

PHASE 2 PUBLIC CONSULTATION SUMMARY



LOWER ATHABASCA REGIONAL PLAN



**Government
of Alberta** 

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1.0 Overview



The Land-use Framework (LUF) sets out a new approach for managing lands and natural resources to achieve Alberta's long-term economic, environmental and social goals. The purpose of the LUF is to manage growth and to sustain Alberta's growing economy, while maintaining a balance with Albertans' social and environmental goals. One of the key strategies for improving land-use decision-making established in the LUF is the development of seven regional plans based on seven new regions. Each regional plan will address the current conditions in a region, and will anticipate and plan for relevant development-related activities, opportunities and challenges in that region over the long term.

The LUF identified the Lower Athabasca Regional Plan (LARP) as an immediate priority. In December 2008, the government established a Regional Advisory Council (RAC) for the Lower Athabasca Region (LAR). The RAC was comprised of 17 members with a cross-section of experience and expertise in the Lower Athabasca Region.

The RAC was asked to provide advice on current and future land-use activities and challenges in the region. The RAC's advice was presented in its document, the Lower Athabasca Regional Advisory Council's *Advice to the Government of Alberta Regarding a Vision for the Lower Athabasca Region*.

The Alberta government's Land Use Secretariat (LUS) oversees the development of each regional plan, providing policy analysis, research and administrative support to the RAC as well as leading the consultation process in each region. A draft regional plan will be developed by the Government of Alberta which will be informed by the RAC's advice, cross-ministry knowledge and the views of residents, businesses, communities, aboriginal communities and other governments that have a stake in the region and its future.

A regional plan will set a vision of how a region should look over several decades and will consider a planning horizon of at least 50 years. The plan will be reviewed every five years to ensure it is effective. Regional plans will set the overall objectives for the region and identify where major activities (such as industrial development, agriculture or recreation) should take place in order to better co-ordinate activity on the landscape. Regional plans are not intended to describe how a neighbourhood will look in the future or set rules about local property.



2.0 Consultation

In support of the development of the LARP, three distinct phases of consultation with the public, stakeholders and municipalities are being undertaken. These phases are as follows:

- Phase 1 – Awareness – May/June 2009
- Phase 2 – Input on the Regional Advisory Council Advice – September 2010
- Phase 3 – Feedback on the Draft Regional Plan – 2011

Aboriginal consultation is also critical to the success of the plan and will be conducted in an ongoing and continuous fashion throughout the planning process.



This second phase of consultation focused on receiving input and comments on the LARP RAC's *Advice to the Government of Alberta Regarding a Vision for the Lower Athabasca Region* document by holding a series of open houses, workshops and meetings with the public, stakeholders and municipalities respectively. Approximately 490 people attended open houses and 270 stakeholders attended workshops held in numerous locations within the region and in several centres outside of the LAR. As well, all Albertans were encouraged to review the RAC advice document and provide their feedback by completing either the online or hardcopy versions of a workbook called *A Workbook to Share Your Views on the Regional Advisory Council's Advice to the Government of Alberta Regarding a Vision for the Lower Athabasca Region*, based on the advice document.

In total, 813 completed workbooks were received in the two formats, the majority of which were submitted electronically. There were also 281 partially completed online workbooks received. In addition to these, 108 written submissions were received.





3.0 Consultation Methodology and Format

3.1 Locations

Workshops and open houses were held on the following dates and locations for both stakeholder group representatives and the public:

Location	Date	Venue Names
Bonnyville	Sept. 8, 2010	Centennial Centre
Cold Lake	Sept. 9, 2010	Energy Centre
Fort Smith	Sept. 13, 2010	Pelican Rapids Inn
Fort Chipewyan	Sept. 14, 2010	Mamawi Community Hall
Fort McMurray	Sept. 15, 2010	Sawridge Hotel and Conference Centre
Lac La Biche	Sept. 16, 2010	Portage College – Main Campus
Elk Point	Sept. 20, 2010	Seniors Recreation Centre
St. Paul	Sept. 21, 2010	Recreation Centre
Fort McMurray	Sept. 23, 2010	Suncor Community Centre
Athabasca	Sept. 27, 2010	Athabasca Regional Multiplex
Edmonton	Sept. 28, 2010	Ramada Hotel and Conference Centre
Calgary	Sept. 29, 2010	Glenmore Inn

In each location, stakeholder workshops were held in the morning and public open houses were held in the late afternoon. As noted, these meetings were held both within and outside of the region in order to provide an opportunity for Albertans to attend and provide their input.

