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Growing Call for Trail Closures on May Long Weekend Conditions are Too Wet for Motorized Access

The Alberta Government is under increasing pressure to demonstrate that motorized access in Alberta's Eastern Slopes is being managed sustainably – by closing trails over the May long weekend. Continuing wet and snowy conditions mean that even low levels of activity would lead to unprecedented damage to trail networks. Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) supports motorized access organizations who have called for a temporary suspension of motorized trail use. AWA is calling for the Alberta government to suspend all motorized trail use in the Eastern Slopes until conditions have substantially improved.

"Alberta Sustainable Resource Development makes it very clear that it manages access to 'Enhance environmental sustainability of public lands'," says Nigel Douglas, AWA Conservation Specialist. "What is equally clear is that the level of use to be expected over a May long weekend would in no way be sustainable under current conditions."

Up and down Alberta's Eastern Slopes – from the Castle to the Ghost to the Bighorn – an unprecedentedly large amount of winter snowfall remains on the ground. Where snow has melted, ground conditions are saturated. Even normal levels of motorized access would be expected to have a severe impact on trails. And Albertans are fully aware of the amount of uncontrolled off-trail access which takes place every May long weekend.

Motorized organizations which have supported temporary trail closure include the Rocky Mountain Dirt Riders, whose trail maintenance director, Aaron Bauer, told the Calgary Herald (May 11, 2011) "Our local club supports a one-time ban over the May long weekend due to the exceptionally high snowpack and the condition of the trails." The Alberta Off-Highway Vehicle Association would also "support whatever the government decides to do."

Whether or not the Alberta government is prepared to act on the recommendations from environmental and motorized access organizations is unclear. A notice on SRD's website currently reads:

"Due to extremely wet conditions and remaining snow pack in some parts of the province, Sustainable Resource Development is considering restricting certain activities in some Forest Land Use Zones to prevent environmental damage. No decisions have been made at this time."

"Let's hope that they make up their minds soon," says Douglas. "If people are going to be able to plan their long weekends, they need to know now. We have every reason to expect users will respect the government's direction"

The Alberta government's 2007 Respect the Land brochure calls for users to "Ride when trails are dry. Avoid riding after heavy rainfall or snowmelt." The brochure emphasizes that "Off Highway Vehicles can seriously impact riparian areas, fish habitat and downstream water quality."

For more information:

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