

Updates

South Saskatchewan Regional Plan

On July 23, 2014 while many were away on holidays and enjoying the beautiful summer weather, the Alberta government released the final South Saskatchewan Regional Plan (SSRP). It came into effect on September 1. In some regards it was an improvement from the draft plan released last October, but AWA sees it as a missed opportunity. Five years in the making... we and many Albertans hoped for more. Meaningful environmental protection on Alberta's public lands still tiptoes around most industrial development opportunities.

The good news first. The plan has created three new Wildland Provincial Parks including 54,588ha in the Castle, 4,498ha along the Livingstone Range, and High Rock's 8,348ha running along the British Columbia border. Bluerock, Bob Creek, Bow Valley, and Don Getty Wildland Provincial Parks have all been expanded in the south Saskatchewan region along with the establishment of several new and expanded provincial recreation areas. More than 34,000ha of grazing leased public land was designated as Pekisko Heritage Rangelands. Perhaps this designation will provide momentum for more Heritage Rangeland designations and encourage other ranchers to embrace this option.

The plan states that on Green Areas of Crown Land "watershed management and headwaters protection is the priority. Forests will be managed with this as **the highest priority** (including water storage, recharge and release functions)." (Emphasis added) This is an example of some of the more promising statements in the plan but whether measurable changes will occur to support these kinds of statements remain to be seen.

Now the 'not so good' news. For a plan intended to guide decisions on how to manage increased competing uses on the

same landscape, the SSRP falls far short of that goal. It remains filled with ambiguous language as it tries to allow everyone to do everything in the same place, at the same time.

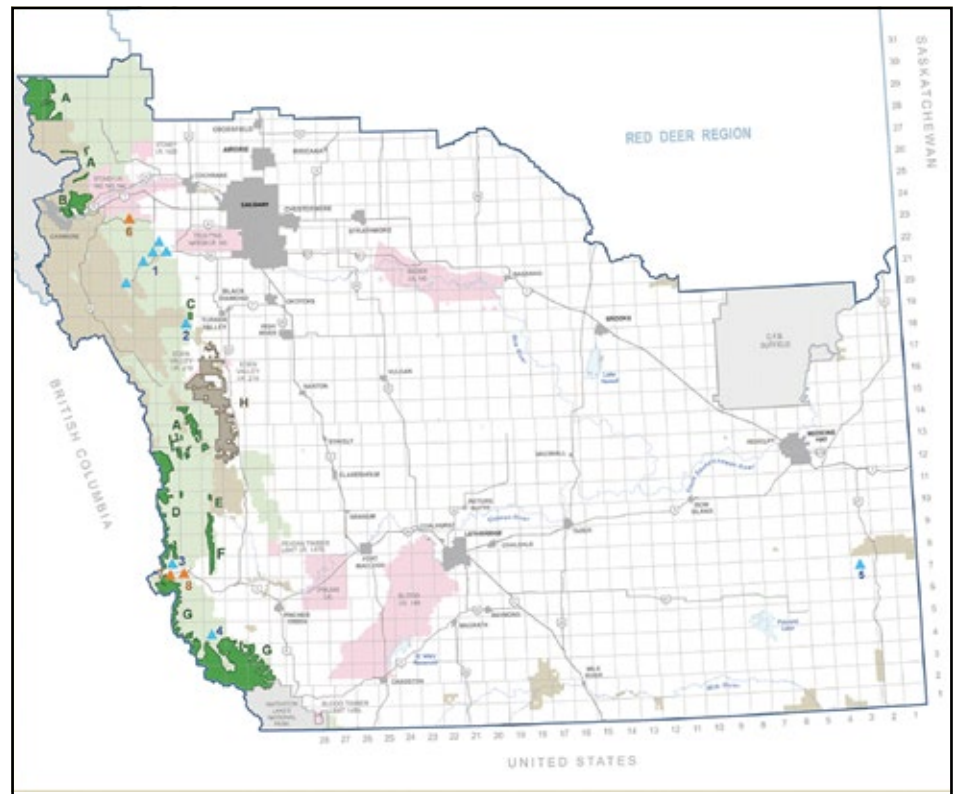
Many key conservation pieces are missing. These are the pieces needed to turn the SSRP into more of a balanced land use plan that takes cumulative effects into account. The Regional Trails System Plan, Linear Footprint Management Plan, Biodiversity Management Framework, and Recreation Access Management Plans will not be completed until the end of 2015 or later. The south Saskatchewan region desperately needs limits on human access and industrial development now.

The Milk River and Wild Horse Plains grassland areas appear on a map for priority sub-regional planning. This is hopeful but, meanwhile, no new designated conservation areas were established in either of those areas. This still leaves the majority

of the region's species at risk vulnerable to further population declines. Oil and gas exploitation continues and native grasslands still may be converted into agricultural lands under the SSRP.

To the provincial government's credit, the plan acknowledges the importance of wildlife connectivity, and key guidelines and projects that will contribute to developing wildlife corridors in the Bow Valley and Crowsnest area. However, the new and expanded Wildland Provincial Parks previously mentioned do not provide the connectivity and landscape-level protection that many species need to survive. The parks omit critical valleys supporting unusual plant and animal diversity and very few of the tributaries that are known critical habitat for threatened trout are within their boundaries.

The designation of the Castle Wildland Provincial Park left many disappointed because the park excludes half of the land-



The South Saskatchewan Region CREDIT: GOVERNMENT OF ALBERTA

scape – arguably the biologically richer half – that conservation groups and many other Albertans have been asking to see protected as park for decades.

The bottom line is that protection of high value ecosystems continues to wait while the economic development train continues apace. If conservation was a person, she's being asked to sit patiently at the station in the hope that some day the conservation express will be allowed on Alberta's tracks.

- *Brittany Verbeek*