3.2 Public Open Houses

In each community, open houses were held for four hours in the late afternoon (4 p.m. to 8 p.m.). All attendees were offered hard copies of various LARP documents, including the RAC advice document and its associated workbook, all of which were also made available online on the LUF website (landuse.alberta.ca). Participants were encouraged to complete the workbook in its online version, or alternatively to complete a hard-copy version to be delivered in the mail via the stamped, pre-addressed envelopes provided. Information regarding the regional planning process as well as the main areas of the RAC's advice was



assembled into six stations staffed by government personnel. These stations – Vision for the Region and Land-use Classifications; Economic Growth and Development; Land Conservation Objectives; Regional Air and Water Thresholds; Human Development Considerations; and Recreation and Tourism – were directly related to identical sections in the workbook. Flip charts were set up for attendees to directly provide their own feedback as well as for the use of government staff to capture important points raised during conversations with attendees. The primary intent of this interactive format was to provide the public with further information and answer their questions to assist them in their completion of the workbook.



4.0 Summary of Public Input



4.1 Vision

The RAC proposed the following vision for the Lower Athabasca Region:

The Lower Athabasca Region is an exceptional mosaic of peoples, communities, forests, rivers, wetlands, lakes and grasslands that are cared for and respected. It is a vibrant, dynamic region that is a major driver of the Canadian economy supported by strong, healthy, prosperous and safe communities. Sustainable economic, social and environmental outcomes are balanced through the use of aboriginal, traditional and community knowledge, sound science, innovative thinking, and accommodation of rights and interests of all Albertans.

Comments received on the vision have been categorized and summarized below.

Economic

Numerous commentators felt that economic forces drove the vision and that it was clear that oil and oil sands development is a priority. Some also felt that protected area boundaries and disturbance thresholds need to reflect efficiencies in the economy, and should be handled through integrated land management (ILM). A few felt that additional development (over and above the existing level) should not go forward due to current water concerns. One respondent felt that the peat industry should be acknowledged more specifically within the vision statement and throughout the LARP.

Environmental

In general, public attendees mentioned that environmental concerns were not emphasized enough within the vision and that economic values were overstated. Concerns were raised with impacts and effects of mineral resource development and landfills, particularly along the shores of Lake Athabasca and the Slave River, as well as within the proposed Lakeland Country area.

Social

Many members of the public mentioned that development should consider the greater good, particularly that of the local population, identifying as priorities: education, health care and effective policing for safe communities. Others suggested that there was no need to change the emphasis on social values within the vision; while some felt social values could be stronger.



Balance

Some members of the public requested clarity regarding how the balance of economic, environmental and social values will occur in the LARP, and if this balance was considered when determining conservation areas. It was suggested several times that prioritizing environmental needs within the vision is important – it was felt that the vision was too focused on wealth and lacking on reclamation.

Language

Some specific comments were made regarding wording in the proposed vision statement:

- “Sound science” is critical, avoid arbitrary targets;
- “Mosaic” needs clarity as it is too vague; and
- Use “co-” to highlight the partnerships such as co-ownership and co-management.



Additional Comments

Many comments were received from the public regarding the vision. Some said the vision should align with the rest of the document by tying into the objectives and bringing forward thinking. Flexibility and a reflection of the dynamic conditions of the region were mentioned several times as being imperative to the success of the LARP. Balancing conflicting land use and keeping people in the region is also important to some. There were several statements regarding management of expectations for public, industry and government, and the need for a clear implementation strategy for the plan.

Many comments expressed concern with the protection of landowners’ rights, and how access management would occur without being too restrictive. It was noted by a few that the vision may be missing the big picture and is not focusing on essential protection and management needs of the entire region. Others felt that overprotection of the land was a concern and that the focus should be limited to endangered species and wilderness.



