

## Communiqué from Eastern Slopes Today and Tomorrow Workshop December 4 2015, Calgary, Alberta, Canada

### Key Principles

1. Healthy watersheds on Alberta's Rocky Mountain Eastern Slopes are essential to the economy, health, and wellbeing of Albertans.
2. There is abundant evidence that the watersheds of Alberta's Eastern Slopes are already severely damaged from the combined effects of high-intensity industrial and recreational development, including off highway vehicles (OHVs).
3. Restoration and protection of our source water and watersheds in the Eastern Slopes is of paramount priority.
4. Permitted uses of the Eastern Slopes watersheds must be supported by the best available science to demonstrate that they are harmless to watershed integrity.

### Protection of Alberta's Eastern Slopes

A round table of scientists and conservationists took place in Calgary on December 4, 2015. We resolved to appeal to the Government of Alberta to meaningfully protect Albertans' water security and the future sustainability of our parks and public lands.

The greater public in Alberta has been increasingly frustrated by the failure of past governments to exercise oversight and sustainable management of our public lands. Albertans have long advocated for the protection of our watersheds and wildlife. There are several Policies and Acts of Legislation that reflect this priority. A *Policy for Resource Management of the Eastern Slopes* (1984) declared that "the highest priority in the overall management of the Eastern Slopes is placed on watershed management". The Alberta government's 2008 *Land-Use Framework* also emphasized the watershed value of forests: "Historically, watershed and recreation were deemed the priority uses of the Eastern Slopes. These priorities should be confirmed, and sooner rather than later." In addition, the *Public Lands Act*, Section 54(1)(d) states that "no person shall cause, permit or suffer the doing of any act on public land that may injuriously affect watershed capacity".

The Eastern Slopes consist of mountains and foothills along the eastern portion of the Rocky Mountains and contain watersheds which are the source of drinking water for the majority of Albertans. Healthy watersheds are valued and protected in policy because Albertans understand the numerous benefits they provide us. Healthy watersheds buffer effects of climate change, moderate flow to reduce flooding and to supply water in drought, recharge groundwater resources, provide critical fisheries habitat, and supply essential ecosystem services such as clean air, water, and soil (Kennedy and Wilson 2009). The majority of Albertans (94%) agree that wilderness is important because it helps to preserve plant and animal species. There is also overwhelming support (92%) for wilderness areas, which contribute to better air and water quality (The Praxis Group 2015).

Westslope cutthroat trout, bull trout, Athabasca rainbow trout, all listed as "threatened" under Alberta's *Wildlife Act*, as well as mountain whitefish and arctic grayling have all suffered major population declines due to decades of inaction and excessive linear disturbance on the landscape.

In recent decades there has been a proliferation of OHV activity on the Eastern Slopes, which has largely gone unmanaged on our public lands. OHV use results in increased soil compaction, proliferation of invasive species, increased habitat fragmentation, and increased runoff of sediment into streams which negatively impacts water

quality and fish habitat (Ouren et al. 2007). Although OHV use is widespread throughout Alberta, only six percent of the population participates in motorized recreation (The Praxis Group 2015). This is in direct contrast to the majority of Albertans that depend on the Eastern Slopes for their drinking water.

### **Actions Required to Protect Alberta's Eastern Slopes**

#### **By May 2016:**

- a) To comply with the Eastern Slopes Policy (1984), a moratorium must be imposed on the use of off-highway vehicles (OHV) on existing trails within Prime Protection and Critical Wildlife Zones, as well as a moratorium on further OHV trail development in these Zones.
- b) Permanent closure and decommissioning of all trails and roads must be implemented where westslope cutthroat trout critical habitat exists. There must be adherence to the westslope cutthroat trout recovery strategy and critical habitat protection order.
- c) No OHVs allowed within Eastern Slopes protected areas<sup>1</sup>, due to the predominance of Prime Protection and Critical Wildlife Zones in the higher elevations and critical habitat for threatened native fish in the valley bottoms.

