

At the Top of Grassy Mountain

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Sometimes it takes climbing to the very top of a mountain to get the whole picture. A 360 degree view. I had the opportunity to do just that on Grassy Mountain at the invitation of Riversdale Resources' staff. I was invited to tour the proposed coal mine site on what turned out to be a stunning September day in the Crowsnest Pass.

We met for lunch prior to the tour at the Crowsnest Pass Golf and Country Club, at a cozy clubhouse tucked in the valley just north of Blairmore. I found the meeting spot somewhat ironic considering Riversdale has received conditional approval by council to locate their coal load out facility right on portions of the *golf course*. The Golf and Country Club website touts that it's been "voted Alberta's most scenic golf course;" that opinion may be hard to maintain if the scenery afforded by its mountain vistas is replaced by the stark industrial presence of a coal conveyor belt system and load out facility.

After lunch, I headed north on the seven kilometre drive to the mine area with two Riversdale staff, an aquatic ecologist, and a local retired coal miner. The company truck took us past remnants of old buildings, private lands, evidence of off-highway vehicle traffic, and meandering cows until we began ascending the precarious switchbacks of Grassy Mountain. Riversdale staff helped us orient ourselves; identifying landmarks and explaining some of the current and historical land uses in the area. They told us Grassy Mountain had been previously mined without much (if any) reclamation. Nowhere was that more obvious than

standing at the end of the mine road near the top of the Grassy Mountain. The coal seams were very evident in several deep gashes along the crest of the mountain.

They also pointed out that the surrounding area is in far from pristine ecological condition. And they were absolutely right. As with so many other areas in Alberta, overlapping land uses abound. There is a lot going on or has gone on behind those hills north of Highway 3 and many of the scars are visible from the top of Grassy Mountain. The Forest Reserve lands to the north and west showed both old and recent clear cuts. Roads wound through the valley on either side headed to oil and gas well pads and private properties.

Grazing agreements on public and private land allow cattle to roam the area. And, although not entirely visible from our viewpoint, I was told by Riversdale that many of the legacy logging trails in the area are now heavily used by motorized recreationists.

The Riversdale staff said on several occasions while on the tour that their company is committed to fully reclaiming the mine area once they have completed extracting the coal. Their point of view is that they do not see any other company or any level of government ready to fund the already much needed reclamation. Someone said to me afterward that this point of view sounded a bit like the infamous military quote 'it be-



Grassy Mountain's ridge was split open by several of these deep cuts revealing the layers of mineral deposits including black coal seams. PHOTO: © D. MAYHOOD



The view from the top of Grassy Mountain shows the scars of multiple land uses on the surrounding landscapes and the need for restoration in the area.
Photo © D. MAYHOOD



The east side of Grassy Mountain was lined with un-reclaimed dirt slopes. Slumping had occurred in several spots where access fluid from drilling had flowed down into the valley below.
Photo © D. MAYHOOD

came necessary to destroy the village in order to save it.’ The life of the mine would be 25 or more years if approved, and that’s not including several years of pre-construction and post-reclamation work. Our poor cutthroat trout, hanging on by a fin in Gold Creek, and many other local species, may not have the stamina to withstand such a long period of disturbance and degradation.

In good company form, the Riversdale staff ensured us that protecting Gold creek was a high priority for them. They say they envision a collaborative approach to restoring and protecting the creek and the life it supports. But I believe we have other options to restore Gold Creek and the mine area that do not involve several more decades of coal mining, as well-intentioned as Riversdale may be. The provincial government is due to complete the Linear Footprint Management Plan and other sub-regional plans for the Livingstone area, which includes Grassy Mountain, by the end of this year. These plans could scale back significantly the amount of linear disturbance in the region. It’s well known that these disturbances have surpassed scientific species at risk thresholds. Damaging roads and trails may be reclaimed; stream crossings may be improved or removed. We can begin restoring the area to a more natural state. Excellent collaborative restoration work is already taking place

on other streams in the Oldman watershed that are home to native trout populations, including Hidden Creek and Dutch Creek.

Riversdale staff also told us they plan to have their Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) completed in the coming months. The project’s EIA will be submitted to the Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency (CEAA) to be evaluated by an independent review panel. I find it puzzling that, as news of low coal prices, layoffs, and mine closures remain in headlines across Canada and around the world, Riversdale’s Grassy Mountain Coal Project continues to chug along the regulatory line. Intended destination? Project approval.

Another topic of conversation during the tour was Riversdale’s relationship with adjacent landowners and the local community. Road access seemed to be a bone of contention with some of the landowners. Riversdale now technically owns the road, and thus far has not restricted access for landowners, recreation users, or members of the Gold Creek Grazing Cooperative. Yet that will likely change if the mine is approved.

From what Riversdale staff said and after reading many of the public submissions on CEAA’s website regarding this particular mine proposal, people have some genuine and very valid health, environmental, and property value concerns. Many questions

have been raised about ground and surface water impacts, air and noise pollution, impacts on wildlife, and whether the mine will ultimately benefit or hurt the local economy.

It has become extremely personal for some of the landowners adjacent to the proposed mine. Some have, with great reluctance and sadness, sold their properties to Riversdale. Other locals have told me they would seriously consider moving away if the mine was approved. I’ve heard many times that the Crowsnest Pass community, in a sense, has been teetering on the fence for quite some time between embracing big industry or embracing tourism to stimulate the local economy. With the newly designated Castle Parks now as a neighbour to the south, it seems a better time than any to revamp the Crowsnest Pass as a gateway community for angling expeditions, ecotourism, and low impact recreation in the surrounding areas. I hope it doesn’t regress to a coal mining community.

As I stood on the top of Grassy Mountain on that near perfect autumn day, I stared all around me at the never ending landscape. I found it hard to imagine what it would look like during and after 25 years of coal mining. I thought how strange it was that I might outlast something as sturdy and long lived as the mountain I was standing on. 🍄