

Sustainable Forests, Sustainable Communities

The Future of Alberta's Southwestern Forests

Citizens and associations from communities throughout southwestern Alberta have joined together to document serious concerns with current industrial-scale logging practices and present an alternative vision for the management of Alberta's southwestern forests¹.

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.

Priority Recommendations for Sustainable Forest Management

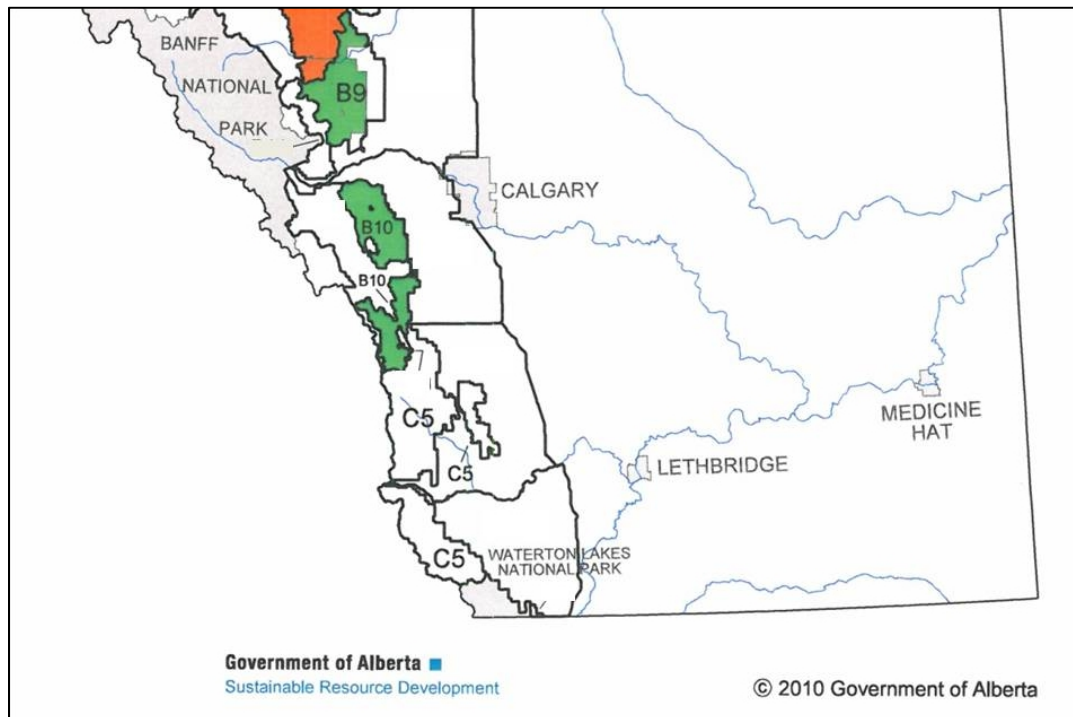
- The first priority of forest management in southwestern Alberta forests will be the conservation of the ecological values of the forest, including provision of clean, abundant water, diverse forest ecosystems, wildlife habitat and connectivity, and natural carbon capture and storage.
- The second priority will be appropriate human use of the same forested landscape, including appropriate recreation and tourism, and sustainable forestry.
- Government agencies, in order to serve the public, will better integrate forest, wildlife, watershed and recreation management with clear objectives, monitoring, and transparency.
- Public consultation processes will be accessible, accountable and transparent.
- Forest management will be based on the best available, peer-reviewed science. When there is a risk of negative impacts, the precautionary principle must prevail.
- Management practices will be geared to assist the recovery of species of concern, such as the grizzly bear and native trout.

We call on the Alberta government to change the unsustainable logging plans that are now in place and take action to develop a sustainable forest management model and implement the recommendations above.

¹ For the purposes of this document, the southwestern Alberta forests are interpreted as the forested headwaters of the Oldman and Bow Rivers, from the north boundary of Waterton Lakes National Park to a point south of Sundre.

The Area

The southwestern Alberta forests, or Southern Eastern Slopes forests (see Map 1), are *public land*, administered by the provincial government on behalf of the public. These issues and the vision discussed here are not necessarily unique to southwestern Alberta forests. Many of the principles are transferable to other areas, particularly to Alberta's northern Eastern Slopes.



Map 1. Southern Alberta, showing the C5 forest management area, and the Spray Lake Sawmill Forest Management Agreement (FMA) area (B9 and B10, shaded green), and Sunpine FMA (shaded orange).