Some suggested that the vision and the LARP process are a direct infringement of the *Indian Act* in regards to lands held in trust by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada.

Concerns were mentioned that the proposed vision promises too much for everyone and needs to be more realistic. Others felt the vision is strong, and sets clear requirements and principles. Overall, there were numerous comments that much thought had obviously been put into many of the recommendations by the RAC.



4.2 Land-use Classifications

The RAC proposed five new land-use classifications that identify priorities to help guide future land-use decisions in the region. The five classifications are:

- Agriculture;
- Conservation;
- Mixed-use resource;
- Population centres; and
- Recreation and tourism.

The RAC also identified three overlays – land-use classifications that pass through and cross over other land-use classifications – in the region as follows:

- Lakeland Country;
- Multi-use corridors; and
- River corridors.

Comments received on the land-use classifications have been categorized and summarized below.

Conservation Areas

Most felt that a very clear definition is required of the priority uses, management intent and other important factors involved in conservation areas before these areas can be designated. Many felt that the conservation areas should not permit any industrial activity, and that motorized access should be restricted into – and within – them. Several members of the public also mentioned the need to protect the McClelland Lake and Fen and other ecologically sensitive areas.

River Corridors

The most common concern expressed by the public was the proposed use of the Clearwater River as an industrial water source. Several suggestions for additional river corridors were proposed, as well as support for large buffer zones (150 metres or more) along all major watercourses and their main tributaries, including their feeder lakes.

Management Intent

Many people expressed a desire for clarity of the management intent for each land-use classification. Generally, it was expressed that the intents proposed by the RAC are on the correct path. While there was recognition of the need for access management as a tool, many commented that it must also have flexibility on the landscape and reflect the temporal nature of land uses. The need for enforcement/ policing resources and “teeth” were also expressed by numerous attendees.



Agriculture

The main issue expressed by the public was the overlapping uses on grazing leases by industry and recreation users. Some also felt there should be an increase in preservation of agricultural land for food production.

Enforcement

The public expressed very clearly that enforcement/policing will require additional resources and a clear set of rules that are communicated to all of the users on a land base. It was felt that multiple uses can occur on the same land, perhaps even at the same time, but monitoring and enforcement of the rules by the government will be key.

Disturbance Threshold

Respondents generally supported the idea of a disturbance threshold for oil sands, and many felt that it should be extended to the other land-use classifications and other industries. In addition, some also expressed that surface mining should be treated separately within the mixed-use resource area; either as an overlay or a completely separate classification due to the land-use impacts it creates.

Additional Comments

Commonly, the public felt there needs to be more clarity of the management intents and prioritization of the land uses in each land-use classification, as there may be impacts to the current land uses. There was a perception that a move to the new land-use classifications may have more economic impact than has been anticipated.


4.3 Economic Development

Comments received on economic development have been categorized and summarized below.

Reclamation

It was suggested that the reclaimed areas could include motorized access, although some people wished to see more restrictive uses being imposed more often, in line with other conservation areas. There was a general feeling that reclamation efforts should occur faster. Many commented that the LARP should encourage the enforcement of Energy Resources Conservation Board (ERCB) Directive 74 to





decrease storage in tailings ponds by 50 per cent. There was support for the concept of repurposing land, as it can be difficult to restore an area to its original ecological capacity. Others commented that repurposed land should be restored to an environmentally healthy state as soon as possible.

Mixed-use Resource Area – General Comments

Some people commented that the term mixed-use resource area is too general with too many economic activities under one classification. To others, it seemed like the area is where intensive oil sands development – the primary non-renewable resource in the region – takes place. Some respondents questioned the size of the mixed-use resource area and the amount of activity that is currently taking place.

Mixed-use Resource Area – Disturbance Threshold

There was a concern that a 15 per cent disturbance threshold is too high. Some people asked for more clarification of the rules and policies that would be associated with this threshold if it is adopted in the LARP. Others felt that if the rate of development versus the reclamation effort is slowed, the 15 per cent threshold could be reduced while still achieving economic targets in the region. Some suggested that no disturbance level is required.

