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## MORATORIUM ON MOTORIZED ACCESS NECESSARY FOR GRIZZLY SURVIVAL

(Calgary) Industrial and public motorized access routes in grizzly bear habitat greatly exceed thresholds recommended in the Alberta government's official *Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan*. This issue is so critical that several Alberta Conservation organizations are calling for an immediate moratorium on new roads.

"Now that grizzly hunting is on hold, the primary cause of bear deaths is too much contact between bears and people due to motorized access into their habitat," says Wendy Francis, Program Director for the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative (Y2Y). "Reducing this access will benefit not only grizzlies, but also source water quality and other species at risk," she adds.

Alberta Sustainable Resource Development is more than two years behind on putting in place the motorized access guidelines specified in the Recovery Plan. Recommended to be in place by end of 2009, motorized density thresholds are set below 0.6 km/km<sup>2</sup> in core grizzly bear habitat, and below 1.2km/km<sup>2</sup> in the remainder.

"The government's management of access routes is so flawed that the goals of the recovery plan are unachievable without a completely new approach to road and motorized trail approvals," says Nigel Douglas, Conservation Specialist with the Alberta Wilderness Association. "In the meantime, if we are serious about grizzly bear recovery, the only responsible action is to halt new road and trail building until thresholds defined in the Recovery Plan are met."

The groups are basing their position on the Recovery Plan and two recent studies that calculated linear access densities (i.e., roads, trails, cut lines etc. accessible to off highway vehicles (OHVs)) much higher than the thresholds recommended for grizzly bear recovery. In the Castle watershed, identified as core grizzly bear habitat, linear access densities were double and sometimes triple the threshold. The Ghost watershed has a linear access density of 5km/km<sup>2</sup>, four times higher than the recommended threshold for non-core grizzly range.

"At these densities, an average person hiking cross-country can travel only for an hour or less before encountering a route used by some type of vehicle," explains Dianne Pachal with Sierra Club Canada's Action Grizzly Bear. "Just think of how hard it is for bears trying to avoid people and to take in enough food to survive the upcoming hibernation," she suggests.

Both reports also found evidence of a gross disregard of access closures by OHV users. "In the Castle watershed, 93% of routes not authorized for motorized access showed evidence of recent use," notes Sarah Elmeligi, Senior Conservation Planner for the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society-Southern Alberta Chapter (CPAWS). "And in the Ghost, only 7% of the trails are open for motorized recreation but 93% them show recent OHV use," she adds.

"New enforcement regulations recently passed under the *Public Lands Act* are helpful, but only if they're used to reduce access on the ground," adds Pachal. "Similar regulations previously available for much of the core habitat weren't put to use for recovery," she notes.

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## MORATORIUM ON ACCESS ROADS NECESSARY FOR GRIZZLY SURVIVAL

### Background

There has been widespread public interest in and concern for Alberta's grizzly bear population for many years. A provincial recovery plan for grizzlies has been in place for over three years. One of the recommendations of the recovery team was a deferral of new linear access. A meticulous count of grizzlies in the province completed in 2009 confirmed that there are fewer than 700 bears in the province; including portions of the mountain National Parks, far fewer than previously estimated. In a partial response to this state of affairs, the province in June 2010 declared the bears to be *Threatened* under Alberta's *Wildlife Act*.

### Importance of Linear Access Densities

The provincial *Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan* identifies human-caused mortality as a significant threat to the recovery of this species. It recommends a number of actions to address this threat, one very significant one being the management of human access through the following strategies, all to have been implemented within one year of the plan's publication (i.e., by March 2009):

- coordinated, inter-departmental road planning at the large scale before new road construction;
- maintaining a maximum open route density of 0.6km/km<sup>2</sup> in "core" grizzly bear priority areas (less is better);
- maintaining a maximum open route density of 1.2km/km<sup>2</sup> in remaining grizzly bear range;
- delayed sale of industrial allocations or only selling allocations with a restriction of no new surface access;
- deferral of resource development in areas of high quality habitat with a poor record of access control;
- deactivation of roads not in regular use within two months of last use;
- reclamation of roads no longer in use within 1 year of last use;
- enforcement of access closures using Forest Land Use Zone (FLUZ) regulations or other authority; and
- ensuring that there is no unmanaged use of off-highway vehicles (OHV), which are to be restricted to designated routes and areas.