Background

Residents living in communities in southwestern Alberta value healthy forests, with diverse native species and a natural range of young and old growth trees. They understand the importance of healthy forests for water quality and quantity: to build and hold soils, to absorb, purify and slowly release ground water as base flow for rivers. They value healthy forests for wildlife habitat, grazing habitat, and for responsible, sustainable recreation.

The forests of southwest Alberta's form 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 the "water towers" that 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 wildlife, including threatened and endangered species such as grizzly bear, cutthroat trout and limber pine. They are also the recreational area for more than one million Albertans. At the same time these forests are also managed to supply other resources, primarily timber and oil and gas.

In recent years, many grass-roots community groups have actively opposed industrial logging in southwestern Alberta forests. Individuals and groups living and working in communities such as Calgary,

the Ghost, Bragg Creek, Crowsnest Pass, Lethbridge, Pincher Creek and Beaver Mines have all spoken out strongly against industrial forestry practices that degrade forest health and water security. The position of these groups is firmly backed by public opinion. Polls carried out in 2011 in the communities of Lethbridge and Coaldale, and Pincher Creek, Fort Macleod, and Crowsnest Pass found that 79.5% and 77% of people respectively would support no commercial logging (surveys conducted by Lethbridge Citizen Society Research Lab and Praxis survey respectively).

Current Forest Management is Unsustainable

We question the ecological and economic sustainability of industrial, clear-cut logging in southwestern Alberta forests. Current management of forestry operations in the C5 Forest Management Area and the Spray Lake Sawmills Forest Management Agreement (FMA) area, which make up the majority of the area discussed in this document, focuses primarily on producing a continuous supply of timber, based on clearcutting to meet targeted volumes of lumber. Other forest values including watershed and wildlife health are managed as secondary objectives. These priorities must be reversed.

In a natural forest, given our historical fire frequency, approximately 40% of the forested landscape would be expected to be older than 100 years (Cyr et al, 2009²). Under the logging regimes laid out in the management plan for the Spray Lake Sawmills FMA in the Ghost area, areas of old-growth forest will be severely reduced and restricted to forests that are either non-merchantable, or located close to streams, or on excessively steep slopes. Populations of wildlife species such as pileated woodpecker and northern flying squirrel that are reliant on these habitats will also be reduced. Threatened populations of species such as grizzly bear and cutthroat trout will continue to decline due to poorly managed industrial and recreational access.

Logging in the far south of the C5 area involves a 500 kilometre round-trip to transport felled trees to the sawmill in Cochrane. Negative economic impacts include road wear, and the degradation of communities through which the logging trucks pass, as well as inefficient use of fuel and associated greenhouse gas emissions. Dry climate, high altitude and strong winds are a limiting factor in tree growth and regeneration. If the transportation and other economic costs are factored in, it is difficult to imagine how the economic benefits of this timber could possibly exceed the costs, including the watershed, environmental and recreational costs.

Current Forest Management Runs Counter to Public Opinion

Current forest management practices run contrary to public opinion in Alberta. For example:

- 79.5 percent of respondents were "strongly opposed" or "somewhat opposed" to commercial logging in the Castle
(March 2011, Lethbridge Citizen Society Research Lab, survey of 771 residents of Lethbridge and Coaldale)
- 77 percent of respondents "strongly oppose" or "somewhat oppose" commercial logging in the Castle
(April 2011, Praxis, survey of 774 residents of Pincher Creek, Cowley, Crowsnest Pass, Piikani First Nation's reservation and Fort Macleod)

² D. Cyr et al. *Forest management is driving the eastern North American boreal forest outside its natural range of variability*. Published in *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, 7(10):519-524, February 2009.

The results of a 2007 Alberta government public survey, published in the *Land-Use Framework Workbook Summary Report*, contained some surprisingly strong responses from the Alberta public. For example,

- 71.8% of participants would be “willing to accept limits to Forestry development to provide for more Watershed Protection”;
- 95% of respondents were very concerned or somewhat concerned about the “failure to consider the combined (i.e. cumulative) effects of land use activities.”