Partners in Economic Activity

Ensuring linkages with the LARP to existing economic development strategies and authorities (e.g., the Wood Buffalo Regional Economic Development Authorities' strategy, Regional Economic Development Authorities) was important to some. It was suggested that there be ongoing collaboration with regional industries and municipalities to capture waste heat for potential use in Fort McMurray and other population centres. Others recommended that the shadow population impacts should be considered in delivering soft services, not just the hard infrastructure issues and deficiencies.

Tourism

Respondents would like to see connectivity among recreation, conservation and tourism potential in the region. There may be the possibility for more oil sands interpretation facilities, and people felt that tourism and resource development can co-exist. Some people commented that there is more room for aboriginal-owned-and-operated nature-based tourism services and experiences. Others could see the potential for more hunting- and fishing-type lodges and other commercial tourism opportunities, especially near Fort McMurray. Finally, some pointed out that eco-tourism opportunities in the region could be a growth industry.



Forestry

A concern was raised that the forest overlay may be lost in the mixed-use resource area against the more dominant oil sands industry and should be more clearly defined. Some wanted it reinforced that forestry companies are renewable natural resource companies. The use of selective logging was proposed in highly productive timber stands in conservation areas and river corridors using less intrusive logging techniques. People would like to see more effort in preventing and mitigating the effects of forest fires, an aggressive pursuit of reforestation programs, work to reduce timber losses due to natural factors and an increase in timber production from tree plantations on private land. Some suggested that to effectively implement integrated land management, oil sands development will need to minimize the size and duration of its land disturbance and progressively reclaim and re-purpose the impacted land.



Oil and Gas

Some members of the public noted a potential impact to junior oil companies when reviewing some of the proposed conservation areas. They felt there is an imbalance between groundwater availability and in situ development. Others wanted lakes protected by not allowing drilling in close proximity and under these water bodies. It was recommended that the LARP needs to acknowledge and keep pace with emerging technology when considering environmental effects of development. For instance, the government should recognize varying extraction techniques and associated nuances for planning purposes.

Mining

Some felt existing aggregate/mineral resources and their potential should have had a higher profile. Others were concerned about the impact of mineral extraction in the far north along the Lake Athabasca shoreline and adjacent to the Slave River. It was also suggested that the LARP should consider the relationship between mineral freehold and surface rights holders.



Agriculture

It was noted that some grazing leases are in the mixed-use resource area and there is some potential agricultural land in the oil sands project leases and other industrial areas in the Lower Athabasca Region. Also frequently noted were concerns about the potential loss of farmland due to the increase in the

number of tree farms on private land. It was further suggested that existing tree farms be returned to agricultural land once all trees are harvested. There were some concerns with respect to the restricted public access on some grazing leases and the financial arrangements for leaseholders.

Approvals and Process

The public indicated that the government needs to better align infrastructure plans with the development plans of industry through the approval process.

Additional Comments

There were some members of the public who were opposed to the approval of any new industrial projects in the mixed-use resource area until the LARP is approved. It was suggested that maintaining a larger portion of the conserved area could secure foreign confidence in Alberta's willingness to protect its environment. Other members of the public supported the development of the oil sands, saying proceeds lead to investment in subsidiary and other industries, which in turn helps diversify Alberta's economy. Some people noted that the LARP should acknowledge the peat industry and its successful restoration practices and policies.

4.4 Conservation Areas

The RAC was asked to assess and advise which lands in the region could contribute to a conservation objective of approximately 20 per cent of the region, consistent with the following guidelines:

- Observe the key criteria for establishing conservation lands;
- Demonstrate how the conservation scenario can be met, while minimizing and limiting any negative impacts, including mineral tenure and fiscal implications; and
- Explore the feasibility of meeting a conservation scenario higher than 20 per cent, while achieving the stated economic objectives.

The RAC was provided the following key criteria for establishing conservation areas:

- Areas with little or no industrial activity;
- Areas that support aboriginal traditional uses;
- Areas that are representative of the biological diversity of the area (e.g., landforms, species, vegetation);
- Areas that provide landscape connectivity; and
- Areas of sufficient size (i.e., roughly 4,000 – 5,000 km²).





Comments received on the conservation areas have been categorized and summarized below.

