

Logging Trumps All Other Concerns in the Castle: Findings from a Freedom of Information Application

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Alberta's forest division seemed to pay little heed to anti-logging protests such as this one near Beaver Mines.

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In early 2012 a dramatic scene unfolded day by day in southern Alberta's Castle. Opposition to the planned clearcut logging program was becoming louder and louder; thousands of letters were written criticizing the logging plans; demonstrations were held in Beaver Mines as well as Calgary and Edmonton; they culminated in the arrest of four protesters on February 1. Yet the Alberta government still was deaf to any voice other than the clearcut logging mantra, seemingly driven by... but what were they driven by?

As the clearcut logging plans continued unabated, AWA increasingly wondered why the government was so determined to push ahead with its unpopular logging plans in the face of growing local opposition and in the absence of any scientific or economic justification for doing so. So in February 2012, AWA applied under the provincial Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FOIP) to try to uncover some of the behind-the-scenes correspondence behind this seemingly inexplicable process. How were decisions being made when there seemed to be no rational justification for them?

In early July, 379 pages of FOIP documents arrived at the AWA office. As usual with these FOIP applications, the documents contain many many gaps and unanswered questions. Only one third of the material applied for was deemed to be in the "public interest" and so provided

without fee. If we wished to see the remaining two-thirds, there would be a substantial fee. Of course there was no way of questioning this "public interest" determination: who decides what's in the public interest and according to what criteria?

Despite the selective nature of the material supplied, there is much interesting information to be gleaned from those 379 pages. There are a few snippets of striking information, a lot of holes, but more than anything, a pervading sense of a Forestry Division entirely devoted to the practice of clearcut logging. It was not going to listen to any alternatives, not even from other divisions within the same ministry.

Though the Fish and Wildlife Division and Forestry Division were both part of the Ministry of Sustainable Resource Development, the FOIP documents leave no doubt that one division – Fish and Wildlife – was very much the junior partner; all of the shots were called by the forest division. Clearcut logging plans were made by the forest division, working closely with the logging company Spray Lake Sawmills (SLS). Fish and Wildlife, with a minimal complement of staff, was given very little time to respond to the plans. Whenever they were unable to respond within the time frames given, their silence was interpreted as approval. On a few occasions Fish and Wildlife wasn't even notified of plans until *after* the response window had closed.

Fish Concerns

Nevertheless, on a number of occasions, Fish and Wildlife staff raised significant concerns, but at no time did their concerns appear to lead to any changes in the planned logging. Instead responses from the forest division mainly justified why Fish and Wildlife recommendations would not be adopted.

Concerns were raised numerous times about the likely impacts of forestry activities on habitat for westslope cutthroat trout (approved for listing as *Threatened* in Alberta) and bull trout (listed as a *Species of Special Concern*). "Harvest should only proceed if Forest Management and Spray Lake Sawmills can ensure changes to hydrology, stream temperature and sediment loads will not impact these species at risk," recommended Fish and Wildlife. Yet the forest division continued to propose haul roads that run within a few metres of trout spawning creeks.

Concerns were expressed at the negative effects on fish habitat if logging access were to be added to the existing network of poorly-designed recreational motorized vehicle trails: "the state of the designated trails in this area is appalling and makes it very difficult to encourage SLS to be more precautionary with their own roading and stream crossing options." This resulted in little more than an acknowledgement that "the designated trail system is what it is," leading one person to question "how recreational interests on trail use supercede fish and wildlife protection interests / values."

Wildlife Concerns

Other Fish and Wildlife concerns included the likely impacts of logging on threatened grizzly bears. “Structure retention should be increased to higher levels for harvest plans in Grizzly bear core areas,” said one proposal. This recommendation was curtly dismissed as “outside the scope of OGR (operating ground rules).” Grizzly concerns were again expressed in a later Fish and Wildlife email, written on February 1, the day that Castle protesters were being arrested. “As you may be aware, proposed harvest areas in this (area) provide some of the more contiguous and unfragmented / key habitat for grizzly bears in this area and it is defined as core habitat as part of our recovery plan. During collaboration with researchers over the last decade, we have captured, collared, tracked and observed grizzly bears throughout this area and have found high use and selectivity during the summer months. Low elevation denning of grizzly bears have been verbally reported to us (sic)... In short, bears use this area extensively.” Once again, there is no evidence that these considerations made a whit of difference.