#### **By September 2016:**

- a) A Branch within Operations be established within Alberta Environment and Parks dedicated to the management of recreational use of public lands.

### **Priority Actions for the Management of Alberta's Eastern Slopes**

#### **Trail Development and Use**

- Motorized recreation is a land use that is incompatible with the Prime Protection and Critical Wildlife Zones as identified within the Eastern Slopes Policy. The Minister must uphold this policy and disallow all OHV trail development and use within those Prime Protection and Critical Wildlife Zones. This intent is echoed in the *Public Lands Administration Regulation*, section 184(1), which continues to assert the Minister's authority to "restrict or prohibit, for any specified period of time, entry into all or any part of the lands within a public land use zone".
- OHV use should be considered and regulated as a formal land use in Alberta. Treating OHVs as a land-use requires their trails to be considered in linear density footprints and future land use planning.
- OHV use must be denied except where explicitly permitted. Authorized use may be given only when the best available science shows that watershed, wildlife, and ecosystem integrity is not compromised by such use.
- The public has the right to use public land for recreation only to the extent that such use does not compromise watershed, wildlife, and ecosystem integrity.

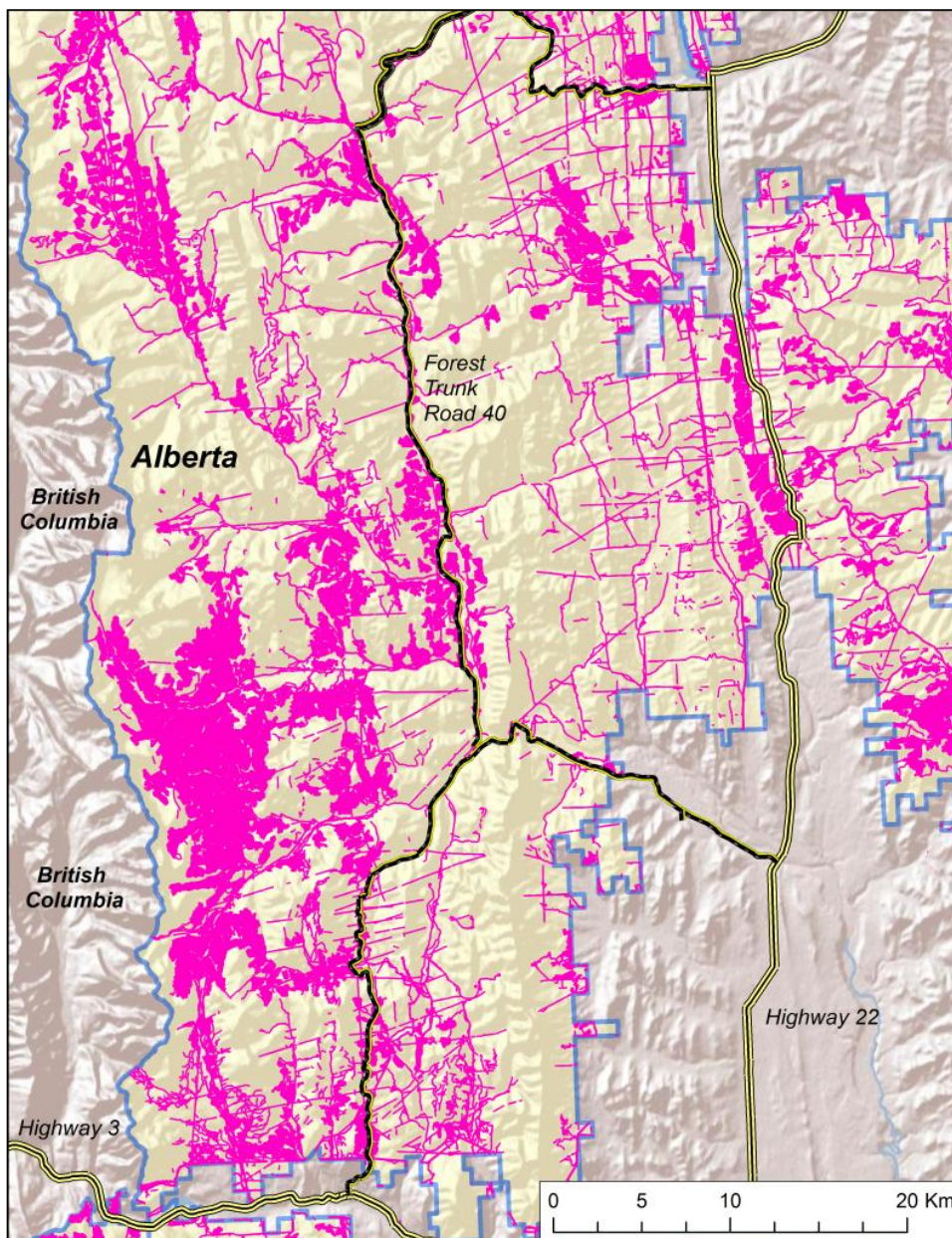
#### **Linear Densities**

- Linear densities are thresholds beyond which certain wildlife cannot persist in an area. For example, the maximum linear density for high quality grizzly bear habitat is currently recognized as 0.6 km/km<sup>2</sup> (Government of Alberta 2008). Linear densities even lower than this are required to maintain bear populations and to sustain Alberta's native fish populations in the Eastern Slopes.
