

Logging the Castle: Now You See It, Now You Don't

On October 10, Albertans learned of a decision made by Alberta Environment and Sustainable Resource Development (AESRD) to impose a delay on logging in the C5 Forest Management Unit. The way in which Albertans learned this was telling: it was not through any announcement by AESRD, not through any notice on the AESRD web site. Instead, the only publicity this decision initially received was a lone story on page 6 of the *Pincher Creek Echo* – a manner so discreet that AWA was at first uncertain whether there was any substance to the story at all.

Following investigation on the part of AWA and other ENGOs, confirmation eventually emerged that a decision had in fact been made that would change the ground reality in the Castle. Of the roughly 770 hectares of forest flagged to be logged by Spray Lake Sawmills (SLS) under a plan approved by AESRD in September 2011, that portion scheduled for harvest this winter (roughly one third) will be permitted to continue. The remainder of the plan is to be placed on hold pending the completion of the *South Saskatchewan Regional Plan* (SSRP).

As was the case with the method of announcement, clarity regarding many aspects of this decision remained wanting. Even to confirm the above facts,

AWA had to resort to digging through documents obtained under a request made under the provisions of the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* (FOIP) earlier this year.

This is the kind of decision that any number of concerned parties have been asking and waiting for since February, when several local residents were willing to put their personal freedom on the line and be arrested rather than stand by to see their beloved Castle logged without any resistance. It was therefore initially puzzling that AESRD did not see fit to so much as let the environmental community know that the decision had been made, much less explain what the decision actually entailed.

The devil, as the saying goes, turns out to be in the details. Although it appeared at first as though it might have been the entire C5 falling under this stay of execution, it soon emerged that this was not the case. Rather, only forests within the Castle Special Management Area would be spared for the time being. For the rest of the C5 and elsewhere the plan remains, “full steam ahead.” As of the time you're reading these words, logging has started in the Hidden Creek area of the Livingstone-Porcupine, some of the only remaining habitat for the fast-disappearing westslope cutthroat trout. There have also been recent logging plan approvals in the Trout Creek, as well as

in West Bragg Creek, elsewhere in Spray Lake Sawmills' Forest Management Area. It may be that SLS will try to use this stay in the Castle as leverage to obtain fast-tracking of approvals elsewhere in its mandates.

Of potentially longer-term concern, it is important also to note that this decision does not represent any permanent halt to logging even in the Castle. It is merely a delay until the SSRP comes out. It is encouraging that AESRD is showing some willingness to hold industry to this same constraint that they have been imposing on environmental legislation for some time. But make no mistake: there is no guarantee that once the SSRP comes out it will respect the multitude of wilderness values in Alberta's southwest forests. It may end up being just as beholden to valuing forests only for their saleable timber as is the existing legislation.

Will this delay turn out to be a portent of long-term changes for the better? Or is it only so much “smoke and mirrors” - a distraction before the fellers start again in earnest? Time will tell, but in the meantime, AWA continues pressuring the government to do the responsible thing, to include legislation under the SSRP friendly to true sustainability and to help ensure the Castle retains its existing magic

- Sean Nichols

Logging begins in the Castle, February 2012.

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