

Hon. Mel Knight
Minister, ASRD
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Conservation Director
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June 5th, 2010

Dear Minister Knight,
Re. The Castle SMA and proposed SLS Logging

Thank you for your letter of April 22, 2010. I am sorry to be so late in acknowledging it. I had to be away in the UK for several weeks and only now have the opportunity of responding.

It is clear from your letter that your department has a very particular interpretation of the various government initiatives that have focused on the Castle area over the past decade or more, particularly when it comes to resolving the matters of controversy regarding continued multiple-use in the area.

Given this long-standing controversy, I believe your Department staff would benefit from attempting to look at the Castle through some different lenses. I believe that the President of the Castle-Crown Wilderness Coalition, Mr. Gordon Petersen, has already provided you with one such different perspective. Your department made some commitments to our organization and to the Minister of the Environment and to the Courts in 2003/2004 with regard to the matter of addressing cumulative effects impacting the Castle Special Management Area at that time. It is now time to live up to those commitments and expectations for the Castle region, following the rulings from the Court of Queen's Bench and the Alberta Court of Appeal that were made in 2003 and 2004.

Contrary to your Department's view of the meaning of the Special Places program and its outcomes (viz. business as usual, with some additional clout provided to yourself through a FLUZ designation), both Alberta Environment and Alberta Tourism, Parks and Recreation viewed the Special Places "Living Document" Recommendations seriously, with Alberta Environment dedicating work to Updating the relevant Sub-Regional IRP to meet the stated objectives of the recommendations, including the need to address legislative changes for the area to achieve the desired conservation outcomes. That document was completed in 2001. And, as has been already mentioned by any number of commentators, although only the 94 hectares of the Westcastle River Wetlands Ecological Reserve received designation by Order in Council in 1998, the GOA has listed the Castle Special Management Area in its entirety (1,000 sq kms, more or less) as part of the provincial inventory of Protected Areas. Continued multiple-abuse under a business-as-usual scenario is no longer an option.

Your letter makes the somewhat outrageous claim that this area has seen "*no major wild fires since the early 1900s*", with the additional erroneous claim that the forests are "*now dominated by large blocks of old trees that are vulnerable to extreme fire and insect attacks*". I don't know who is providing you with this sort of misinformation. Some of the biggest fires that the province saw in the 1900's were the dramatic burns in the Castle and the Eastern Slopes in the mid 1930's, and the biggest recent fire in the southwest of the province occurred in 2003 with the 22,000ha burn of the Lost Creek fire, taking in a huge swath of the north end of the CSMA, in the Carbondale and Lynx

Creek drainages. This occurred only two years after the smaller Gorge Creek fire that had hit the eastern edge of the same drainage area of the CSMA. The timing here coincided with the start-up of the C5 20 year planning process, and it is clear from the C5 planning records that the implications of these burns, including the immediate salvage logging operations, had not been fully analysed at the time.

As for the “*large blocks of old trees*”, I would be delighted to go out hiking with your staff to identify these on the ground, especially as the forestry modeling of age-classes in the C5 process red-flagged the future old-growth scenarios, on account of their importance as a surrogate indicator for biodiversity health. The Draft C5 Plan falls short on this test. As for the areas in the Castle currently being flagged for SLS logging, the most that SLS can hope to get from the timber will be for their post and rail operations, with probably the bulk of the volume going to their lucrative urban market in the woodchip landscaping business. This is sustainable forestry? This is an appropriate “balance” of forestry values?

In my comments below I am drawing on information provided to me, under an Access to Information Request (#2006-G-0024), to take issue with some of the arguments that you have offered by way of rationalizing the decision to allow Spray Lakes Sawmills to fast-track their operations in the Beaver Mines Lake-Castle Falls area. These excerpts are from staff in your department at the time tasked with assisting in the C5 Plan.

Your reference to possible future insect infestations (as for example the pine beetle outbreaks) is largely irrelevant for the Castle area, according to your own forestry data, provided by the Southern Rockies Forestry Information Office. To suggest, as the Draft C5 Plan does, the need to precipitate a 120% “surge cut” increase in the annual allowable cut in order to meet this “threat” is utterly fictional, and was challenged at the time by your own forestry staff as well as by the Fish and Wildlife staff. The driver here was Spray Lakes Sawmills who directly argued their need for the additional volume to maintain the efficiencies (profitability) of their Cochrane mill. As the Forestry Corp Inc. consultant contracted to do the C5 TSA modeling stated at the time: “*Usually, when contentious issues like surge cutting comes up, the real issue is that everybody hasn’t agreed to the desired future forest values, and no amount of TSA runs are going to convince them otherwise*” (Brooke Martens, Forestry Corp, Feb 2006). Which brings us to those other forest values.