"Core" grizzly bear priority areas were identified and their "road" densities were estimated by Scott Nielsen *et al.*<sup>1</sup> as follows:

<i>c. Road density (km/km<sup>2</sup>)</i>	Core Area	Secondary Area
Clearwater	0.48	1.09
Grande Cache	0.48	1
Livingstone	0.28	N.A.
Swan Hills	0.63	1.23
Waterton	0.37	N.A.
Yellowhead	0.47	1.07

At first glance, it appears that virtually all Core and "Secondary"<sup>2</sup> areas are currently being managed to meet the Recovery Plan's requirements for road densities (below 0.6 km/km<sup>2</sup> in Core Areas and below 1.2 km/km<sup>2</sup> in other habitat). However, it has become apparent that there are significant issues with the calculation of road densities in the Nielsen *et al.* paper and with the government's management of access routes and actual access throughout grizzly habitat.

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<sup>1</sup> Scott E. Nielsen, Jerome Cranston, Gordon B. Stenhouse, "Identification of Priority Areas for Grizzly Bear Conservation and Recovery in Alberta, Canada", *Journal of Conservation Planning* Vol. 5 (2009) pp.38 — 60

<sup>2</sup> The provincial grizzly recovery plan does not refer to "Secondary" areas. It refers only to the need for Core secure areas within each grizzly bear population unit. "Secondary" areas are a concept created by Nielsen *et al.*

## **The problems with access**

The following problems plague the calculation and management of access densities and actual access within Core and other areas within Alberta's grizzly population units:

1. the definitions for "open routes" in the Recovery Plan and "roads" in the Nielsen paper are significantly different;
2. as a consequence, true access densities within Core and remaining grizzly range are already much higher than that recommended in the Recovery Plan;
3. ongoing approvals of access for new resource development is driving access route densities even higher; and
4. there is no systematic management or enforcement of access by OHVs in Core Areas or other grizzly bear range.

### **1. Different definitions of "Open Routes" and "Roads"**

The provincial *Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan* defines "open routes" as "a route without restrictions on motorized vehicle use". This very broad definition distinguishes only between access routes that may have access restrictions (e.g., temporary, seasonal, or permanent closures, or restrictions to only authorized use) and those that have no such restrictions. Thus it appears to include any access route that is open to public use.

However, "road", as defined and calculated in the Nielsen *et al.* paper includes a much narrower range of access routes. Nielsen used a definition of routes as "roads and trails on which motorized traffic is possible". Provincial conservation organizations have been advised on several occasions by SRD staff<sup>3</sup> that this has been interpreted to mean trails and roads accessible by four-wheel drive trucks. This definition excludes all trails, seismic lines, pipelines and other routes currently used by a wide variety of OHVs and, thus, significantly underestimates true access densities.

### **2. True Access Densities already too High**

The non-government conservation community has undertaken two recent studies that provide a more accurate calculation of access densities in grizzly bear population units in southern Alberta. Global Forest Watch Canada undertook an analysis of linear disturbance and access densities in the Castle Forest Land Use Zone (FLUZ)<sup>4</sup>. The Castle FLUZ falls within the Waterton grizzly population unit and is identified entirely as "core" grizzly habitat in the Nielsen *et al.* paper. As such, the management goal is 0.6 km/km<sup>2</sup> of linear access throughout the Castle FLUZ.

The Global Forest Watch analysis concluded that the density of linear disturbances in the Castle FLUZ is 1.3 km/km<sup>2</sup> and that three watersheds (Lynx Creek, Beaver Mines Creek and the Lower Castle River) have a linear disturbance densities exceeding 2.0 km/km<sup>2</sup>. Thus, the linear disturbance density within the Castle FLUZ averages more than double the Alberta Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan's recommended threshold of 0.6 km/km<sup>2</sup> and more than triple that threshold in several watersheds and within several important grizzly bear areas.