Wildlife

Many of the public respondents commented on the need to protect caribou, inside and outside of the conservation areas. Controlling access to protected areas and limiting or prohibiting linear disturbances were mentioned as ways to help protect wildlife. Others felt the conservation areas should reflect and incorporate wildlife regions and critical habitat such as wetlands and river corridors. It was expressed that lands should not be selected and set aside for conservation just for convenience, but for the protection of Alberta's wildlife resources. Additionally, several other comments were made in support of trapping and hunting inside the conservation areas.



Management Intent

A number of responses addressed caribou and the need to increase conservation areas strictly for caribou. For instance, this could include controlling access to areas inhabited by caribou. It was also suggested that the conservation areas should be protected by law.

There were a number of comments regarding current tenure and leases on land within the region – many respondents were concerned about what would happen to existing agreements.

Some commented that the bitumen land base was not accurate, and that there is more bitumen in the west portion of the region. It was also mentioned that ecological integrity should be defined so it can be monitored, enforced and delivered. Others commented that conservation areas mean nothing without enforcement, that there are too few staff to monitor the current areas and consequences are insufficient to deter abuse.



Industrial Activity

There were public comments both in favour of and opposed to allowing industrial activity in conservation areas. Some mentioned that rare and valuable mineral resources could be unavailable for exploitation, thereby hindering economic development in the province. Others responded that no development whatsoever should be permitted, and that industry already has access to large tracts of land. It was also suggested by some that the pace of development should be slowed and new projects should not start.

Several comments were received suggesting staged implementation of conservation areas, where industrial activities would take place before land becomes a conservation area.

Twenty Per Cent Conservation Target

Most public respondents questioned the 20 per cent conservation target and wanted to know how this number was reached, and what – if any – method was behind it. Several expressed the desire to reduce the amount of conservation while others suggested a significant increase to 50 per cent of the region or even higher.

Environmental

Some members of the public expressed the need to permanently protect lakes in the region, and to prohibit development where caribou are located. Concern was expressed by several respondents about the state of wetlands in the region, particularly where oil companies are involved.

The conservation benefits of retaining natural areas on private land were mentioned, along with the need to recognize this contribution.

Recreation and History

Several people expressed the need for more funding and enforcement in conservation and recreation areas, as well as the need for more conservation education in schools.

Area Specific

A number of areas were suggested for designation as conservation areas, such as expanding Lakeland Provincial Park for conservation, the Fort Chipewyan area, the Cold Lake Air Weapons Range and a corridor connecting Lakeland Provincial Park to Lac La Biche. A number of comments regarding specific areas, including suggestions for their improvement or expansion, were also provided. There was also significant concern regarding the Lakeland areas due to their current frequent use for motorized recreation.

4.5 Air and Water Thresholds

The RAC was asked to use the established watershed and airshed thresholds to develop its advice, consistent with the following guidelines:

- Assess the three economic development scenarios with reference to the specified regional cumulative environmental thresholds for air and water; and
- Where both the economic and environmental objectives cannot be satisfied in all scenarios, assess the options and recommend the preferred option.



Comments received on the air and water thresholds have been categorized and summarized below.

Existing Frameworks

Concerns arose from the public about the current amount of industrial activity and about how to access information about current air and water monitoring. Many expressed their wish for an education campaign regarding what is being monitored and what are the current thresholds. Some expressed concern for the future of wetlands, stating there is high demand for water and that, historically, river water levels have been much higher, specifically on the Athabasca and Clearwater rivers. Water quality testing and conflicting data about monitoring results in Lake Athabasca were raised as important issues. In addition, low water levels and withdrawal amounts have reportedly led to boat navigation concerns in several locations. Some expressed contamination concerns, especially at Moore (Crane) Lake and Tucker Lake. It was suggested that increased conservation area coverage could preserve habitat and protect groundwater recharge performance.



Triggers and Thresholds

The concept of specific thresholds and limits for industry was supported by several members of the public. A common statement was that “firm limits on air and water contamination need to be set.” Some commented that it was important to remain true to an effects-based approach that is measurable and has clear management triggers. Several people wanted common provincial ambient air standards and trigger thresholds established. Many expressed a need for cumulative thresholds and management objectives before the plan is finalized to encourage innovative development in the oil sands.