Similarly, in a January 25 news release, AWA and the Wild Canada Conservation Alliance raised the issue of winter logging operations and their potential to displace or even kill denning bears. According to the operating ground rules (OGRs) for forestry operations, Spray Lakes Sawmills is required to produce maps showing den sites of black and grizzly bears. Conservationists requested copies of these maps and assurances that logging equipment would not disturb bears in their dens, but these were never produced. The FOIP materials do not give any indication that these maps were ever submitted by Spray Lake Sawmills or approved by Fish and Wildlife.

Another typical case involves long-toed salamanders which are listed as a *Species of Special Concern* in Alberta. The OGRs for forestry operations call for a 100-metre buffer for ponds containing the salamanders. As forest division plans called for development close to a stream where the salamanders have been recorded (the exact distance has been deleted from the documents), Fish and Wildlife raised their concerns, but these concerns were once again brushed off. “SLS is confident that the

30-90 m buffer left will adequately protect the salamander,” reads the forest division’s response, adding that “the OGRs refer to the buffering of ponds not streams.” Without any explanation the forest division appears willing to give more weight to the logging company’s expertise on salamanders than its own colleagues, particularly when the salamanders are foolish enough to inhabit the wrong type of water body!

Rare Plant Concerns

The issue of rare plants in the Castle is another case where the logging paradigm was allowed to run roughshod over other concerns. In July 2011, the Alberta Native Plant Council wrote to the forest division to enquire whether the required rare plant surveys had been carried out in the proposed logging areas, noting that “the Crown of the Continent ecosystems in southwestern Alberta harbour the richest biodiversity in all of Alberta.” The resulting flurry of emails is almost comical as it becomes clear that nobody had thought to follow through with this, even though it was a requirement of the Detailed Forest Management Plan (FMP). “We might of (sic) missed this step of sharing an updated rare plant map with SLS... as committed to in the C5 FMP as well as incorporating these requirements into the new ground rules.”

Filling in the Blanks

As is often the case, one of the most striking things about reading the FOIP materials is what discussions did not appear to take place. Nowhere is there any suggestion that the Castle is any different from any other forest scheduled for logging; there is no reference to the Castle as a Special Place, designated by the Alberta government in 1998 as “a major milestone in the preservation of Alberta’s natural heritage for future generations.” There is no reference to the mounting opposition to the clearcut logging, to the thousands of letters and emails, or to the extensive media coverage.

Even more surprising is the fact that there is not even any reference to the government’s own land-use planning process, the Land-Use Framework, and its renewed commitment to protecting headwaters forests. The 2008 *Land-Use Framework* document emphasized: “Historically, watershed and recreation

were deemed the priority uses of the Eastern Slopes. These priorities should be confirmed, and sooner rather than later.” This principle was then reaffirmed in March 2011 in the draft recommendations of the South Saskatchewan Regional Advisory Committee which recognized the need to “Manage land in the headwaters (e.g., Eastern Slopes and Cypress Hills areas) so that maintaining watershed integrity is given highest priority by considering impacts of land disturbance in management decisions.” There is no indication that this led to any changes within the forest division.

The period during which the Castle clearcut logging decisions were being made was a somewhat turbulent one in Alberta, with an internal battle for the leadership of the governing Provincial Conservative party. Though the Alberta government under Premier Alison Redford was elected on a platform of openness and transparency, unfortunately it appears that her southwestern forest division did not get the memo. The documents suggest that Alberta’s forests still seem to be managed almost as a personal fiefdom. Clearcut logging has been the mainstay of forest management in this area for decades, and there is no intention of changing that, regardless of what is going on in the world outside forest division offices. The circular, self-fulfilling philosophy seems to be: “we must manage forests this way because we have always managed forests this way.”

Now that the Sustainable Resource Development ministry has been merged with the Environment Ministry, it may be that other concerns – particularly water concerns – will belatedly be allowed to play a role in future management decisions. One response from a beleaguered and entrenched forest division might be to dig in further and try to ensure that future concerns are not put on record, so as to prevent them from being revealed in future FOIP applications. Or alternatively, perhaps the notorious atmosphere of secrecy which surrounds the decisions of the forest division will in future be thrown open to more scrutiny. Alberta’s forests in general, and certainly the precious and fragile forests of the Castle, deserve so much more than a singular management focus on providing a sustained supply of low quality timber. ♣