

Landowners concerned with OHVs

J.W. Schnarr, Lethbridge Herald, 21 March 2016

A group of landowners is calling on the province to ban the use of off highway vehicles (OHV) in critical areas along the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains in southern Alberta. The Livingstone Landowners Guild issued a media release last week stating the group is asking for the restrictions as part of their efforts to “keep the world class landscape on both sides of Alberta’s Cowboy Trail — Highway 22 — teeming with wildlife and rich in scenic beauty.” The LLG describe themselves as a group of property owners in the upper Oldman River drainage area that includes ranchers, acreage owners, small business operators, and those with an interest in and who work hard to be good stewards.

Some of the main concerns the group has with OHV use include: OHVs trespassing on private land and grazing leases, sometimes cutting fences to do so; disturbing domestic cattle on public land grazing permit areas; pushing wildlife from heavily travelled public forest lands onto private lands where conflicts can result; causing weed infestations that spread from damaged public land soils into carefully managed native rangelands; increased wear and tear on area roads from OHV laden trailers hauled behind private vehicles day after day, causing a burden to local taxpayers; and reduced groundwater recharge because of rapid drainage of runoff down numerous unplanned and poorly laid out OHV trails.

Bruce Mowat is a member of the LLG and said pressure is growing from OHV users, particularly urban ones, who have been driving elk out of wooded areas and onto his property. “The population has increased quite a bit, so it is putting a lot of pressure on us,” he said. “We don’t mind a few. Like, 100 head, I wouldn’t mind. But when you get 400 head, that’s a lot of elk.” The animals are similar in size to beef cows, and the damage they can do to crops, grasses, and fences quickly amount to a substantial issue for landowners. Dan McKim is another spokesperson for the LLG who says the proliferation of OHV use in the area has exploded over the past 20 years. “We’ve got to get a handle on this and draw it back, so there are designated places for quadding,” he said.

The group would like to see OHV use restricted to areas not deemed parks or classified as critical wildlife or prime protection areas under the Eastern Slopes Policy. It should be prohibited in areas critical to the survival of threatened species such as the Westslope Cutthroat trout. In the places where OHV use can be permitted, motorized vehicles should be restricted to a few properly designed trails that minimize surface runoff and erosion. They are also looking for more enforcement so these rules will be strictly enforced.

In 2015, the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) Southern and Northern Alberta chapters commissioned a survey about recreation activity and behaviour, related to nature and outdoor recreation. The survey discussed the issue with 1,300 Albertans and came to a number of conclusions: The findings showed 76 per cent of those surveyed take part in some form of outdoor recreation, and 67 per cent prefer non-motorized recreation. Most (77 per cent) preferred designated campgrounds to random camping. Two per cent said they participate in OHV use in the summer and three per cent said they take part in it in the winter. Overall, 94 per cent were in favour of land being set aside for wilderness protection.

Damage must stop to Eastern Slopes

By [Rick Zemanek - Red Deer Advocate](#)

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There's a "perfect storm" brewing along of our precious Eastern Slopes at the hands of off-highway vehicle drivers recklessly opening up deep wounds in the environmentally fragile landscapes.

A conservation group has sounded the alarm, and warned that unless the provincial government puts the brakes on unregulated access to these forests, pristine rivers and vulnerable watersheds "immediately," we are courting a tsunami of devastation beyond recovery. And that's not overstating the dilemma.

"Tens of thousands of Albertans are calling for strict limits on off-highway vehicles along Alberta's Eastern Slopes, and for a ban on OHVs in Alberta's parks and protected areas," says the West Athabasca Bioregional Society (in Jasper/Hinton/Edson). "Poor management of the cumulative impacts of industrial developments from oil and gas, forestry and mining along the Eastern Slopes has created the 'perfect storm' of unregulated access from OHV users."

Hinton area rancher and horse-packing guide Rocky Notnes is livid. "OHVs of all types are wreaking havoc in many local areas of land bordering the mountains of Jasper National Park and the Willmore Wilderness Park, all the way to Grande Cache," says Notnes. "This kind of abuse makes it impossible for other user groups to enjoy the same landscapes."

Further, habitat fragmentation from industrial and uncontrolled motorized recreation access is imposing a death sentence on Alberta's native trout species.

The watershed society is part of Alberta's conservation community that recently called on the government "to take a strong stand on years of unchecked damage to our Eastern Slopes watersheds." And that includes areas west of Red Deer where negligent conservation practices — nothing short of criminal — have placed two native trout species in peril: the bull and cutthroat.

The bull trout, Alberta's official provincial fish, has been awarded the unenviable title of "threatened" under the federal government's "Species At Risk Act."

And the International Union for Conservation of Nature has named this once-plentiful salmonid to its "Red List of Threatened Species." Central Alberta old-timers, who cut their baby teeth on West Country fishing trips, once boasted there were so many bull trout at one time "you had to hide behind a tree to bait your hook."

The iconic cutthroat trout, named for the bright red-orange streak in the fold under its mouth, joins the bull trout as "threatened."