- All linear disturbances must be considered when measuring linear density, not just roads.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Protected areas' here refer to Willmore Wilderness Park, Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves, Wildland Provincial Parks and Provincial Parks.

- Linear density **must** be kept far less than 0.6 km/km<sup>2</sup> for all trail and road networks. Low trail densities not only minimize wildlife impacts but they enhance the wilderness experience of users. Linear densities currently significantly exceed 0.6 km/km<sup>2</sup> over large areas of the Eastern Slopes (see Figure 1 for example).
- Certain watersheds should be kept free of roads and vehicle trails. Research shows that there is seven to ten times the sediment produced by erosion from OHV activity in watersheds where OHV activity is high (Clearwater Environmental Consultants 2006). This seriously influences water quality and aquatic habitat. Management decisions must take into account the cumulative effects of all activities on the landscape including forestry, oil and gas, and OHVs.
- Decommissioned trails and other linear disturbances must be allowed to regenerate, or in many cases, will require active restoration.



**Figure 1.** Map outlining the extent of the Human Footprint within the Eastern Slopes Policy Zones as of 2015. This is a relatively small area north of Crowsnest Pass (Lee 2015a).

## **Enforcement**

- Enforcement will motivate responsible use of our public lands and is an effective means of educating the public.
- Increased enforcement on public lands is necessary to uphold trail closures and to manage trails designated for OHV use.
- Enforcement capabilities must be returned to land agents including fish and wildlife, public lands, parks, water, and forestry.

