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Hay-Zama Committee Agrees on Management Plan for Hay-Zama Wildland Park

By Cliff Wallis

Following extensive consultation with environmental groups, government, industry and Dene Tha' First Nation, Alberta Community Development (Parks and Protected Areas) has developed a management plan for the Hay-Zama Wildland Park. The management plan was endorsed in Edmonton Oct. 11, 2001 by the Hay-Zama Committee. A public open house will be held in High Level in the near future to present the draft plan. Key elements of the plan include:

- Allowing natural processes to function largely unimpeded by human activities
- Permitting traditional uses by the Dene Tha' to continue
- A commitment to further negotiate cooperative management by the Dene Tha' and Parks and Protected Areas
- Encouragement of scientific research and interpretation of the area's natural and cultural heritage
- Restrictions on oil and gas activities as defined by previous agreements will remain in place
- Hay-Zama Committee will continue to advise on research, management and oil and gas activities in the Park

The Hay-Zama Lakes Complex is situated in the NW corner of Alberta, 50 km NE of Rainbow Lake. It is a large, diverse area encompassing marshes, open water, willow swamps, floodplain woodlands and wet meadows. It has been designated an internationally important wetland under the RAMSAR Convention and 486 sq. km were designated a Wildland Park under the Provincial Parks Act in 1999. The Complex provides habitat for a wide array of nesting and migrating waterfowl, shorebirds and marsh birds. During migration, up to 30,000 geese and 100,000 ducks use the area. Hay-Zama Lakes is an important traditional fishing and hunting area for the Dene Tha' First Nation at Chateh.

The Hay-Zama Committee was established in the 1980s to address issues related to oil and gas activities that were previously authorized in the Complex. It was re-activated in 1994 to cooperatively resolve conflicts on the development of oil and gas reserves and protection of the area's cultural and natural heritage. The committee includes representatives from the Dene Tha First Nation, Alberta Energy and Utilities Board, Governments of Canada and Alberta, Ducks Unlimited, Alberta Wilderness Association and the energy industry. It is committed to an accelerated winding down of activities that have a high potential to impact this internationally significant wetland. The committee received an Emerald Award in 1996 in recognition of its accomplishments.

Major successes for the cooperative approach used by the Hay-Zama Committee have been:

- 1996-EUB directive, ID 96-1, defined **access limitations** within the Complex's most sensitive areas
- 1999-Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) **reduced the time frame** that oil and gas activities, including existing operations, were to be allowed. It significantly improved environmental performance and committed to a phase out in high risk areas and a longer phase out in less sensitive areas.
- 1999-designation of the most sensitive parts of the Complex as a **Wildland Park**

2000-Addendum to 1999 MOU resulted in **no new footprints for oil** development and a **rapid phase out of oil in the high risk zone** as well as an accelerated phase out of oil and gas in the less sensitive sites. New gas footprints are being offset by wellsite abandonments, resulting in no net gain of all footprints in the Complex.



