

Release Date: September 15, 2003

Alberta Government refuses to require an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) for a major resort near Bighorn Wildland

A large-scale, up-market spa and resort complex has been proposed by a St. Albert developer on the west side of Abraham Lake in, what was until now, a largely undisturbed wilderness region along the Eastern Slopes. The area is about 40 km from Banff National Park.

The *Abraham Glacier Wellness Resort* is to be spread out over 260 acres of public land (one square kilometre) in the Whitegoat Lakes Development Node near Cline River. It would consist of a 90 room lodge with recreational and conference facilities and between 130 and 166 cabins. The proponent, 1006335 Alberta Inc., expects to build a resort which could exceed 250,000 visitor nights annually.

In addition to the guests, over 200 staff are required to run the facility, which would also provide a cosmetic surgery clinic with medical staff being flown in by helicopter. While the developer says most of the staff will be housed in Nordegg (a hamlet of 70 residents) that still leaves a huge number of people in the area on a daily basis.

Although the node is earmarked for some tourism development, both the local Integrated Resource Management Plan (IRP) and the development node vision acknowledge the environmental sensitivity of the area. However, project size, type of development and the initial concept of the developer are not in line with the character of the region, which draws visitors from near and far. These visitors try to escape the extensive commercial developments that have significantly reduced the attraction of the adjacent National Parks for many.

The development proposal shows minimal concern for the environmental sensitivity of the entire area, impact on traditional area users or the wilderness appeal of the region. The plans for this resort fail to address the principles of sustainable development and the impact of 500 to 800 guests and staff, facility emissions, etc. on surrounding natural areas or other area users.

ALERT and AWA are not opposed to tourism development in the region in general. Sensible low-impact tourism development can provide a better economic alternative for the Bighorn, compared to natural resource extraction, industrial uses or mass-tourism and mechanized recreation.

The Whitegoat Lakes Development Node is surrounded by and close to Prime Protection areas, Critical Wildlife Zones, Wilderness Areas (Siffleur and Whitegoat) and an Ecological Reserve (Kootenay Plains). It is an important wildlife corridor, which allows wildlife movement to and from the mountains. It is also a prime over wintering area for many park animals. The ecological importance of the region is very high because it represents one of the few remaining montane habitats in the Eastern Slopes, which have not been heavily impacted or destroyed by industrial, recreational, transportation or residential development.

Following a review of the vague and incomplete development plans for the project, the Regional Provincial Environmental Manager decided in June 2003, that no Environmental Impact Assessment was required. He argued that any environmental issues can be addressed with the existing approval processes on municipal, provincial and federal levels. However, these processes cannot and will not address the complexity of such a large-scale development and the cumulative impact it will have on the entire valley. They merely deal with isolated aspects only and NOT with the overall effect of such a large development on the immediate surroundings and the entire region.



ACTION ALERT

ALBERTA LEAGUE FOR ENVIRONMENTALLY RESPONSIBLE TOURISM ALBERTA WILDERNESS ASSOCIATION

An Environmental Impact Assessment should be conducted for the following reasons:

- the development is located in and adjacent to a highly sensitive and largely undeveloped area,
- the development will have a significant impact, way beyond the boundary of the Whitegoat Lakes Development Node,
- an Environmental Impact Assessment was requested by area users, conservation interests, the County of Clearwater (!) AND Alberta Sustainable Resources (!), the provincial department responsible for the lands in question,
- the project plans do NOT address the environmental impact or offer any mitigating procedures / features which would address such impact,
- the project plans do not clarify how key infrastructure and project management decisions (power, water, waste management) will be handled, how guest use will affect the area and how over 200 staff will be housed and provided with essential services.

ALERT proposes that only low-impact, sustainable tourism development should be permitted in the Whitegoat Lakes Development Node. Such development allows visitors to enjoy and learn about the natural significance of the region without damaging its wilderness character, without disturbing other area users or impacting the ecological integrity of the Bighorn. Facilities or activities, which are too extensive, disruptive or unrelated to a low-impact recreational use of the region, are to be excluded or moved somewhere else.

A properly designed and managed wellness resort or spa facility could be acceptable if:

- it is planned, built and operated in an environmentally responsible manner (resource conservation, impact on wildlife, minimal air/water/noise/light or other pollution, etc.),
- it does not destroy the wilderness character of the area it operates in,
- it can and will exercise control and minimize the impact of the facility and activities of the facility users and staff on surrounding natural areas,
- its size is dictated by minimizing impact on the environment and not by maximizing profits and including services inessential to area visitors (these should be provided elsewhere).

