

# SUSTAINABLE FORESTS, SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES. THE FUTURE OF ALBERTA'S SOUTHWESTERN FORESTS

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Management of forests in southwestern Alberta – or more frequently their mismanagement – has been in the news often over the past five or six years. Communities from the Ghost to Bragg Creek to the Crowsnest to Beaver Mines have spoken out clearly to oppose plans for clearcut logging programs in their local forests. The imminent clearcut logging plans for the Castle region have been the most recent plans to raise the ire of residents throughout the south-west.

Increasingly people realize that these are not just local issues: they are symptoms of a bigger problem with the way our southern forests are managed. Essentially Alberta manages these forests first and foremost to supply timber. All of the ecological services that forests provide – production of clean drinking water, habitat for wildlife, recreation opportunities – come a distant second.

The forests of southwest Alberta occupy a relatively thin strip of land between the mountains and the grasslands. Their ecological importance is far greater than their physical area. These forests are “water towers;” they ensure clean, abundant drinking water for communities across southern Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba where water is a scarce resource. They provide habitat for a rich array of flora and fauna, including threatened and endangered species such as grizzly bear, cutthroat trout and limber pine. They are also a prime recreational area for more than one million Albertans.

AWA has been pleased to host a number of environmental groups, landowner organizations, watershed groups and

businesses, working to present an alternative model of forest management in Alberta. The new report, *Sustainable Forests, Sustainable Communities: The Future of Alberta's Southwestern Forests*, was released on October 25, 2011 and outlines a number of recommendations. They include:

- “The first priority of forest management in southwestern Alberta forests will be the conservation of the ecological values of the forest, including provision of clean, abundant water, diverse forest ecosystems, wildlife habitat and connectivity, and natural carbon capture and storage.”
- “The second priority will be appropriate human use of the same forested landscape, including appropriate recreation and tourism, and sustainable forestry.”
- “Public consultation processes will be accessible, accountable and transparent.”

The groups are very clear that they are not opposed to logging. But they are opposed to current logging practices, particularly the huge cutblocks which have become a normal feature of so many of our public land forests. Recent public opinion polls suggest that the majority of Albertans agree: polls carried out in 2011 first in the communities of Lethbridge and Coaldale, and second in Pincher Creek, Fort Macleod, and Crowsnest Pass found that 80 percent and 77 percent of people respectively would support no commercial logging (surveys conducted by Lethbridge Citizen Society Research Lab and Praxis survey respectively).

Two things are particularly striking about

the groups who have signed on to these recommendations. First is the geographical spread of these groups: organizations from the Castle all the way up to Bragg Creek and the Ghost are calling for very similar things. Second, the diversity of the voices speaking out, including tourism groups, local businesses and landowner groups, is impressive. A growing list of businesses and organizations are still signing on to these recommendations. They include:

- Alberta Wilderness Association
- Beaver Mines Store
- Bert Riggall Environmental Foundation
- Bow Valley Naturalists
- Bragg Creek Environmental Coalition
- Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (Southern Alberta Chapter)
- Castle Crown Wilderness Coalition
- Crowsnest Conservation Society
- Full Circle Adventures
- Ghost Watershed Alliance Society
- Livingstone Landowners Group
- South Porcupine Hills Stewardship Association
- Southern Alberta Group for the Environment
- Stop the Castle Logging Group
- Trail of the Great Bear
- Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative

The recommendations have been sent to Premier Redford. There is certainly some optimism that, with a renewed commitment to “transparency and accountability,” this government will be willing to look at a new more constructive and balanced approach to managing forests, one that respects all of their values and not just the dollar value of the timber that can be removed. ▲

THERE IS AN URGENT NEED TO CREATE AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL OF FOREST MANAGEMENT IN ALBERTA. WE ENVISION A NEW MODEL, BASED ON ECOSYSTEM MANAGEMENT, GUIDED BY INDEPENDENT SCIENTIFIC EXPERTISE AND AUGMENTED BY LOCAL COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION AND BENEFIT. WE ARE NOT OPPOSED TO ALL LOGGING. INSTEAD WE SUPPORT THE DEVELOPMENT OF A FOREST MANAGEMENT MODEL THAT MAINTAINS HEALTHY FOREST ECOSYSTEMS AS ITS PRIMARY FUNCTION, AND OFFERS SUSTAINABLE BENEFITS TO COMMUNITIES FROM THE WISE USE OF THESE FORESTS.

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Alberta's forests deserve so much more than these unsubtle clearcut blocks in southern Kananaskis Country.

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