## **Westslope Cutthroat Trout**

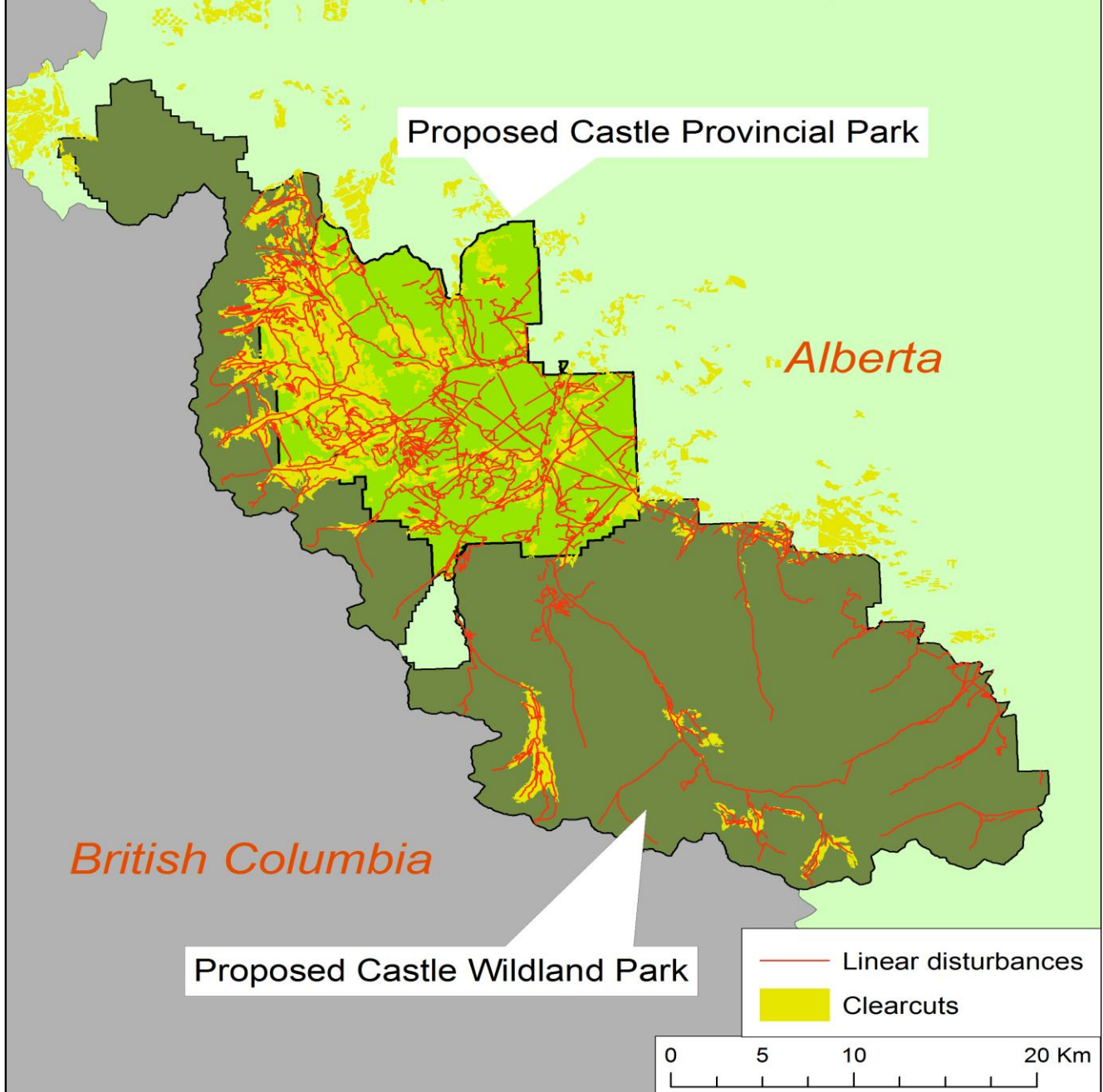
- The *Species at Risk Act* (SARA) designates westslope cutthroat trout as a threatened species.
- The Critical Habitat Order, issued on December 2 2015, triggers the prohibition under subsection 58(1) of SARA against destroying any part of the critical habitat of the westslope cutthroat trout, Alberta populations.
- Permanent closure of all trails and roads that have damaged, are damaging, or threaten to damage, westslope cutthroat trout critical habitat is necessary to adhere to the westslope cutthroat trout recovery strategy and critical habitat protection order.
- No new development (e.g. roads, trails, transmission lines, pipelines, well sites, buildings, fences, bridges) should be allowed in areas that may damage critical habitat.

