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Bighorn Trail Closures Confirm AWA Concerns

The recent decision by Alberta Environment and Sustainable Resource Development (ESRD) to close trails in the Bighorn Backcountry area to all motorized traffic due to “extreme erosion” confirms what AWA has been saying for over a decade: this important wilderness area cannot handle motorized recreation, and OHV trails are not an appropriate development for these pristine valleys.

“Although we are pleased to see ESRD take the necessary step of closing these trails, this decision is long overdue,” says Sean Nichols, AWA conservation specialist. “It is extremely unfortunate that the situation had to become so bad before this kind of action was taken.”

On July 3, notices went up at trailheads of the Hummingbird circuit announcing that all OHV trails other than the Onion Lake road were “Closed Until Further Notice Due To Extreme Trail Erosion.” Observations made by AWA staff as part of our Bighorn Recreation and Impact Monitoring Project, now in its 8th year, corroborate the existence of this erosion. Trails leading up the creek valleys have sustained extensive damage and are practically impassable to foot traffic, let alone OHVs.

Particularly wet weather, seen in the spring of 2012 as well as several other recent years, serves to exacerbate OHV damage caused to the loose and unsuitable soil in the areas through which these trails are driven. Even in dry periods, rutting and other damage causes unacceptable disturbances to the local vegetation, riparian areas and wildlife habitat. When high water flows combine to cause impassable wash-outs, this is merely a highly-visible symptom of the damage that has already been occurring.

“The AWA position has always been that continued motorized off-road traffic is not sustainable in these areas, and that this type of activity would lead to the extensive damage we are now seeing. Motorized traffic is best restricted to hard-surfaced roads, such as the Onion Lake road, that do not suffer the same extent of damage,” says Nichols.

AWA looks forward to ESRD decisions that will leave the wilderness area in its natural state and allow nature to mend the damage caused by these trails.

For more information:

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