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Tourism Leases Leading to Unbridled Development

By Chris Wearmouth

Recent developments along the Panther River in the Eastern Slopes of the Bighorn should have Albertans worried. In late November after members of the surrounding community contacted AWA with concerns over recent construction activity, we visited the area along the Panther River west of Mountain Aire Lodge to examine the intensity of development. We found a staggering level of expansion on the four Alberta Tourism Recreational Leases (ATRLs) along the river's southern bank, where businesses offer services ranging from trail riding to whitewater rafting.

ATRLs, overseen by Alberta Sustainable Resource Development (SRD), originated from the older miscellaneous leases created to meet the need of trail riding outfits to have a seasonal base camp with temporary fences to corral horses. Far from the original wooden fences dismantled at the end of the season, Panther River leaseholders seem to have free rein to build any number of permanent structures with concrete foundations and adjacent amenities. They also now offer year-round services such as lodging, RV parking, and horse boarding – all on public land and regardless of season.

The ongoing urbanization of Alberta's backcountry, exemplified by the Panther River case, is happening largely behind closed doors. In 2006, AWA, along with many others, expressed objections to the expansion of one of the Panther River leases. Despite the outcry, the applicant was quietly granted the expansion in early 2007 without those who objected being notified. In several other instances where AWA has opposed the granting of leases, SRD ignored our objections and did not inform us of the process or the final decisions.

At the beginning of December, following the visit to Panther River, AWA wrote two letters to SRD Minister Ted Morton. As we go to press, we have received no response to either letter. To learn more about the oft-hidden development of Alberta's wild places, read the four-part article "The Quiet Urbanization of the Backcountry" (*WLA*, Dec. 2005 – Apr. 2006), available at www.AlbertaWilderness.ca.

