

## **Bighorn Déjà Vu**

The new provincial government will not implement the Bighorn Country concept proposed by the Notley government. In early May, Environment and Parks Minister Jason Nixon confirmed that the United Conservative Party government will instead return to the North Saskatchewan Regional Planning process.

What does this mean? While it's impossible to know exactly, we can compare the Bighorn Country proposal and the progress made on the North Saskatchewan Regional Plan to glean some important inferences.

As some readers may be aware, the North Saskatchewan Regional Plan is part of the Land-use Framework. That Framework launched a process in 2008 to split up the province by major watersheds in order to attempt to manage cumulative effects within each region. Advisory councils composed of local citizens and groups provide advice, which together with public feedback, helps to guide the future of the region.

In 2014, the North Saskatchewan Regional Advisory Council produced a report with a number of recommendations for the region, including consensus agreement on the conservation of the Bighorn. It's important to note the wide range of interests a previous Progressive Conservative government included on this advisory council. It contained local ranchers, farmers, officials from the forestry and oil & gas industries, and outfitters. The Progressive Conservatives also included the Reeves of Clearwater and Beaver County plus an Edmonton city councilor on the Council.

This group recommended the Progressive Conservative government protect much of the region west of the Forestry Trunk Road as a Wildland Provincial Park. This 2014 recommendation aligned with the NDP's Bighorn Country proposal. However, the Bighorn Country proposal went further and proposed the establishment of an extensive Public Land Use Zone (PLUZ) east of the Forestry Trunk Road in order to help man-

age the impacts of multiple recreational uses on the landscape. It would have designated trails for off-highway vehicles. The PLUZ would not have regulated forestry and oil & gas at all (much misinformation suggesting otherwise plagued the debate surrounding the Bighorn Country proposal).

One of the reasons touted by the new government for changing tack was that a socio-economic analysis had not been conducted on the Bighorn Country proposal. This concern doesn't pay enough attention to the fact a Wildland Provincial Park in the Bighorn (again, the Wildland Provincial Park would only have been created west of Highway 940) would not impact industry. There is little to no industrial activity within the proposed wildland park thanks to the 1984 Eastern Slopes Policy and protective notations. There are, in fact, multiple potential economic benefits to be gained from protecting the Bighorn, including increased economic diversification and protecting the source of 90 percent of Edmonton's drinking water.

On public lands east of the Forestry Trunk Road, a new Public Land Use Zone wouldn't impede industry at all. In fact, it would provide more certainty for industry. Certainly there would be new regulations for recreational users. But these regulations also should be seen as providing certainty and promoting responsible land use.

Regardless, AWA plans to participate in any new processes or public consultations that unfold. In the meantime, as our newly elected officials begin their term, we hope you will take this as an opportunity to introduce yourself to your MLA and the Premier ([premier@gov.ab.ca](mailto:premier@gov.ab.ca)). Please let them know that you support protection of the Bighorn. Write a letter, schedule a meeting or just drop into your MLA's constituency office.

We thank you for following the Bighorn and AWA's 50-year quest to have the Bighorn Wildland protected with legislation. To be continued...

- Joanna Skrajny