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Last Stand for Threatened Bull Trout – Logged

In Alberta's secluded Hidden Creek, a rapid-fire "blink and you'll miss it" logging operation is coming to a swift close. Hidden Creek is the most important spawning grounds for threatened bull trout in the entire Oldman River system in southern Alberta, and is also home to threatened westslope cutthroat trout. For a paltry \$17,000 of timber royalties, this important refuge is now jeopardized by a new road and clear cuts that will alter its water quality and quantity.

Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) believes that the details surrounding this logging operation, including the lack of an appropriate risk assessment, the speed of the operation, and numerous deviations allowed from the Operating Ground Rules, point to a failure on the part of the Government of Alberta to adequately protect these threatened species.

Spray Lake Sawmills (SLS) is responsible for logging this area and indicates they are operating as if Hidden Creek were a Class A stream. "During a tour of the logging with SLS representatives, AWA observed that significant harmful deviations to the Operating Ground Rules had been approved," says Sean Nichols, conservation specialist with Alberta Wilderness Association. "An entire kilometer of the road length is within 100 meters of the creek, and in one place the approved road is within 10 meters of a cliff edge above the creek: this is not acceptable for protecting a Class A stream with threatened native fish. We can expect to see significant sedimentation and silting of a stream that is essential to the regional survival of bull trout." AWA is also concerned that tributaries of Hidden Creek have been logged and that requirements for Class A waterbodies may not have been considered.

Retired biologist Lorne Fitch agrees: "It's one thing to say that Hidden Creek is a Class A stream," he says, "but it's another to actually treat it as one."

AWA has always had grave concerns with logging in the headwaters of the upper Oldman River and during the 1980's fought to save the Hidden Creek area from logging because it is a vital headwaters area. We were not successful. When AWA learned of the logging planned in this area again, we wrote to the Premier and the Minister of Alberta Environment and Sustainable Resource Development (AESRD) and to date, six weeks later, we have had no reply. The logging operation allowed in Hidden Creek reflects a long-standing, outdated approach to forest management that falls short of best standards for ecosystem management in the design, approval and implementation of logging plans.

While heartened by the October decision to temporarily halt logging in the Castle, AWA believes that given we are in the middle of a significant government-led land use planning process for the South Saskatchewan region, it was inappropriate for this decision to be followed by the approval of operations in vital habitat for threatened species elsewhere.

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