hindbo
Dennis Schafer	Clarence Stewart	Norman McCallum	Bonnie Brewer
Bob Haagsma	Kristin McKenzie	Harlan Dixon	Ken Zelt
Yvette Choma	Don Livingston	Derry Armstrong	Eldon Bruns
Ron Taylor	Jim Allen	Anne Anderson	

Chairperson

Butch Shenfield

Regrets

Greg Mallo	Richard Smith	Bob Long	Rob Hunter
Rick Artzen	Derek Durocher	Philip Lacerte	Jimmy Wildman
Cheri Adolph	Ken Schroderous	Nathan Moore	R.W. (Bobby) Turner
Calvin Rakach	Mike Adolph	Christie Clark	Lisa Block

Introduction

Butch Shenfield thanked everyone for attending the meeting. Round-table introductions were completed, with individuals identifying their user group.

It was explained that to ensure confidentiality, names of Standing Committee members were not previously specified to comments in the summary notes as these summary notes are posted on the Bighorn Backcountry website. Standing Committee members agreed to have specific comments in the summary notes recorded without names listed.

The agenda for the meeting was reviewed. It was commented that the word “scalp” written in “Scalp Creek Trail” was an insult to the native people. The words “Ya Ha” written in “Ya Ha Tinda” do not fit into the Stoney native language, with tinda meaning

an open area. Currently, these two names are taken from provincial maps. The history and spelling of these two names will be reviewed.

Activities, Enforcement and Signing

Overall, snow vehicle activities are lower than anticipated in both in the Bighorn Backcountry and outside this area. Trails staging from the Hummingbird and Cuffoff Creek Forest Recreation Areas have been quiet. During the Family Day weekend, rallies in Nordegg, Caroline, Sherwood Park and Sylvan Lake took place, creating competition for the Nordegg rally. With the anticipated spring snow, the number of snow vehicles should increase.

General enforcement and compliance has been good. Currently, the most common issue is snow vehicles with valid insurance and registration, with compliance getting better over time.

Ice climbing is very active in the David Thompson corridor. An inquiry had been made regarding highway pull-out parking areas along Highway 11. Don Livingston will contact Alberta Infrastructure regarding snow removal on current highway pull-out parking areas that do not receive snow removal. Clearwater County will be contacted regarding snow removal on the Crescent Falls road.

Signs indicating trails used by trappers are currently being printed. These signs will be posted upon completion.

Monitoring and User Statistics

Ron Taylor distributed statistic summaries, representing the general trail usage on selected trails in the Bighorn Backcountry. Currently, two types of trail counters are being used:

- Infrared Trail Counters; and
- TrafX (off-highway vehicle counters).

Infrared Trail Counters measure warm objects passing through an emitted beam, and store the information with the date and time. TrafX counters make use of the magnetic field when a metallic object passes through the field. After recent discussions with the manufacturer representative of the counters, some TrafX counters may be moved from the center of the trail to the side of a trail. These counters will be moved in 2004 to increase the accuracy of the count. Counter information is regularly compiled in Rocky Mountain House, with representative graphs to appear on the Bighorn Backcountry website.

Currently, the Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) has counters in place, and their counter information is being compared to the above counter information.

Recommendations were made regarding the placement of some counters, closure dates of the trapping season, and wagon transportation that may increase counter readings. Wolves with collars and horses with shoes may also set off a counter reading under unique circumstances.

Overall, trail monitoring will assist in evaluating trends, forecasting enforcement, and assessing previous trail damage and regeneration. It was asked if user numbers could be attained from helicopter companies. This summer, counters at fly-in trails will be installed, and forest guardians will complete “lake counts” at popular lake destinations. Trail questionnaires/self registrations will also be placed at trailheads.

Hummingbird Forest Recreation Area

The Hummingbird Forest Recreation Area Concept Plan has been developed, based on the recommendations of the Standing Committee to the Steering Committee. It is intended as a long-term plan for the area to accommodate present usage.

Ron Taylor and some Standing Committee members met to discuss service items and costs for 2004 installation and priority. Their focus will also be to have the service items financially installed and maintained, and how to distribute the work. All members are welcome to join this group.

Currently in the Hummingbird Forest Recreation Area, toilet installation is the first priority. The following areas are proposed sites for toilets to be installed in 2004:

- at the entrance for the 4-H site to serve groups in the 4-H site and the bowl area (one toilet facility);
- at the Hummingbird Falls area (two toilet facilities);
- at the extreme west end (one toilet facility); and
- at the small site in the open gravel area near the river flats (one toilet facility).

The snowmobile staging area (gravel pit) is identified as a possible area for a winter-use toilet (one toilet facility). It will be confirmed with Clearwater County if the road to the cabin and perimeter can be removed of snow, with the consideration to parking curb removal. The toilet in this area will be delayed until confirmation with the county.

The second consideration is the development of new campsites. Three sites in the west end will see clearing beginning in 2004:

- Site A;
- Site B, appropriate for smaller camping units and tents; and
- Hummingbird Falls area.