Current Forest Management Runs Counter to the Alberta Government’s Own Policies

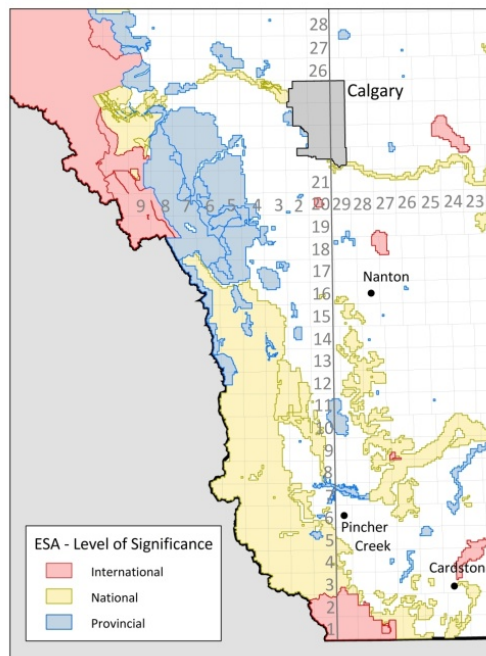
Different Government of Alberta policies governing the management of southwestern Alberta forests are at times contradictory. The current governing policy for the region, the 1984 *Policy for Resource Management on the Eastern Slopes*, states:

“the highest priority in the overall management of the Eastern Slopes is placed on watershed management.”

This priority is reinforced by the province’s 2008 Land-Use Framework, which states:

“Historically, watershed and recreation were deemed the priority uses of the Eastern Slopes. These priorities should be confirmed, and sooner rather than later.”

The Government of Alberta’s 2009 maps of Environmentally Significant Areas (ESAs) in the province designate Alberta’s southwestern forests as *Nationally Significant* with the remainder as *Provincially Significant* (see Map 2).



Map 2. Environmentally Significant Areas. From Government of Alberta, 2009.

But at the same time, plans for forestry operations in the region have different priorities. The Spray Lake Sawmills FMA, for example, was established “to provide for a perpetual sustained yield of timber” (*Detailed Forest management Plan, Spray Lake Sawmills, 2006*).

This clash of priorities was recognized by CROWPAC, the public advisory committee for the C5 Forest Management Plan, in 2006: “The plan centers on the sustainable harvest of timber while considering other values. This is clearly an economic point of view. However no-one has yet been able to provide a reliable analysis of the economic benefits derived from the other ways in which we use the forest. This is an area that is quantifiable and should be addressed if we are looking at maximizing benefit to Albertans. The forest may be able to generate equivalent revenue in more socially and ecologically friendly ways.” (CROWPAC, March 2006).

Principles of Sustainable Forest Management

- The first priority of forest management in southwestern Alberta forests will be the conservation of the ecological values and services of the forest, including provision of clean, abundant water, diverse forest ecosystems, wildlife habitat and carbon capture and storage. Diverse forest ecosystems include High Conservation Value forests, old growth forests, natural age structures, natural edge structure, habitat connectivity, critical wildlife habitat and watercourses.
- The second priority will be appropriate human use of the same forested landscape, including appropriate recreation and tourism, and sustainable forestry.
- Government agencies, in order to serve the public, will better integrate forest, wildlife, watershed and recreation management with clear objectives, monitoring, and transparency. Ministries responsible for forests, water, wildlife and recreation must be better integrated.
- Public consultation processes will be accessible, accountable and transparent.
- Forest management must be based on the best available, peer-reviewed science. When there is a risk of negative impacts, the precautionary principle³ must prevail. Management practices must assist recovery of species of concern such as grizzly bears and native fish.
- Logging, re-planting and reclamation will mimic and foster natural ecosystem functions.
- To the best extent possible, existing roads and infrastructure will be used. If not in regular use for over two months, roads must be deactivated.
- Off-Highway Vehicles (OHVs) will be allowed only where there is a sustainable trail system that does not interfere with ecological values of the forest. Enforcement of motorized access will be greatly increased. Management of motorized recreational use will be the joint responsibility of SRD, and forestry companies operating in the area.
- Forest management practices will produce local benefits, and be fostered by local input.
- Forest management will result in practices that adapt to the effects of climate change, such as changing distribution of tree species due to changing climatic conditions.

³ The 1992 United Nations *Rio Declaration* defines the *precautionary principle*: “Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation.”

In order for this new model to become reality, we call on the Alberta government to:

- commit to ecosystem-based forest management in southwestern Alberta forests
- change the unsustainable logging plans currently in place
- take action to develop and implement this model of sustainable forest management

These recommendations are endorsed by:

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

Southern Alberta Group for the Environment

Stop the Castle Logging Group

Trail of the Great Bear

Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative