

Peace Country

In late May, Carolyn Campbell and I were fortunate enough to travel to the northwestern part of Alberta to connect with some members, colleagues, and communities for updates on ongoing land-use concerns and to explore new areas. The first part of our journey took us near the proposed location of the Amisk Dam, west of Fairview. Aside from getting an opportunity to take in the majesty of the Peace River and its valley in person, we visited a local family who toured us around their farm. They shared their deep love, history, and knowledge of the land and their concerns of why the dam could potentially destroy some of the fragile sandy topography of the area and ultimately change the ecology of the landscape. We learned that recent low Peace River water levels and flows have facilitated the crossing of larger wildlife species such as elk and moose. The local wilderness still seems to be teeming with life; the family recounted sightings of large flocks of sandhill cranes, black bears, and numerous fishers that have apparently have been of great assistance keeping the mice at bay. They even observed a grizzly mother and her cubs further upstream in the Valley this year.

We traveled next to the town of Peace River to attend the Mighty Peace Watershed Alliance's AGM. This opportunity allowed us to learn more about the watershed council's projects that were launched or completed within the last year, and to learn more about what the group plans to prioritize and focus on for the foreseeable future within the watershed.

Our travels then took us further north to Fort Vermilion, which was hosting many evacuees from High Level and the Dene Tha' First Nation because of the wildfires. As our days progressed, so did the evacuations of more communities. Locals from Fort Vermilion were commenting on how the population had essentially tripled in a matter of days, with a scarcity of available lodging. In some cases, low fresh food supplies created more challenges. It

was saddening to witness such dire straits. However, there was no lack of helping hands; many locals banded together to help displaced families by volunteering their time to cook food or help set up cots at the local arena.

Our visit to Fort Vermilion focused around connecting with the Hungry Bend Sandhills Society. This local grassroots organization has long advocated for increased protection of the sensitive wilderness within the exceptionally diverse local sandhill formations along the north bank of the Peace River. We were toured around farms and the Machesis Lake Provincial Recreation Area to see the current state

of the landscape and the beautiful natural features that makes this part of the Peace River region so notable.

Our trip was a tremendous opportunity to see firsthand the current land-use practices and demands, in addition to gaining an improved sense of how to best support communities in sustaining ecologically valuable areas. Our experiences and interactions with locals will also help shape our approach to advocating and educating the public on how conserving Alberta's northern wilderness has inherent values for all Albertans.

- Nissa Peterson