

Summary - What We Heard

Consultation to Enhance Protection of the Castle Area in the South Saskatchewan Region

March 2016

The Government of Alberta committed to enhancing protection of the Castle area. To achieve this, on September 4, 2015, the government announced plans to amend the South Saskatchewan Regional Plan (SSRP) and designate the Castle under the *Provincial Parks Act* as a mix of Wildland Provincial Park and Provincial Park. The following classifications of parks were proposed:

- Expansion of the Castle Wildland Provincial Park - this expansion would include the most critical and sensitive wildlife areas and habitat, major valleys and front canyons and two major wildland movement corridors along the continental divide northwards to Crowsnest Pass.
- Creation of a new Provincial Park - the new Provincial Park would encompass the existing Provincial Recreation Areas:
 - Castle Falls Provincial Recreation Area
 - Castle River Bridge Provincial Recreation Area
 - Syncline Provincial Recreation Area
 - Beaver Mines Lake Provincial Recreation Area
 - Lynx Creek Provincial Recreation Area

The Provincial Park would provide a range of nature-based outdoor recreation opportunities while still maintaining the ecological health of the larger area.

The new designations will support conservation management objectives and differentiate and diversify the recreation and tourism opportunities within the region. The planned designation would not include the Castle Mountain Resort lease or private land. West Castle Wetlands Ecological Reserve will remain in place and is unaffected by the commitment.

Consultation Process

All Albertans were invited to participate and provide input to the proposed plan for the Castle. A 30-day public input period was held from September 4 to October 5, 2015. Input was provided to government in a variety of ways including an online survey, written and email submissions, phone calls and meetings. There were approximately 3,400 responses to the online survey (Appendix 1 – Summary of Public Online Survey Results). Meetings with stakeholder groups were also held with the Land Use Secretariat and with Alberta Environment and Parks representatives upon request.

Separate Indigenous consultation was held from September 4 to November 9, 2015 as per the *Government of Alberta's First Nations Consultation Policy on Land Management and Resource Development* and associated guidelines. On September 4, 2015 notifications were sent via email and mail to the 13 First Nation Chiefs and consultation technicians who participated in the consultations for the South Saskatchewan Regional Plan. Notifications were also sent to the Métis Nation of Alberta Region 3. The notifications included details regarding the proposal, information brochures, and maps about the proposed Castle boundary.

First Nations included:

Blood Tribe, Piikani Nation, Siksika Nation, Stoney Nations (Bears paw Nation, Chiniki Nation, Wesley Nation), Tsuu T'ina Nation, Ermineskin Cree Nation, Louis Bull Tribe, Montana Band, O'Chiese First Nation, Samson Cree Nation and Sunchild First Nation.

What we heard about conserving important wildlife populations, habitat and headwaters now and for future generations

- Majority of people responding through the consultations, support the enhanced protection for watersheds, wildlife and wilderness recreational values in the Castle.
- Most people support the proposed park designations.
- Almost all people participating in the consultations supported the need for better management of the area and increased enforcement.

What we heard about opportunities for new and enhanced recreational and tourism

Tourism and Recreation

- Most people favour low-impact recreation and tourism due to the ecological importance of the area or would like to see facilities and services in one central/designated location such as outside the park boundaries. People feel the Castle area has the potential to provide outdoor heritage, recreation and tourism opportunities, such as eco-tourism or motorized activities.
- Some people specifically recommend providing the Castle Mountain Resort (CMR) with additional support to improve infrastructure and operations, thus attracting more people to the area.

Camping

- Many people support limited or un-serviced camping and do not want backcountry camping opportunities restricted.
- Most people support restricting random camping to controlled areas or restricting access to sensitive areas.
 - Ideas that were shared for managing random camping include:
 - Purchase mandatory license with an expiry date displayed at campsite;
 - Administer a yearly park pass, yearly permit or pay a daily user fee;
 - Provide minimal cost camping in areas or encourage the use of existing campgrounds;
 - Increase the number of designated group camping areas by providing large fenced in compounds that are serviced;
 - Permit random camping exclusively for tents and access to the backcountry by foot or horse; and
 - Designate sites, camping nodes or backcountry access with assigned numbers and zero services that appeal to random campers and are free.

Hunting and Fishing

- Most people support hunting in both parks and it was described as an important conservation tool and a subsidy for food costs.
- Most people support fishing in both parks and suggested for some sensitive areas temporary fishing ban, no-angling sanctuaries, catch and release only regulations (or ban) and/or annual stream closure rotation to support healthy fish populations and habitat.