Only an EIA can ensure that these parameters are met.

ACTION:

1. Please write to Lorne Taylor, Minister of Environment, to request that an Environmental Impact Assessment be required for the Abraham Glacier Wellness Resort: The Hon. Dr Lorne Taylor, Minister of Environment, 423 Legislature Building 10800 - 97 Avenue, Edmonton, AB, T5K 2B6, Phone: 780 427 2391, Fax: 780 422 6259, e-mail: lorne.taylor@gov.ab.ca

A sample letter can be found at: <http://www.albertawilderness.ca/Issues/BH/Bighorn.htm>

2. cc. a copy of your letter to Premier Ralph Klein at: The Hon. Ralph Klein, Premier, 307 Legislature Building 10800 - 97 Avenue, Edmonton, AB, T5K 2B7; Fax: 780 427 1349; e-mail premier@gov.ab.ca

3. Write letters to your newspaper editor to call for more responsible tourism development and the need to properly screen this project for environmental impact.

4. ALERT would appreciate receiving copies of your correspondence and the replies that you receive: ALERT, PO Box 1288, Rocky Mountain House, AB, T4T 1A9. Donations are also welcome.





ALBERTA WILDERNESS ASSOCIATION

"Defending Wild Alberta through Awareness and Action"

January 21, 2003

Mr. Don McCargar
Potters Hand Inc.
c/o R. Saunder Architects
12125 Jasper Ave.
Edmonton, AB T5N 3X9
Telephone: 780-418-2742
e-mail address: ppci@telusplanet.net

Re: Abraham Glacier Mineral Spa and Resort

Dear Mr. McCargar,

The Alberta Wilderness Association has a long-standing interest in the Bighorn area surrounding the site of the proposed Abraham Glacier Mineral Spa and Resort.

We are pleased to see that your development is planned in an appropriate development node along the highway. However, we do have a number of concerns that we would like to bring to your attention.

Due to the large size and large occupancy of the proposed development, we are concerned about a variety of environmental impacts. Our primary concern is the footprint of your large development and associated access. We trust that you will do everything you can to carefully consider your development in light of ecological values, and will minimize your footprint. We are particularly concerned about increasing traffic and access to wilderness that may result from this development. We hope you will make a commitment not to operate or permit motorized access to the surrounding areas from your resort, including helicopter access to the backcountry, heli-fishing, hiking and skiing.

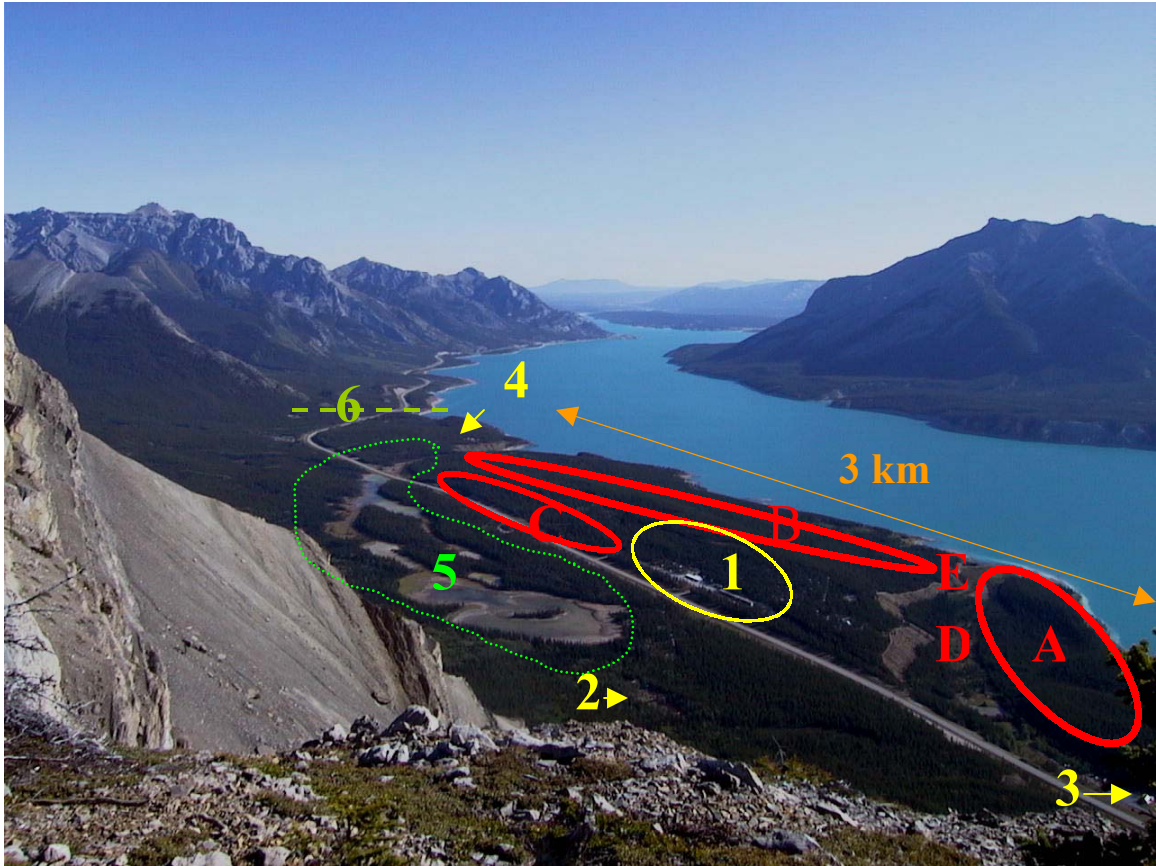
We hope you will take every step to ensure the maintenance of the integrity of the natural environment and will prevent any problems associated with water quality/contamination, erosion and siltation, sewage treatment and disposal, and wildlife/habitat disturbance. We would like you to consider the use of alternative clean energy sources such as wind and solar for some of your energy needs.

