



NEW U.S.–FORT McMURRAY HIGHWAY PROPOSAL BAD NEWS FOR NATIVE PRAIRIE

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A proposal to open the Wild Horse border crossing for 24-hour service and expand a north-south transportation corridor along the eastern border of the province would have dramatic negative environmental effects on the southeast corner of Alberta. The proposal includes expanding Highway 41, which extends from the U.S. border to just south of Lac La Biche, into a major corridor that would link the U.S. and Fort McMurray in order to transport heavy equipment to the tar sands via a route other than the existing corridor through the Coutts border crossing.

“The Cypress Hills-Sage Creek area is internationally significant as one of the largest and least disturbed blocks of mixed grassland on the northern glaciated plains of North America,” says AWA Vice-President Cliff Wallis. “If the proposal is approved, this landscape will suffer environmental impacts, with the local communities receiving minimal or zero economic benefit.” About 80 percent of Alberta’s species at risk are located in the southeast corner of the province – this is one of the largest concentrations of species at risk in Canada.

Potential Effects on Wildlife

One of the many species at risk that would not welcome 24-hour traffic is the swift fox. Extirpated from Canada by 1938, this species was reintroduced in the 1980s, but the population remains small and the species is listed as “endangered” in Canada. The area around Highway 41 South is prime swift fox habitat, and according to the World Conservation Union (IUCN) status survey and conservation action plan, “Collisions with automobiles are a significant mortality factor for young animals [swift foxes] in some landscapes.” But swift foxes forage mainly at night, and with the Wild Horse crossing currently closed during the hours of darkness and night traffic on Highway 41 virtually non-existent, they are relatively safe at the moment.



The consequences of 24-hour heavy truck traffic would greatly impact this species, as well as the many other species at risk who rely on this area, such as the mountain plover, sage grouse, and burrowing owl.

“Many of these species are sensitive to human activity, and increased traffic will result in increased mortality of species at risk as well as alienation of habitat for many wildlife species,” says Wallis. The swift fox isn’t the only animal that often meets its end under the wheels of a truck. The prairie rattlesnake is listed in Alberta as “may be at risk” due to accumulated anecdotal evidence that the species is declining in the province. A number of reports on rattlesnakes have listed mortality associated with roads as a current threat to the provincial population (e.g., Alberta Species at Risk Report #76; Alberta Wildlife Status Report #6).

Species like mule deer and pronghorn would also be impacted if this proposal were approved. Recent research has revealed that pronghorn migrations are much more extensive than previously thought, and that migration is getting more difficult every year due to land development that is putting obstacles such as major roadways in the path of migration corridors (*Smithsonian*

Magazine, January 2007). In winter, pronghorns migrate into southeastern Alberta in huge numbers. Some of the possible routes being considered for the new Highway 41 corridor go through critical wintering pronghorn habitat, with great potential for disturbance, including road mortality.

Provincial and State Support

Cypress-Medicine Hat MLA Len Mitzel has spent considerable energy pushing the crossing/corridor proposal forward over the last few years. His Motion 506 – passed unanimously in the Alberta legislature in April 2006 – proposed to “promote the use of Highway 41, up to and including Highway 63, from Wildhorse to Fort McMurray, as an alternate north-south transportation corridor from the United States.” The bi-national 14-member Wild Horse Border Committee was struck in November 2006 with the mandate to promote the 24-hour Wild Horse crossing. Co-chaired by former Mayor of Medicine Hat Garth Vallely and Havre Mayor Bob Rice, the Committee includes Mitzel, several southeastern Alberta mayors, and representatives from the Alberta Chamber of Commerce, the Palliser Economic Partnership, and the Economic Development Alliance of Southeastern Alberta.

On January 10, 2007, Mitzel led an Alberta delegation to Montana to attend a hearing of the state House Transportation Committee and voice support for the 24-hour crossing bill that was before the House of Representatives. The delegation included Canada’s Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, Monte Solberg. A month later, the bill was approved by the Montana Senate. A year later, on January 17, 2008, officials from Texas arrived in Medicine Hat to promote the crossing/corridor proposal.

Border crossings are a federal issue, however, and the U.S. Customs and Border Protection division of the Department of Homeland Security has reportedly said “that the number of

vehicles using the port doesn't justify any changes in the hours" (*Havre Daily News*, November 5, 2007). But the Wild Horse Border Committee is pushing forward: Medicine Hat Mayor Boucher informed AWA that the Committee will be meeting with Homeland Security later this spring.