Trails

- Many people commented they would like to see sustainable trails and/or more resources to repair trails, trail maintenance, restoration, and enforcement including trail user fees for these purposes.
- Most people would like to see resources to support the development of designated trails for specific activities such as mountain biking, hiking or OHV use.
- Most people want to limit or ban OHV use (including snowmobiles) in the Castle area. Recommendations for improved management of OHV use included:
 - Trails – many people agree efforts to ensure OHVs remain on designated trails are a must. This includes requests for development of a designated trail system that consider wildlife habitat and migration patterns, infrastructure, maintenance and enforcement to ensure compliance.
 - Enforcement – Strong agreement from people that enforcement in the Castle area is lacking. There were a significant number of requests for additional staff to monitor and enforce rules. To fund additional enforcement and maintenance of trails, people recommended implementing user fees or monthly/ yearly permits. There were also requests to greatly increase penalties for illegal use of motorized transport.
 - Designated Areas – Many people recommended designating specific areas for OHV use away from environmentally sensitive areas (such as waterways or streams).
 - Clubs – want to ensure local OHV and snowmobile clubs have access and a role in maintaining or improving trails.

Enforcement

- Most people agree degradation in the Castle area is due to a lack of management/enforcement. To address this issue, recommendations include enforcement with heavy fines.
- Many people support additional funding to hire additional staff to patrol, educate and enforce rules and regulations with regard to concerns with permitted activities. Requests for increased on the ground support or presence of conservation or fish and wildlife officers were common.

What we heard about supporting traditional land use and Treaty Rights from Indigenous Peoples

- First Nations are concerned with the growing overuse of the area which diminishes the availability of the land-based resources and the quality of the traditional land use and spoke to the need for limits to access and/or recreation and developments on areas of high cultural value.
- There are concerns about designation of the vacant public lands under Parks legislation and the impact regarding Indigenous land uses or treaty rights. It was raised that Alberta has a number of traditional land entitlement claims to settle and questions were raised on how the parks would impact future traditional land entitlement claims in this area.
- First Nations recommend:
 - Indigenous name for the Castle area.
 - Prior to any management plans, a ceremony to take place on the land.
 - Traditional land use studies be complete prior to completion of the management plan and implementation.
- First Nations request improved education of Parks staff and provincial enforcement officers. They seek to increase awareness of treaty rights, Indigenous peoples values and sensitivity towards traditional land use activities (such as in-field ceremonies).

- Planning processes and parks management plans need a clear acknowledgment of treaty rights and traditional practices through signage, allocation/demarcation of exclusive ceremonial areas inaccessible to the public.
- There are concerns regarding proposed permitted activities, including motorized recreation, hotels, camps, tourist centres, car-access front country campgrounds and backcountry campground and how these recreational and tourism activities align to the intent to conserve the Castle area.
- A common concern is that regulation of camping and OHV use in the Castle area could push these activities into adjacent areas which also impact treaty rights and traditional land use on those public lands.
- Participants are largely in agreement with limiting energy and forestry developments and have concerns about the recent history of industries in the region and impacts this has to water quality, wildlife, soil condition and other cumulative effects.
- Some First Nations are interested in Indigenous tourism opportunities and support from government for tourist businesses.
- First Nations perceive the commitment to enhancement of the Castle area as a unilateral government decision-making process and consultations on the issue inadequate.
- Questions were raised referring to potential for Métis to have harvesting rights in order to practice legally protected traditional hunting within the area and elsewhere in Alberta. Most referenced their disagreement with the current legislation that does not recognize historic Métis settlements in the south of the province, thus precludes them from enjoying their Indigenous privileges within 160 kilometres from these historic communities.

What we heard about other land uses and from other land users

Cattle Grazing

- Many people indicate the need to significantly improved grazing rules, management systems and/or monitoring to restrict cattle grazing impacts on water quality, protect fish habitat and prevent spread of invasive species and manure pollutants. If properly regulated, grazing may be appropriate in a Wildland Provincial Park, but should be banned in the Provincial Park.
- Grazing associations support continued cattle grazing as an important part of the ecosystem and the benefits it serve for plant species, biodiversity as well as a fire prevention tool. There are concerns that removing cattle grazing as a permitted activity will have impact the livelihoods of ranchers and their families as it may be difficult to find different grazing land.

Forestry

- Most people welcome the government's decision that commercial forestry will be stopped in the Castle area but recognized the need to manage for the forest health, the forest's natural succession and the build-up of fuel in the absence of logging.
- Some local residents have permits for gathering firewood to heat their homes and want personal firewood harvesting to continue and well as opportunities for cutting Christmas trees.

Oil, Gas and Coal

- Most people agree with the approach to permit existing petroleum and natural gas commitments and support no new industrial commitments with surface access.