There were concerns regarding the wildlife corridor and the flood plain. It was confirmed that toilets will not be built on the flood plain, and that the “pinch-point areas” will not be developed. Eldon Bruns recommended day sites and not overnight sites in the areas of the wildlife corridor.

There was concern that the Hummingbird Forest Recreation Area is traditional native land, and the Stoney leaders and people were not consulted. It was confirmed that First Nation representation had been a part of the Standing Committee and previous

Public Advisory Committee that directed the development and plans for the Bighorn Backcountry Forest Land Use Zones. Currently, many people visit the area and the concept plan is intended to accommodate the present usage, improve the area, and protect the wildlife.

Eldon Bruns recommends only day use in Site C, to keep the wildlife corridor open for wildlife movement. There is concern that toilet installation may create a “permanency.” It was noted that toilet installations and opening of new areas will be followed by unsuitable areas being phased out. The rough trail along the river will need to be phased out in the future, to keep on-highway vehicles off and allow the trail to be properly reclaimed. Sites and access in Site C will be shifted to higher, more stable ground with solid reclamation on deteriorated portions. Emphasis needs to be more westerly focused on this particular site to draw away from identified wildlife corridors.

The potential for users to take their garbage to Ram Falls Provincial Recreation Area for disposal was expressed. It was suggested signs indicating garbage is the users’ responsibility should be posted. Big Horn Campground (located on federal land and cared for by Friends of the Eastern Slopes) has many signs regarding garbage, and print this message in their newsletters.

It was confirmed the recommendation for a seasonal closure on the west half of the forest recreation area will not be implemented at this time. For future records, the term “*will be closed*” has been changed to “*may be closed*.”

Jim Allen suggested the gravel pit area to the pinch-point area not be removed of snow due to wildlife issues. It was commented that the funds to install a toilet in this area are not large, and this appears to be the best area.

Don Livingston commented in previous heavy snow years, efforts have been made to remove snow to the Ram Falls area for additional parking. As a future possibility, an agreement may be made with Parks and Protected Areas and the campground operator.

The current legislation pertaining to the Hummingbird Forest Recreation Area does not permit the discharging of firearms, hunting, or trapping within the boundaries. Some Standing Committee members met with Don Livingston and Eldon Bruns in December, to discuss this issue. An amendment to the legislation will be required to permit the above activities within the boundaries. A disposition reservation (DRS) will be placed on the proposed boundary to hold the area until an amendment is finalized; therefore, the boundary to the forest recreation area will not be changed at this time. Current wildlife regulations regarding dangerous use of a firearm indicate that a firearm cannot be discharged across or along a road. Current Forest Recreation Regulations do not permit unsafe use of a firearm within the vicinity of a forest recreation area. It was recommended that trails be marked with signs that indicate the approach to a camping area. The road is currently the responsibility of Clearwater County, and the county will be contacted regarding appropriate signs for this road.

Several equestrian organizations have concerns regarding equestrian users in the Hummingbird Forest Recreation Area, and are requesting “equestrian only” campsites.

At a recent meeting of the Central Alberta Light Horse Association, seven of nine executive members present voted against multi-use campgrounds. Equestrian organizations are prepared to bring forward \$7500 towards this proposal, and they have the following concerns:

- safety: some horses are not desensitized to off-highway vehicles;
- site maintenance: other users may not want to camp in sites with manure; and
- Ya Ha Tinda is heavily used, and this proposed campsite may redistribute equestrian users.

Further discussion of all Standing Committee members included:

- Most horses have already acclimatized themselves to having motorized units in their vicinity and that others would follow suit.
- The size, number, and design of “camping nodes” should allow groups of like desires to be together in single nodes.
- Some groups prefer to mingle horses and off-highway vehicle users who travel together, and others prefer to group with equestrian or non-equestrian only for that time. Several people traveling together would likely dominate a node site that would likely take care of concerns (assuming everyone is properly sharing the individual allowed space).
- The valley has been used by multiple users for many years with ample opportunity to choose a clearing to satisfy the variety of users. There is a strong desire to keep all the area as multiple use to further encourage all users to get along.
- There is a strong feeling there is plenty of room for all users in the multiple use concept.
- Stronger enforcement of potential conflicts needs to occur (i.e.) if a motorized user was operating his/her vehicle in a dangerous or unsafe manner, the individual should be stopped and penalties (tickets) given to ensure corrective action.
- Other campsites (e.g.) Ram Falls Provincial Recreation Area do not permit horses or operating off-highway vehicles in their boundaries, and accommodate non-equestrian users.
- There is concern that snow vehicle users are volunteering to brush Site A and prepare the area for a campsite. An equestrian-only campsite would be an insult to those who volunteer their time but cannot use the site because they are not equestrian users.
- Concern was raised that by giving one user group a separate site, other user groups will also want their own separate sites.
- Safety of and with animals is the responsibility of the owner, and inexperienced animals should not be brought into campsites or on to the trails.
- It was felt that multi-use education through signs and brochures would be better than user segregation.
- It was confirmed that a speed limit can be enforced inside a forest recreation area.
- It was suggested to design multi-use campsites with equestrian facilities, and equestrian users will be encouraged to use the sites.