Further north, in the Athabasca watershed, the unique and rare Athabasca Rainbow Trout, is under federal review to be listed as “endangered.” That’s one step away from extinction. “High intensity industrial and recreational land use impacts on water and wildlife, and the lack of management and protection of Alberta’s headwaters along the Eastern Slope is the foundational issue,” says the society.

Connie Simmons, watershed steward and a former board member of the watershed council, warns “The Eastern Slopes are essential as Alberta’s water tower. Impacts on the source of water for the province and beyond need to be addressed immediately.”

Continued abuse of our Eastern Slopes is out of control, the new kid on the block being OHVs. Bob Scammell, Advocate outdoors columnist recently named to the Alberta Sports Hall of Fame, calls those ripping up the West Country with these mini-tanks “kamikaze riders.”

Traditionally in Central Alberta, the May holiday weekend sees these riders emerge from hibernation and launch an all-out assault in our wilds — leaving in their wake destroyed vegetation in non-trail areas, erosion, and damaged fish-spawning streams, to name just a few. And the convoy heading out of the woods after the weekend with their OHVs caked in Eastern-Slope mud is enough evidence to back the Athabasca society’s call for tough, new laws.

This continued abuse — now unmanaged and out of control — is straining Mom Nature in healing “critical biodiversity and watershed health values,” the society warns. Such critical intrusion is also impacting Alberta’s fragile woodland caribou and grizzly bear populations.

Among the recommendations by the Athabasca society, it’s asking the government to “ban OHVs from all protected areas and parks in Alberta’s Eastern Slopes, and from areas identified as Prime Protection and Critical Wildlife Zones.”

Further, and this might be a tough pill to swallow for Central Alberta OHV riders, the society asks: “Reduce existing road and motorized trail density in Alberta’s Eastern Slopes to scientifically defensible levels.”

Ohhhh, yes! Gone are the good days when our precious West Country was largely inaccessible except by foot traffic or old logging roads. Pristine, mountain-fed streams teamed with trout and fresh-caught fish sputtered and curled in the cast-iron frying pan while a can of Libby’s Deep-Browned Pork and Beans bubbled beside the campfire. And to finish off a perfect evening meal — a cup of coffee or tea made from for-real-mountain-stream water. Back then it was safe to drink.

Our province cannot afford to remain obtuse and inactive when addressing the public’s concern over the health of our Eastern Slopes. Of late the government has been airing TV ads showing the awesome and undisputed natural wonders this province embraces and what we have to offer to tourists. But the government must remain cognizant of the fact such natural beauty blossoms only in a healthy biodiversity system.

And that includes our Eastern Slopes.

What happens upstream is felt downstream

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We are all downstream from the watershed.

On Thursday, the Oldman Watershed Council held its ninth annual “Holding the Reins” landowner summit, with close to 100 people from southern Alberta in attendance who share a common concern over land and water conservation in the watershed. Also in attendance were 40 agriculture science students from Lethbridge College.

Cody Spencer, OWC Watershed Legacy Program Manager, said the program is an opportunity to gather people from all different sectors of farming, ranching, along with environmentalists and government officials as well as anyone with an interest in the quality of the watershed. Speakers from all over the province come to speak to those in attendance in a number of different areas of concern.

“They talk about various things to do with agriculture, watershed stewardship and protection of public lands,” Spencer said.

Gerald Vandervalk spoke at the event as a cow/calf operator west of Clareholme who shared the benefits and advantages of some of the changes made on operation in regards to stewardship.

“There’s getting to be a larger disconnect between the cities and rural people,” he said. “When I was small, everyone knew someone from a farm. And it’s not like that anymore. “We just want to manage our land and make it so my kids and their kids come back. So we want something sustainable.” “I want to show what we’re doing is working, it’s best for the land and our animals.”

While the event is designed as a place to share information, the importance of water in particular is a message that can’t be understated, according to Spencer.

“Water is the most important thing we’ve got,” he said. “The OWC wants to keep drilling that message into people’s heads that this is really important, and that we need to protect it and manage it in a way that is going to help us out in the long run. We all need water.”

Spencer said many landowners are voicing concerns over the use of public lands, and are concerned with the degradation and abuse they say is happening. “Specifically the farmers and ranchers whose land borders the public land,” he said. “They see the effects of people who ride their quads onto public land, and then tear into their fields and rip that up as well.” “That’s a big issue for everybody because it shows a lack of respect for the land and everyone else.”

Drought was another concern voiced by some of those in attendance, according to Spencer, as producers have experienced another dry winter. “At the same time, there’s not much we can do about that,” he said. “It’s a result of climate change or El Nino, or maybe a combination of both.”

Low water levels in the Oldman River are also on a lot of people’s minds as well.

Spencer said it is important for everyone, including those who live in the city, to remember the impact on their lives when something happens in the watershed.

“What happens further upstream from Lethbridge directly affects how our city operates,” he said. “Promoting stewardship of the land, in turn, increases water quality which benefits everybody. We’re all downstream.”

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