Appendix 1: - Summary of the Public Online Survey Results

<p>The Government of Alberta is acting on its intent to enhance protection of the Castle area. To achieve this, the government will amend the South Saskatchewan Regional Plan and designate the Castle under Parks’ legislation as a mix of Provincial Park and Wildland Provincial Park. This designation will protect important wildlife populations and habitat as well as important headwaters. This will also enhance the tourism and recreation potential of the area, and help to diversify the economy into the future.</p> <p>Question 1: To What extent do you agree with the above statement on a scale of 1 to 5?</p>	<p>3,379 Albertans responded to this question. Fifty-two per cent somewhat or strongly agreed with the government intent to designate the Castle under Parks’ legislation, while 31 per cent said they somewhat or strongly disagreed with the government intent to designate the Castle under Parks legislation, leaving 17 per cent neutral.</p>	 <p>Weak Support Full Support</p>
<p>Question 2: Designated “unserviced camping areas” in the new Provincial Park</p>	<p>2,910 Albertans responded to this question. The survey responses revealed a high level of support for unserviced camping areas in the new Provincial Park, which was higher than for limited service (question 3), and significantly higher than serviced campgrounds (question 4).</p>	 <p>Weak Support Full Support</p>
<p>Question 3: Designated “limited service camping areas” in the new Provincial Park.</p>	<p>2,907 Albertans responded to this question. The survey responses revealed a high level of support for limited service camping areas in the new Provincial Park, though not as high as for unserviced (question 2), and significantly higher than serviced campgrounds (question 4).</p>	 <p>Weak Support Full Support</p>

<p>Question 4: Serviced campgrounds in the new Provincial Park that could include concessions, power/water hookups, RV waste transfer stations, etc.</p>	<p>2,912 Albertans responded to this question. The survey responses revealed a medium level of support for serviced campgrounds in the new Provincial Park, significantly lower than the support for limited or unserviced service camping areas (questions 2 and 3).</p>	 <p>A horizontal bar chart with a blue bar extending from the 'Weak Support' label to approximately the 60% mark on a scale ending at 'Full Support'.</p>
<p>Question 5: Backcountry off-highway-vehicle camping areas in the new Provincial Park.</p>	<p>2,902 Albertans responded to this question. The survey responses revealed a medium level of support for backcountry off-highway vehicle camping areas in the new Provincial Park, significantly lower than the support for backcountry non-motorized camping areas (question 7).</p>	 <p>A horizontal bar chart with a blue bar extending from the 'Weak Support' label to approximately the 65% mark on a scale ending at 'Full Support'.</p>
<p>Question 6: Backcountry off-highway-vehicle camping areas in the expanded Wildland Provincial Park.</p>	<p>2,907 Albertans responded to this question. The survey responses revealed a medium level of support for backcountry off-highway vehicle camping areas in the expanded Wildland Provincial Park, significantly lower than the support for backcountry non-motorized camping areas (question 8).</p>	 <p>A horizontal bar chart with a blue bar extending from the 'Weak Support' label to approximately the 65% mark on a scale ending at 'Full Support'.</p>
<p>Question 7: Backcountry non-motorized camping areas in the new Provincial Park.</p>	<p>2,903 Albertans responded to this question. The survey responses revealed a high level of support for backcountry non-motorized camping areas in the new Provincial Park, significantly higher than the support for backcountry off-highway vehicle camping areas (question 5).</p>	 <p>A horizontal bar chart with a blue bar extending from the 'Weak Support' label to approximately the 85% mark on a scale ending at 'Full Support'.</p>
<p>Question 8: Backcountry non-motorized camping areas in the expanded Wildland Provincial Park.</p>	<p>2,895 Albertans responded to this question. The survey responses revealed a high level of support for backcountry non-motorized camping areas in the expanded Wildland Provincial Park, significantly higher than the support for backcountry off-highway vehicle camping areas (question 6).</p>	 <p>A horizontal bar chart with a blue bar extending from the 'Weak Support' label to approximately the 85% mark on a scale ending at 'Full Support'.</p>
<p>Question 9: High service accommodations or services such as hotels, restaurants, etc. along the Highway 774 corridor within the new Provincial Park.</p>	<p>2,904 Albertans responded to this question. The survey responses revealed a low level of support for high service accommodations in the new Provincial Park.</p>	 <p>A horizontal bar chart with a blue bar extending from the 'Weak Support' label to approximately the 35% mark on a scale ending at 'Full Support'.</p>
<p>Question 10: Outdoor Adventure Tourism opportunities.</p>	<p>2,894 Albertans responded to this question. The survey responses revealed a medium level of support for outdoor adventure tourism opportunities.</p>	 <p>A horizontal bar chart with a blue bar extending from the 'Weak Support' label to approximately the 75% mark on a scale ending at 'Full Support'.</p>

<p>Question 11: New outdoor adventure concepts like via ferrata, (Italian for "iron road," this is a steel cable which runs along a climbing route and is fixed to the rock that climbers can secure themselves to as an aid) in the new Provincial Park or expanded Wildland Provincial Park.</p>	<p>2,891 Albertans responded to this question. The survey responses revealed a medium level of support for new outdoor adventure concepts like via ferrata in the new Provincial Park or expanded Wildland Provincial Park.</p>	
<p>Question 12: Hut to hut backcountry travel opportunities in both the new Provincial Park and expanded Wildland Provincial Park.</p>	<p>2,888 Albertans responded to this question. The survey responses revealed a high level of support for hut to hut backcountry travel opportunities in both the new Provincial Park and expanded Wildland Provincial Park.</p>	