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## **Bighorn Wildland Protection Calls Bolstered by New Grizzly Report**

Calls to protect one of Alberta's last great unprotected watersheds received a recent boost with the publishing of the province's new report, *Status of the Grizzly Bear in Alberta*. The 4,000 km<sup>2</sup> Bighorn area, which sits east of Jasper and Banff National Parks, has suffered from motorized abuse, and it is now clear that grizzly bears are one more victim of that abuse.

"The new grizzly report underlines what we have been saying for a long, long time," says Nigel Douglas, Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) conservation specialist. "Grizzlies in the Bighorn region are in trouble, and motorized access must be reduced if they are going to survive."

The March 2010 report states clearly: "A large area of grizzly habitat, particularly south of Highway 16, currently appears to be a population sink, but could support a self-sustaining population if human-caused mortality was reduced." The Bighorn area falls squarely within this *population sink* south of Highway 16. The report is also clear on the solution: "To reduce mortality, motorized access to bear habitat must be minimized and human activities that lead to conflicts with bears must be mitigated."

AWA has stated consistently for many years that motorized activity should not be allowed in sensitive headwaters such as the Bighorn. As well as being important wildlife habitat, the Bighorn is the source of drinking water for many Albertans.

Ironically, exactly one year ago, AWA published its analysis of motorized access in the Bighorn area. The report, *Is the Access Management Plan Working? Monitoring Recreational Use in the Bighorn Backcountry*, detailed the results of a five-year monitoring program, studying new motorized trails in the Bighorn. Key findings from the report include:

- Illegal use of trails is increasing,
- Trail damage is increasing,
- Water bodies are not adequately protected,
- Albertans want to see ecological values in the Bighorn given the greatest priority,

The Alberta Government's own studies seem to agree. According to the 2009 *Environmentally Significant Areas* report, produced to give direction to the province's Land-Use Framework process, the majority of the Bighorn area is recognized as *Nationally Significant*. The province's 2008 *Land-Use Framework* also stated: "Historically, watershed and recreation were deemed the priority uses of the Eastern Slopes. These priorities should be confirmed, and sooner rather than later."

"We entirely agree with the province on this one," says Douglas. "The *Land-Use Framework* was outspoken about the importance of headwaters areas such as the Bighorn, and now the *Grizzly Status Report* reinforces that. The need for protection in the Bighorn, and other non-protected headwaters such as the Castle and the Kakwa is stronger than ever."

### **For more information:**

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