Of all attending Standing Committee members, the majority felt that the Hummingbird Forest Recreation Area should not have exclusive use in regards to equestrian-only areas, but design and enforcement be the main tools to alleviate the equestrian-only concern. Safety issues are considered in the planning and design of the forest recreation area. Education items including brochures and signs are considered and need to be maintained. It was requested a letter be sent to the Alberta Equestrian Federation and the Central Alberta Light Horse Association regarding the equestrian-only concern that was brought to this meeting.

The subcommittee is working with Ron Taylor to implement recommendations with financial and in-kind work. This group has asked for an umbrella organization or club to act as an organizational lead to coordinate finances and work. Documentation from Friends of the Eastern Slopes was presented, outlining their society status and annual duties. This organization maintains the multi-use Big Horn Campground on the federal Ya Ha Tinda Ranch, and works closely with both the federal and provincial governments. Friends of the Eastern Slopes Board of Directors are willing to fulfill the role of the umbrella group to do the following:

- work closely with Ron Taylor in regards to facilities and service items for the Hummingbird Forest Recreation Area;
- oversee non-government finances and contributions for service items; and
- organize the work required for the installation and maintenance of service items.

Currently, the umbrella group has financial commitments from Bowden and Lacombe Light Horse Associations and Olds Snowmobile Club for services in multi-use areas. Friends of the Eastern Slopes is encouraging other organizations to contribute financially and participate with the umbrella group. At the next Standing Committee meeting, members are encouraged to bring forward information regarding insurance/liability policies for groups maintaining trails and service items. Don Livingston will contact the Sustainable Resource Development justice lawyer to attend the meeting. A full consensus was expressed supporting Friends of the Eastern Slopes acting as the umbrella group for service items required for the Hummingbird Forest Recreation Area.

Eagle Creek Forest Recreation Area

Derry Armstrong distributed the “Eagle Creek Forest Recreation Area Draft Concept Plan.” The draft concept was reviewed, and photographs of the area were presented with the following concerns:

- currently there are four toilet facilities (two old and two new), with the deteriorating fifth toilet facility to be removed from the area;
- old spruce trees are beginning to die due to user traffic on root systems;
- hitching rails are being used, with equestrian use on soft ground conditions creating mud holes;
- highlines are being used; however, they are not strong enough and are bending;
- permanent fire rings are not installed, and many random fire rings are present;
- roads servicing the campsites are in rough condition and require work;
- heavy use along the river bank has created erosion;
- the danger of falling dead trees is potential; and
- the manure drop-off site is being used.

The main issues regarding the Eagle Creek Forest Recreation Area are as follows:

- the staging area with its current use appears to be adequate;
- the area currently has approximately 25 campsites and could accommodate approximately 50 campsites;
- currently uses are mostly equestrian and backcountry staging, and some off-highway vehicle use; and
- the area is situated in a chinook belt, and this limits snow vehicle use.

Derry Armstrong proposes the following for the Eagle Creek Forest Recreation Area:

- maintain the current staging area;
- maintain and reclaim some poor or heavily damaged sites;
- improve the facilities; and
- construct up to 25 new campsites.

He suggests that the area be built to accommodate equestrian users, but that some campsites not provide equestrian services for non-equestrian users (approximately 10 percent).

The possibility of an unforeseen closure of the Big Horn Campground needs to be considered, and soft/wet areas, the river, the guardian site and current leases boarding the forest recreation area need to be noted. Standing dead trees require removal, with the possibility of some re-planting. Permanent fire rings on gravel pads require installation, and stronger highlines and appropriate gravel pads for equestrian use are required. It was recommended a toilet facility be installed in the staging area. The current concave road requires gravel, and the riverbank erosion requires attention.

Derry asked the Standing Committee members to review the draft Concept Plan for the Eagle Creek Forest Recreation Area and be prepared to discuss at the next meeting. A copy of the map will be forwarded to Standing Committee members with the summary notes.

Ya Ha Tinda / Scalp Creek Trail

With the approval of Sustainable Resource Development, the Olds Snowmobile Club built the Ya Ha Tinda / Scalp Creek Trail in approximately eight days. The majority of the work is completed, with some seeding required during the spring. Financial contributions and donated equipment and manpower from the Olds Snowmobile Club and Friends of the Easter Slopes were used for this project. Snow vehicle travel is permitted from January 1 to April 30 by permit only; however, current conditions are unsuitable for snow vehicle travel.

Bighorn Backcountry Website

The Ya Ha Tinda / Scalp Creek permit conditions will be posted on the Bighorn Backcountry website. These conditions outline the responsibilities of the permit holder and groups traveling by snow vehicle on this trail.

Counter statistics will be posted on the website under the “Monitoring” button. Statistics will be available for viewing in a graph format, and printable on letter-sized paper. Counter updates will be regularly posted, with past graphs maintained on the website for comparison.

NEXT MEETING: Wednesday, June 2, 2004