## **Provincial Parks and Protected Areas**

- Alberta's *Provincial Parks Act* states that "Parks are established, and are to be maintained a) for the preservation of Alberta's natural heritage, b) for the conservation and management of flora and fauna, c) for the preservation of specified areas, landscapes and natural features and objects in them that are of [...] cultural, [...] ecological importance, and [...] e) to ensure their lasting protection for the benefit of present and future generations". Land uses and permitted activities must reflect this mandate.
- OHVs are a land-use which is incompatible with the purpose of Provincial Parks. What is allowed (and prohibited) in Provincial Parks must be upheld in the new Castle Provincial Park, as well as in all future and existing Provincial Parks. Allowing OHVs in the Castle Provincial Park will set a dangerously destructive precedent. The current linear densities within the proposed parks already far exceed any scientifically established threshold for protection of fish and wildlife (Figure 2). Closure and subsequent restoration of these disturbances is urgently required.
- OHV use must not be permitted in Provincial Parks or other Eastern Slopes protected areas, due to the predominance of Prime Protection and Critical Wildlife Zones in the higher elevations and critical habitat for threatened native fish in the valley bottoms. Motorized recreation is a conflicting use in protected areas, based on public values, science, and inherent wilderness values.



# Linear disturbances and Clearcuts in the proposed Castle parks



**Figure 2.** Map outlining the linear disturbances (outlined in red) as well as clearcuts (highlighted in yellow) in the proposed Castle Provincial Park and Wildland Park (Lee 2015b).

**The principles, concerns, and requests addressed in this communiqué are endorsed by the following:**

Alberta Native Plant Council (ANPC)  
D. Lorraine Andrews (High River)  
Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA)  
Bert Riggall Environmental Foundation (BREF)  
Bragg Creek Environmental Coalition (BCEC)  
Castle-Crown Wilderness Coalition (CCWC)  
Lindsey Cockerill (Pincher Creek)  
Clint Docken, Environmental Lawyer (Bragg Creek)  
Alan Ernst, Tourism Operator (Cline River)  
Klaus Exner (Calgary)  
Glen Feys (Spruce Grove)  
Kathy Feys (Nordegg)  
Lorne Fitch, Professional Biologist (Lethbridge)  
Sharlene Fritz, Environmental Advocate (Calgary)  
Dr. Brian L. Horejsi, Speak Up For Wildlife Foundation  
Judy Huntley (Lundbreck)  
Art Jackson (Jasper)  
Lorri Jankowski-Arfdndt (Nordegg)  
Mike Judd, Artist, Guide and Outfitter, President, Timberwolf Wilderness Society  
Arlene Kwasniak, Professor Emerita of Law  
Peter Lee, Biologist-Geographer  
Eric Lloyd (Bragg Creek)  
Harvey Locke (Banff)  
Sid Marty (Willow Valley)  
David Mayhood, Aquatic Ecologist & President, FWR Freshwater Research Limited  
David McNeill (Pincher Creek)  
Livingstone Landowners Guild  
Gordon Petersen, Photographer  
Vivian Pharis, Ecologist  
Charlie Russell, Naturalist  
Wendy Ryan (Pincher Creek)  
Richard C. Secord (Edmonton)  
Dr. David Schindler, Professor Emeritus (Edmonton)  
Dr. Richard Schneider (Tofield)  
Dave Sheppard (Lethbridge)  
Peter Sherrington (Beaver Mines)  
Jim Stelfox, Fisheries Biologist (Calgary)  
Southern Alberta Group for the Environment (SAGE)  
Stewards of Alberta's Protected Areas Association (SAPAA)  
Stop Ghost Clearcut  
Dr. David Swann, Leader of the Alberta Liberal Party  
Jacques Thouin (Beaver Mines)

**The principles, concerns, and requests addressed in this communiqué are endorsed by the following:**

Kevin Van Tighem (Canmore)

James Tweedie (Pincher Creek)

Dr. Joe Vipond, M.D. (Calgary)

Cliff Wallis, Professional Biologist (Calgary)

West Athabasca Bioregional Society

Ken Williams (Pincher Creek)

Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative (Y2Y)

Marla Zapach (Nordegg)

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