In addition, we have had the privilege of meeting with many local residents, and those from nearby communities. A major concern has been with the development of large, expensive resort destinations that are not for local people to enjoy. We trust you will make opportunities for people of all backgrounds to enjoy your resort.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. Please continue to send me your planning documents and updates on the approval process as you proceed.

Sincerely,

Tamaini Snaith
Conservation Biologist



Whitegoat Lakes Development Node, showing the impact of **Abraham Glacier Wellness Resort (red areas) on the region:**

1. Existing David Thompson Resort (46 room motel and campground)
 2. McKenzie's Trail Riding and Outfitting
 3. Icefield Helicopters Heliport
 4. Aurum Lodge (9 units)
 5. Whitegoat Lakes (environmentally significant wetland area)
 6. northern boundary of Development Node (Southern limit is just outside the bottom right hand corner of the photograph).
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- A. main resort complex with ten two to three story buildings, 16 cabins and over 300 parking lots
 - B. cabin development with between 120 and 140 cabins
 - C. staff housing, medical clinic and support facilities
 - D. two large sewage lagoons next to existing lagoons of the David Thompson
 - E. suspension bridge or dam linking A. and B.



Above photo shows the existing Aurum Lodge (arrow) overlooking Little Indian Cove at the north end of the proposed Abraham Glacier Wellness Resort Development.

The architecture of Aurum Lodge and the set back from the escarpment are designed to reduce the visual impact on the area. This is not the case with proposed development which will be build very close to the ledge.

The ledge where the wellness resort is to be built is higher and more prominent and very visible from the highway. The brown squares indicate the approximate extent / visual impact of the main Resort development, compared to Aurum Lodge.

(115,000 sqft vs 8,000; max height of 50ft vs 30 ft, 10 buildings vs one). The new development will be visible from a distance as you approach Cline River from the South.

Your Name and Address

Date

The Hon. Lorne Taylor
Minister of Environment
423 Legislature Building
10800 - 97 Avenue
Edmonton, AB, T5K 2B6

Dear Minister Taylor,

I am writing to you to **request that an Environmental Impact Assessment be required for the proposed Abraham Glacier Wellness Resort** at Cline River, west of Nordegg in Clearwater County.

The proximity of the proposed development to various environmentally sensitive areas, both within and outside of the development node, requires the type of all-encompassing evaluation (and recommendations for impact mitigation and measurement), which only an EIA can provide.

Type and size of this development, its location, the impact of hundreds of additional visitors, staff and traffic in the region are all going to have significant adverse effects on the area ecology, wildlife, trails, historic sites as well as the air and water quality in the valley.

Please review and correct the Regional Manager's decision to waive the requirement for an EIA. It is imperative to ensure that the burden (and cost) of making this project environmentally acceptable, is placed on the developer and not on the tax payer and local or provincial departments, which neither have the human resources or funds to perform an in-depth evaluation.

I thank you for your time and positive intervention in this matter and look forward to your confirmation that an EIA will be required for this project.

Yours truly,