New Frameworks

Numerous concerns were raised about current practices and the need to decrease the environmental impact of development. Many felt there is a need to establish science-based thresholds on air emissions that will protect the long-term health of ecosystems and people affected by oil sands development. People felt the LARP should establish and deliver long-term monitoring protocols by independent, third-party scientists and local communities, as opposed to the current industry-led monitoring program. Some citizens supported the development of a biodiversity framework.





Monitoring and Enforcement

The general feeling among many members of the public was that current regulations and approved policies/practices have to be followed and enforced much better than they are today. They suggested that communities lack confidence in present environmental management and monitoring capability. It was noted that the Wood Buffalo Environmental Association (WBEA) does not provide enough transparency when emission levels are exceeded in the region. It was also felt that the government relies too heavily on community capacity in its monitoring, especially since there are varying levels of this capacity throughout the region.

It was recommended that more aboriginal capacity funding to do environmental impact assessments and framework reviews be made available. It was also felt that there is an increasing need for education and public access to the results of monitoring. Others commented that the roles of WBEA, watershed planning and advisory councils (WPACs), the Regional Aquatics Monitoring Program (RAMP) and the Cumulative Environmental Management Association (CEMA) need to be re-defined and developed to align with the LARP.

While there is an understanding that the government cannot provide all of the monitoring resources alone, concerns were raised about allowing industry to monitor itself due to a potential conflict of interest. It was suggested that a third party should carry out the monitoring and this process should involve a peer-reviewed scientific approach. Additional concerns were raised that thresholds may constrain development of new technologies and that low flow river withdrawals must be reduced or stopped. Finally, it was recommended by some members of the public that an extensive integrated information processing system be developed.

Additional Comments

Overall, positive comments were made that the general approach to setting thresholds was well conceived. It was generally felt that Alberta land uses need to ensure healthy ecosystems and that the government should strictly enforce healthy standards for air quality, water quality and biodiversity. Development of science-based targets that place high value on important aspects of the region were a common theme among the comments received. Some recommended that the government change its emphasis for the region to be more on the conservation/habitat preservation side than the industry development side. Many commented about the amount of industrial activity and how this affects surface and groundwater levels. A need for meaningful engagement with aboriginal peoples was expressed, especially with elders who have knowledge of the changes to the region over decades. Finally, it was mentioned that disturbance thresholds need to consider all types of development, not just oil sands, and firm limits on air and water impacts must be placed on all industries. The perceived slow speed at which landfills are decommissioned within the region was also noted.



It was recommended by one member of the public that the Wiau Channel be protected – it is a buried channel that has large potential for potable water reserves for the region.

4.6 Human Development Considerations

Recognizing the inter-related nature of economic, environmental and social objectives, the RAC was asked to:

- Consider options for tourism development with emphasis on Lakeland Country;
- Consider options for recreational development, including advice on effective management of recreation activities on provincial Crown land;
- Provide advice on the general location of major transportation and utility corridors in the region and the considerations that must be addressed by the Alberta government in planning the specific locations;
- Provide advice on the implications associated with the three economic development scenarios as they affect population growth labour needs; and
- Provide advice on the impacts to aboriginal communities as well as treaty and other constitutional rights exercised by members of those communities.

Comments received on the human development considerations have been categorized and summarized below.

Regional Infrastructure

Transportation

A few members of the public provided specific comments regarding the need for better connectivity within the region through highway network improvements.

Multi-use Corridors

The corridors were seen as important; however, how they are developed, where they are located and what impact they will have were issues frequently discussed. Access was identified as being important and utilizing existing transportation corridors to reduce the possibility of environmental impact was often mentioned by the public. Questions were raised about whether these corridors could actually be multi-use (that is, could recreational users be within the same footprint as pipelines, highways, transmission lines, etc.), how these could be developed and if communities along the corridor could directly benefit financially.



Recreation and Tourism Areas

Access

Various members of the public stated that access is critical to successful recreation and tourism areas. Several felt that the approach taken to access lands has to respect various potential user rights, such as trappers, aboriginal peoples and especially landowners. The plan should provide a clear understanding of access for all interested parties in order to minimize negative impacts.

