



ALBERTA

ENVIRONMENT AND PARKS

Office of the Minister

Minister Responsible for the Climate Change Office

MLA, Lethbridge-West

97170

FEB 07 2019

Neil Keown, Chair
Alberta Backcountry Hunters and Anglers
c/o PO Box 10294
Airdrie AB T4A 0H6
alberta@backcountryhunters.org

Dear Neil Keown:

Thank you for your correspondence supporting the proposed Bighorn Country, including support for the creation of the Bighorn Wildland Provincial Park and West Country Public Land Use Zone. As a result of our ongoing engagement, I am pleased to provide clarification on some key themes that have emerged around the Government of Alberta's intent of the proposal and its proposed implementation.

As Alberta grows, there are increasing pressures on our parks and public lands for both recreational use and economic development. The goal of the Bighorn Country Proposal is to ensure safe and positive outdoor recreation and tourism experiences, protect critical headwaters and the environment, and continue to support the opportunities this area provides to Albertans. Bighorn Country includes the designation of a new wildland provincial park and new, expanded or amended parks, recreation areas, and public land use zones (PLUZs). Enhanced management of recreational use in the Bighorn area would provide improved tourism and recreational experiences, address user conflicts, benefit the environment, as well as support various industry and municipal partners.

I am pleased to note that our government is committed to the parks and protected system of our province, building on the historic protections we recently brought into place for the Castle area and the creation of the world's largest contiguous area of boreal protected land in northern Alberta. Environment and Parks recognizes and appreciates the significant work of volunteer stewardship groups in the Bighorn area, and we commit to continue working with them. The excellent work of the Bighorn Backcountry Standing Committee and other active volunteers and stewardship groups has established usage permissions and designated trails to sustainable levels. We are investing \$40 million over the next five years to support management of the proposed parks and PLUZs, which includes trail maintenance and enforcement. The proposal, accompanied by capital and operating commitments, would position our government to better partner in maintaining trails, enhancing the user experience, and providing basic amenities that are currently absent.

Parks and recreation management planning would include site-specific environmental assessments and stakeholder consultation to understand the impacts of any future parks or public land infrastructure. In addition, future proponent-led tourism development would be required to meet environmental requirements under the provincial *Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act*, Environmental Assessment Regulation, and conditions for parks and public land approvals.

The current proposal considers the social, economic, environmental, and Indigenous values of this area; the land designations were proposed specifically to minimize industrial and commercial impacts. The intent for tourism development and commercial recreation in Bighorn Country is a continuation of current policy for this area. A variety of local tourism development and commercial recreation would be supported in a way that limits footprint and is compatible with the character and values of Bighorn Country.

In response to your preference for a wildland provincial park that encompasses the entire Bighorn Backcountry PLUZs, our department will be considering all stakeholder feedback prior to making any decisions on the proposed designations, their boundaries, and management intent. In the proposed Bighorn Wildland Provincial Park, tourism would be restricted to opportunities for backcountry and wilderness recreation in a relatively undisturbed state. Low- to moderate-intensity development would be supported close to the highway corridor in the proposed David Thompson Provincial Park. Frontcountry development including a range of four-season accommodations, visitor services, food services, and commercial recreation activities would be directed to the Town of Nordegg, or the proposed provincial recreation areas. Parks and recreation management planning with stakeholders and Albertans would take place to determine the management intent for each designation based on many values, including the conservation of high-quality wildlife habitat.

The management and administration of hunting and angling would not change in the proposed Bighorn Wildland Provincial Park and PLUZs; however, our department may apply timing restrictions or restrict firearm discharge in provincial parks and provincial recreation areas where firearm use may conflict with other uses. I want to thank you for your comments regarding regulating dogs on leashes in wildland provincial parks, and the unintended effects on cougar hunting. Department staff are aware of this issue and are creating an interim solution through the existing permitting system; they are also working towards developing a more permanent solution by amending the regulation.

Within the proposed West Country PLUZ, recreation management plans would be completed in a phased manner across the planning units. These plans would give guidance to recreational use of public land with emphasis on enforcement, trail connectivity, and environmental sustainability. A PLUZ, however, does not have authority to limit land use other than recreation. Other uses on public land including forestry, and the oil and gas industry, will continue to be managed under existing legislation. Our department staff will continue to work with stakeholders to address concerns and ensure effective management of those uses. For further information, I have attached a copy of the Bighorn Country Proposal frequently asked questions document, as well as the proposed West Country PLUZ information sheet and a boundaries map.

Consultation on the Bighorn Country Proposal includes an online survey, public information sessions, Minister-led telephone town halls, sector meetings with municipalities, industry stakeholders, and recreation user groups, First Nation and Métis regional planning working group meetings, and one-on-one meetings with First Nation and Métis communities. Our government will continue to gather input on the future of the Bighorn area. If we proceed with the proposal, we will hold a further multi-year consultation with stakeholders, municipalities, and Indigenous peoples. Engagement is ongoing, and will be critical as the proposal is not set in stone.

Public input is encouraged to ensure the right balance of Indigenous, economic, environmental, and social values are represented in the Bighorn Country Proposal. Details of further engagement opportunities, as well as a link to our online survey, are available at www.talkaep.alberta.ca, now extended until February 15, 2019. Should you have further comments after completing the survey, please contact aep.bighorncountry@gov.ab.ca.

Thank you again for taking the time to write. Environment and Parks is taking great care to ensure the Bighorn Country Proposal better supports tourism and recreation, future economic development and diversification interests, and important conservation objectives.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Phillips". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent initial "P".

Shannon Phillips
Minister

Attachments

cc: Honourable Ricardo Miranda
Minister of Culture and Tourism

Bev Yee
Deputy Minister