As you will know from the records of the C5 Planning process, as well as from the CROWPAC’s letter to the former Minister for ASRD, and local MLA for the area at the time, the Hon. Dave Coutts, the need to balance the impacts of logging against the other watershed, tourism, recreational, and wildlife values of the area was highlighted. In the opinion of that committee, which included local GOA staff, the Draft C5 Plan - as presented - fell short of achieving that balance. Your own local Fish and Wildlife biologist and the newly minted Provincial Biodiversity Specialist, in particular, were harshly critical of the Draft C5 Plan for its failure/inability to incorporate non-timber values into the modeling scenarios: specifically those with regard to future seral stage targets that could support Alberta’s commitments to ensuring biodiversity thresholds, and Alberta’s ability to support the present Grizzly Bear Recovery Strategy.

The concern of F&W staff was sufficiently strong that they provided your Department with a paper titled “Unresolved Wildlife Issues in the C5 DFMP Process”. Perhaps the central message of that document is in the following paragraph:

“Using Mountain Pine Beetle as a justification for a surge cut is not acceptable. A surge cut is compromising our ability to meet reasonable seral stage targets (an AAC of no more than 95% of the current level allows us to reach some reasonable targets). The decision to proceed with an agenda of surge cutting had insufficient input from Fish and Wildlife, despite our presence on the technical team. To my knowledge no work has been done to look at what type of harvest pattern or strategy could best be undertaken to minimize the beetle threat, and some, including Crowpac members, who have done more research than me, claim that experts say it is too late to develop a proactive harvest approach to manage the pine beetle threat, that a surge cut will do little to prevent the spread of MPB. Implementing a surge cut justified by MPB is nothing more than a cover for increasing harvest levels in the short term.”

Other comments from your biologists and forest ecologist can illustrate these real and ongoing concerns, even if they were deflected by senior departmental managers at the time.

Regarding future old growth stands: *“The TSA analysis grossly overestimates the amount of old growth that will remain in C5”.*

Regarding Grizzly bears and roads/trails: *“There are no extensive areas of C5 that are unimportant for grizzlies.....With current data and understanding, core grizzly areas and areas connecting them comprise pretty much the entirety of the C5 area. This is the approximate spatial scale of the Recovery Team’s Conservation Areas.”*

Regarding habitat loss for bears: *“Given that there are currently no hunting allocations for grizzly bears in this area compared to many other areas of the province, I don’t think it’s appropriate to accept further habitat losses, given our mandate as a Fish and Wildlife management agency.”*

And with direct relevance for the area currently being proposed for logging by SLS: *“I suggest the target **be no change in the average HSI (Habitat Suitability Index) value of high and medium quality grizzly bear habitat** for the grizzly bear model derived in the SHARP process (Southern Headwaters at Risk Project).”* (Emphasis in the original)

Your letter makes the quite remarkable claim that *“The (watershed) analysis that department staff completed during this planning process far exceeds the background work that was completed for the Oldman Watershed Integrated Management Plan and the Oldman River - State of the Watershed.”*

Given that the role of watershed management in the Province lies with Alberta Environment, and it is Alberta Environment that is responsible for the Province’s Water for Life Strategy, and whose staff have assisted in developing the Oldman WMP, our organization would be most interested to see the analyses that you are referring to.

It is worth noting Alberta Environment’s own perception of ASRD’s analysis in their review of the C5 Planning materials: *“Since water quantity captured in C5 is of considerable significance to the Oldman Basin, ASRD ought to acquire the skills and confidence in water quantity modeling for watershed protection. It is puzzling that large-scale harvesting in C5 is anticipated without reasonable data to support the assertions that harvesting is appropriate and can meet legislative requirements.”* Clearly, Alberta Environment staff have some concerns here as they also state elsewhere in their review: *“Generally, there needs to be a much higher commitment to watershed protection than is identified in Criterion 3 (of the DFMP Matrix)”*. Their review also questions ASRD’s commitment to upholding the provincial wetlands policy.

I don’t believe I need to belabor our organisation’s concerns regarding the failure of ASRD to review the Castle Access Management Plan – a matter I have already raised. While your authority

under the FLUZ may enable you mitigate some of the more egregious activities associated with off-highway vehicles in the area (given sufficient resources and staffing for enforcement), it has so far done nothing to review or update the Plan. This concern was equally shared by your F&W biologist and your Provincial Biodiversity Specialist during the C5 review, who went so far as to suggest some appropriate “Consultative Notations” for areas they deemed critical for carnivore connectivity (the area of the current SLS logging proposal was identified in one of their maps for such a potential designation).

In light of the above, you can see that our organization takes no comfort in your response to our concerns and we will continue to challenge the inappropriateness of the logging activities that you are currently authorizing. Recent media coverage of comments that you made in Lethbridge suggest that you may shortly sign-off on the Draft C5 DFMP. If it is the same Plan as was presented in 2006, ie. essentially a timber supply plan for Spray Lakes Sawmills, you can anticipate further local criticism far beyond just our organization with its explicit focus on the Castle. Ranchers and landowners throughout the Porcupine Hills, Livingstone and Oldman areas all expressed their own concerns when the Plan was briefly put out for public review in 2006.

I trust that you will give some re-consideration to your department’s position on this matter.

Yours truly,

James Tweedie, Conservation Director, for the CCWC

Cc: Mr. Evan Berger
Municipal District of Pincher Creek