A licensing fee system for access was suggested as an idea, much like hunting and fishing licences or even as a component of them. Another individual stated that ultimately the main focus of the system should be adequate consequences for non-compliance.

Camping

Many supported the increase in the number of campgrounds and suggested re-opening various specific ones such as English Bay, Rock Island Lake, Clearwater, Mountain Rapids and Cascades. Several concerns were raised regarding backcountry camping and the damage it is doing to the surrounding lands and environment. The need for improvement in the overall management of camping was also mentioned as a key concern.

Lakeland Country

The public generally supported the idea of Lakeland Country, but stated various concerns that need careful consideration to ensure that the concept becomes successful. Some of those considerations included creation of well-managed recreation within the area, including all-terrain vehicle (ATV) specific areas and camping (as some felt those areas were not being well maintained), preservation of the boreal ecosystem, expansion of the area in general, or more specifically, to include the proposed conservation areas adjacent to the existing Lakeland Provincial Park and Provincial Recreation Area. It was specifically mentioned that this area will need to provide continued and improved motorized access, and that those who use the trail system would be willing to assist in managing and maintaining this amenity.

Trails

Trails were heavily supported by the public, particularly for a variety of uses such as equestrian, walking, motorized and non-motorized activities. It was often suggested that utilizing existing trail systems and being careful and respectful of wildlife and conservation areas are important components of the LARP.



Motorized

The public strongly supported the development of well-managed trails for both non-motorized and motorized users. Other ideas included staging areas when planning and consider reclaiming previously disturbed areas. Education is considered a key component to ensure there are less harmful impacts to the environment. Implementation of user fees was supported, and classification of the various types of trails was mentioned. Many concerns were raised regarding the amount of damage caused by motorized users. However, there were also concerns raised by several individuals regarding limiting motorized use within certain parts of the region.

Specific areas of concern mentioned were damage in the Marie Lake area, and the need for designated recreation areas at Poachers Landing, limiting use in the Lakeland area, better management of the Richardson Backcountry and damage to the sand dunes due to heavy use of the Old Conklin Road.

Management and Enforcement

Many felt that recreation areas were not well managed and that increased government funding and improved enforcement are required. A proactive approach was mentioned, and ideas were raised regarding implementing user fees and establishing recreation associations to manage these areas. Many stated the perception that currently, recreation users seem to go wherever they please and cause a lot of damage. It was frequently suggested that this needs to change. One solution proposed was for recreation users to work together with industry, traditional land users and the government to manage recreation areas effectively.

Area Specific

The public generally supported the creation of recreation and tourism areas for the eastern portion of the Richardson Backcountry, the Athabasca and Clearwater river valleys near Fort McMurray, Christina Lake and Lake Athabasca. It was also mentioned by some that it is important to maintain motorized trail access for the proposed conservation areas Lakeland North and Lakeland South.

Additional Comments

Overall, there was support for the proposed planned recreation areas. Diversity of recreation and tourism were often discussed including ecotourism, commercial tourism, a marina, the sand dunes, public access points to Wood Buffalo National





Park and birding activities. To some it was also important to ultimately protect the boreal ecosystem and biodiversity while allowing recreation activities.

Many members of the public suggested that recreation has to be considered holistically, beyond regional or provincial borders. Corridors between recreation areas were mentioned as being important as well as protecting wilderness and balancing the impact on the land. Fish, stocking lakes and contamination issues were also mentioned.

It was suggested by several members of the public that there is a need for strong support for more recreation opportunities and protection of current recreation areas.

Recreation opportunities in northern areas, possibly owned and operated by the First Nations, were mentioned by a few people. Some concerns were also expressed about the impact on the wilderness as a result of industry and recreation activities.

Specific comments on the following areas were provided:

- Marie Lake needs to be protected;
- More recreation opportunities are needed near Cold Lake;
- Landfill at Hylo may impact recreation in Lakeland Country;
- Heritage River/Clearwater River is good for canoeing; and
- Hydro development on the Slave River may have impacts on whitewater recreation.