The Ghost Watershed Alliance commissioned a report assessing the cumulative impacts, including road densities, in a study area within the Ghost River Watershed<sup>5</sup> that is entirely within the Ghost River FLUZ. The study area is entirely within non-core grizzly bear habitat, the management goal of which, according to the grizzly Recovery Plan, is access densities of 1.2 km/km<sup>2</sup>. It was found that, on average, the actual access density was 5 km/km<sup>2</sup>, more than four times the recovery plan's recommendations. Even Spray

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<sup>3</sup> E.g., (1) meeting between Wendy Francis of Y2Y, Jim Pissot of WildCanada Conservation Alliance and Jon Jorgenson of SRD in Canmore on October 25, 2010, and (2) meeting between Wendy Francis of Y2Y, Nigel Douglas of AWA, and Ron Bjorge of SRD in Calgary on November 8, 2010

<sup>4</sup> Peter Lee and Matthew Hanneman, *Castle Area Forest Land Use Zone (Alberta): Linear Disturbances, Access Densities and Grizzly Bear Habitat Security Areas*, Global Forest Watch Canada, 2010

<sup>5</sup> Ghost Watershed Alliance, *An Assessment of the Cumulative Effects of Land Uses within the Ghost River Watershed, Alberta, Canada*, 2011

Lake Sawmills' forest management plan assessed linear densities in the Ghost study area ranging from approximately 3 to 4 km/km<sup>2</sup>, 2.5 to 3 times more than is required for grizzly bear recovery.<sup>6</sup>

Provincial conservation organizations have been advised by SRD officials (see footnote 2) that access routes accessible by four wheel drives were chosen for measuring road densities because it was “too difficult” to measure all routes accessible to off-highway and all-terrain vehicles. As the Global Forest Watch and Ghost Watershed Alliance reports demonstrate, the data and methodologies necessary to measure all access routes are readily available at a cost within the reach of non-profit organizations. Such data and analysis is also readily available to the Alberta Government.

### **3. Ongoing Approvals Driving Densities Higher**

Not only are current access densities many times higher than what is necessary for grizzly bear recovery, but also the Alberta Government continues to approve new resource access roads, pipelines, seismic lines, transmission lines and other routes accessible to vehicles, constantly driving access densities even higher. The recent approval of forest harvesting plans by Spray Lakes Sawmills for within the Castle FLUZ is just one example of this.

### **4. Off Highway Vehicles are out of Control**

In addition to maintaining access densities below thresholds identified in the grizzly recovery plan, the government also has a responsibility to manage actual off-highway use to ensure that it is regulated and enforced. There is ample evidence that off-highway and all-terrain vehicles are running rampant throughout much of provincial grizzly habitat.

Within the Castle FLUZ is a network of designated motorized access routes. Global Forest Watch Canada conducted an analysis of motorized use in the FLUZ and discovered that there is significantly more access occurring in the Castle than would be the case if the designated access were obeyed and enforced. Of the 42 linear disturbances surveyed that were not authorized for vehicular access, 39 (92.9%), had evidence of being used by motorized vehicles, as indicated by vehicular tracks and trails. Only two had no evidence of being used by vehicles.

Field inspection within the Ghost River Watershed produced very similar results evidencing a very high degree of non-compliance with or enforcement of closed access routes. Only 2 of 29 (7%) of the trails and linear features examined were posted with signs indicating they were open for motorized recreation. However, during field assessments in 2010, 27 of 29 (93%) of linear features and trails examined showed recent OHV use.

### **Deferral of new access necessary**

Given the consistency in findings between the Global Forest Watch and Ghost Watershed Alliance reports, it is reasonable to conclude that linear access densities are exceeding the thresholds recommended for grizzly bear recovery and that actual motorized access is occurring in an essentially unregulated or unenforced manner throughout grizzly habitat in Alberta.

Such being the case, every industrial access road, seismic line, pipeline and transmission corridor approved within grizzly habitat is making the situation worse for Alberta's Threatened grizzly bear population. The only reasonable and precautionary response is an immediate halt to all approvals that create new access until:

1. there is an accurate calculation of linear access densities for all core grizzly habitat within Alberta's grizzly bear population units,
2. actions have been taken to remove and effectively close access such that the effective linear access densities are at or below 0.6km/km<sup>2</sup> within the designated “core” portion of each grizzly bear population unit and below 1.2km/km<sup>2</sup> within remaining grizzly bear range, and

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<sup>6</sup> Spray Lakes Sawmill, *Detailed Forest Management Plan*, 2007

3. a comprehensive plan is in place to designate motorized trails and manage and enforce motorized access throughout grizzly bear range in the province.