

Bighorn Country Parks and Public Land Use Zones Proposal

In November the Alberta government released a proposal for multiple land use designations in the Bighorn. The proposal consists of the creation of a new Wildland Provincial Park, new or expanded provincial parks and recreation areas and Public Land Use Zones (PLUZ) in the area from the eastern border of Banff and Jasper National Parks stretching to Highway 22.

More information on the proposal can be found on the Alberta Environment and Parks website at www.talkaep.alberta.ca/bighorn-country.

The Government of Alberta has made a commitment to honor all grazing dispositions within the proposal. AGLA is very happy to see the government recognize the importance of the role of grazing to the health of the landscape. Long term adaptive grazing management in the Bighorn PLUZ's and parks will help insure the continued health of the landscape. Security of grazing dispositions plays a key role in proper stewardship. AGLA hopes that the commitment of the government to honor these dispositions remains indefinitely.

It is also worth considering that other uses on top of grazing dispositions will have an effect on the grazing disposition. No matter if its back-country hikers, fishermen or off-highway vehicles, they all affect how livestock is distributed. Without control of livestock distribution to graze the land, there is a loss of control in how to keep the landscape healthy.

Concerns

There are a number of concerns that stem from the Bighorn Country proposal:

- The government circumvented the land use framework process in developing this proposal. Bighorn Country falls within the North Saskatchewan Regional Plan. The management plan of the Bighorn should be directed by the multi-stakeholder process of regional land use planning but the NSRP is not even in draft stages as of yet.
- Lack of trust by grazing disposition holders. This is due to a lack of engagement prior to the development of the proposal, the government's disregard for the regional planning process, and uncertainty of the long-term commitment to the grazing disposition tenures, transfers and renewals. Grazing dispositions are a vital piece for the sustainability and succession of many operations and there needs to be guaranteed security of tenure to ensure the proper stewardship of these lands under dispositions.
- By managing or limiting recreational access within the Bighorn Country, this displaces the activity to areas outside the boundaries of the proposal. The increased pressure in adjoining lands is not only a hardship for those managing those lands but also represents a potential net loss in landscape health. In short, parks make bad neighbours.
- No provision for the expansion or creation of new grazing dispositions within Bighorn Country. Science has proven the importance of grazing livestock in the health and maintenance of the ecosystem cycles. Placing restrictions that exclude this valuable tool may not be in the best interests of the landscape and could be short-sighted on the part of government.

- Opening up the development of the land use planning in the PLUZs to include all land users could create conflict. Not all land users have the same degree of investment in the sustainability of the landscape and the weight of their input into the process should reflect that. Creating policy that is informed by those who are not familiar with the grazing lease instrument nor how to manage a grazing animal on the land for the health of the landscape could have negative implications for the ecosystem processes that drive this beautiful and productive landscape.

Recommendations

- 1) The Government of Alberta postpone the development of the Bighorn Country Proposal until after the development of the final North Saskatchewan Regional Plan. The land use framework sets out a robust system for land use planning that would be beneficial to the development of the Bighorn Country proposal.
- 2) The Government of Alberta commit to long-term secure tenure of grazing dispositions within Bighorn Country. Longer tenure has been introduced within other regional plans and should also be reflected in the NSRP including within Bighorn Country.
- 3) The Government of Alberta allow for provision of new and expanding dispositions for proper land management within the parks and recreation areas in Bighorn Country. These could be in the form of new temporary or shorter-term grazing permits.
- 4) The Government of Alberta support grazing disposition holders with recreation management plans and user conflict mitigation plans to deal with recreation pressures within and outside the boundaries of the PLUZs.