The Committee is also lobbying Canada's Public Safety Minister, Stockwell Day, whose department is responsible for border crossings. According to the Alberta Chamber of Commerce website, "The minister's first response noted a lack of resources to address the issue, but a subsequent letter opened the door to working with the regional director towards the goal." Mayor Boucher told AWA that Minister Day has conveyed in a letter to the Committee that his department is considering a review of the proposal.

Another Oil Sands Highway

When AWA spoke with Mitzel, he insisted that "there would be no need to upgrade at all" because semis already use the highway. The current highway, however, was not built to accommodate the amount of truck traffic that is expected to use this corridor should the proposal be approved, and more truck traffic is exactly what the proposal is about. On the same day AWA interviewed Mitzel he was presenting the proposal's merits to truckers: he spoke at the January 17, 2008 monthly meeting of the Alberta Motor Transport Association (AMTA) to provide "further insight into the business case to support a 2nd North-South Corridor 24 hour Border Crossing within Alberta" (AMTA Agenda). AMTA represents all sectors of the highway transportation industry, including truckers. Furthermore, when Mitzel presented his Motion to the legislature in 2006, he stated: "Highway 41 has relatively low traffic volumes and can therefore support *an increase in traffic by these heavy, wide, and slow-moving vehicles*" (*Hansard*, April 10, 2006; emphasis added).

According to the *Havre Daily News*, "The [Wild Horse Border] committee also wants to change the port, now open to commercial traffic only by permit, to commercial status, which would allow trucks to cross at the port without needing a special permit" (November 5, 2007). Senator Jon Tester, when he introduced the new crossing legislation



The swift fox is one of the many species at risk that will suffer increased mortality if Highway 41 becomes a major truck corridor to the oil sands. C. WALLIS

in Montana, emphasized "the need for a second 24-hour port as Alberta develops its Oil Sands region. The project requires heavy machinery to cross the border" (*Helena Independent Record*, November 6, 2007). Obviously the primary intent of the proposal is to accommodate a large increase in heavy truck traffic.

Discussion with the Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation has already taken place. Jerry Lau, an Alberta Infrastructure planning engineer, told AWA that feasibility studies for upgrading and realigning Highway 41 are in process: "If the port becomes 24 hour, we would look to see what kinds of upgrades are necessary."

There has been talk of a variety of possible routes for the new north-south corridor, using Highway 41 in conjunction with other less used roads in the area, including Highway 501 and the Black and White Trail (see map). This would prevent trucks from having to go over the Cypress Hills.

A December 2006 Medicine Hat Chamber of Commerce article waxes enthusiastic about the corridor/crossing proposal, "with a focus on heavy truck traffic shipping oil and gas supplies north to the oil sands." The smaller rural communities in the area may have a very different perspective: does the prospect of 24-hour heavy truck traffic through their previously quiet communities fill them with enthusiasm for the project? Even if only half of the 2,000 trucks per day that go through the existing 24-hour crossing at Coutts decided to use the new route, quality of life for both human and non-human communities would be eroded.

Upgrading the roadways in this corner of the province to accommodate

24-hour heavy truck traffic would be phenomenally expensive. Albertans need to consider whether they want their taxes to pay for infrastructure that may benefit a small minority and will have large, irreversible environmental and social costs. If nothing else, we must demand a full economic analysis, including the costs to prairie ecosystems and wildlife, the local communities, and average Albertans. "Logical north-south transportation routes already exist via the Coutts/Sweetgrass border crossing within less sensitive landscapes," argues Cliff Wallis. "These should be emphasized rather than increasing traffic and disturbance within environmentally significant areas."

AWA encourages you to express your views on the proposal. Write to Alberta's Minister of Infrastructure; your MLA and MP; MLA Harry Chase, Shadow Minister for Infrastructure and Transportation; and federal Minister of Public Safety Stockwell Day.

On January 29, 2008, the Government of Alberta released its "20-Year Strategic Capital Plan to Address Alberta's Infrastructure Needs." Among the "Medium-Term Plans and Priorities" are the following:

- Reconstruct Highway 41 at Cypress Hills Provincial Park southwest of Medicine Hat to meet current highway standards and to ensure traffic safety and operation
- Help facilitate a 24-hour port-of-entry at the Wild Horse Border Crossing on Highway 41, at the Alberta-Montana border south of Medicine Hat