Population Centres

Social Infrastructure

Members of the public recommended a balanced and proactive approach that considers existing residents, the aging population and planning for the future. Many felt that support should be provided for health and community development, and that existing residents should have the first opportunities for jobs as they are most familiar with the area.

Physical Infrastructure

Infrastructure the public says is needed included affordable and green housing, mass transit options, recreation areas and campgrounds for recreational use (not residential use as is currently the case). Increasing development densities rather than sprawling was encouraged by a few.

Some felt the planning of the region should consider the present and future needs to assist in attracting people to the region and encouraging them to stay. A few suggested avoiding growth on prime agricultural land.



Municipality Specific

Some members of the public commented that the areas around Fort McMurray should be protected, growth should be managed and that there should be ample local places for recreation. The social issues associated with Athabasca being what they called a “bedroom community” for Fort McMurray, and the resulting stresses on family life, were raised by a few. It was suggested that development should be allowed and encouraged to occur north of Cold Lake and east of the west range road, as well as south of Lac La Biche along Highway 36. From a community perspective, suggestions were made that there should be an expansion of Lac La Biche infrastructure instead of expanding the town site in Conklin, as well as using the potential in the growing community of Plamondon.



First Nations and Métis

Overall, public perception indicated that the government needs to improve efforts to engage aboriginal peoples, including ensuring resources are available to encourage them to effectively review and provide input on various elements of the plan (environmental impact assessments, frameworks, etc). Some commented that they should have had direct access to the RAC, and don't feel their opinions were reflected in the advice document. They would like to see more consultation on the draft plan.

Others indicated they feel there is a lack of trust in the aboriginal community about monitoring and enforcement by agencies and this should be addressed through the development of a more understanding and effective approach. Many also felt that the First Nations and Métis peoples need to be more accurately identified within the plan.

Additional Comments

Members of the public suggested there is a need to build on the region's existing strengths and to consider the development of new technologies and additional resources. They feel sharing resources and knowledge amongst many stakeholders will assist in the development of a successful, balanced plan. Aligning infrastructure, existing plans and resource development plans were identified as important. The implementation of the LARP can't happen soon enough for many, as in their opinion, there has already been damage to the lakes and natural areas in the region.



4.7 Other

Several other comments were received by the public based on the RAC advice; they have been categorized and summarized below.

Integration of Authorities

Many felt that better integration and co-operation between authorities dealing with specific issues between different municipalities is required. They felt the same way about issues related to recreational uses and environmental/monitoring frameworks of the provincial government. Many comments reinforced that there are a number of planning tools and processes already in place, and that these tools are important considerations for the LARP. Several also suggested a need for significant clarification in the governance approach and the strategies required to integrate the array of different plans already in place.

The topic of LARP integration with existing plans was raised. There were questions as to what has happened with documents such as the Clearwater-Christina River Plan and the Lougheed-era Regional Plans. There was also comment that there is a potential conflict between these development plans, including the Canadian Heritage River Management Plan, which appears to be contrary to the RAC's recreation and tourism vision for the Clearwater River. Several said that with the extensive diversity of plans and their potential impacts, there is a strong need for co-operation and alignment of regulation and management within the various government ministries and departments that work in the region. There is also a need to clarify and define the roles of bodies such as watershed planning and advisory councils, the Wood Buffalo Environmental Association, the Regional Aquatics Monitoring Program and the Cumulative Environmental Management Association, and their influence on the LARP.

Compensation

The public's major concern was that they feel there is considerable uncertainty regarding tenure continuation and renewals on conservation lands, and the associated compensation intent must be clarified. They said that failing to respect existing lease commitments is a "major breach of trust," and a clear process needs to be in place to determine compensation where there is direct impairment of development.





Process

Some members of the public found the workbook difficult to understand and hard to complete. The name of the project, Lower Athabasca Regional Plan, was opposed by some respondents because people living and working in the south part of the region were not aware until late in the process that this regional plan might affect them. Various comments were received that the work to date is too strong on the environmental perspective and there has been a lack of input by recreation users. Others recommended that the planning team seek out and actively encourage all stakeholder groups to comment on the draft LARP.

