

Access Management on Public Lands in Alberta's Green Zone

A Position Paper By
The Alberta Chapter of the Wildlife Society
July 2004

Alberta Chapter of the Wildlife Society

The Alberta Chapter of The Wildlife Society (ACTWS) is a non-profit organization comprised of approximately 250 professionals and students in the field of wildlife biology and management. The chapter was formed in 1988 as a subsidiary of The Wildlife Society, an international organization representing 9000 wildlife professionals worldwide. Our members represent a broad cross-section of professionals (research scientists, biologists, technicians, managers, policy makers, and academics) and students. Members are associated with academic institutions, government agencies, consulting firms, private organizations, and industry. Professionals dealing with both terrestrial and aquatic systems are represented.

ACTWS Recognizes the Necessity of Access

Alberta's resource industries rely on the development of access routes in order to reach and recover the resources on which their business is based. New access routes can also provide secondary benefits to Albertans by enabling them to travel through and explore the province. The ACTWS recognizes these essential functions of access to the economy and public good in Alberta.

Concerns of ACTWS Regarding the Rate of Access Development

The ACTWS is concerned that the proliferation of linear access and uncontrolled use of such features by people for motorized access to remote areas is causing harm to Alberta's fish and wildlife populations. Industrial resource development sectors continue to build many new access routes such as roads, pipelines, seismic exploration lines, and power transmission lines. Motorized access along these features for recreational purposes is rarely controlled. The ACTWS is particularly concerned with the situation in the forested 'Green Zone' of the province.

The detrimental effects of the proliferation of access on wildlife and fish populations have been demonstrated scientifically beyond any reasonable doubt. Woodland Caribou, a threatened species in Alberta, avoid all types of linear disturbances to varying degrees. The cumulative impact of linear disturbances corresponds to substantial habitat loss for this species. Grizzly bears suffer higher mortality in areas with more linear access features, and are prevented from effective use of habitat. The status of recreational fish populations declines dramatically in parallel with increased access. These are just a few examples from a much longer list.

Although some wildlife species will adapt to the current rapid rate of development, many will not. Proactive planning is required to ensure provision is made for these sensitive species. A clear vision of what the landscape should look like, including identification of development thresholds, is required. Consequently, the process of land planning and development would begin to coordinate and police itself. We recognize and support current voluntary attempts involving industry to manage access development, but without an overarching vision and plan supported by legislation where appropriate, the final landscape is left too much to chance. The Government of Alberta has the mandate and responsibility to develop and implement this vision.

ACTWS believes that means to minimize the impacts of access development must be implemented. We believe the need to address the situation is urgent. Fundamental shifts in government policy and industry practice are required. Creation of new access should be minimized. Coordination among industrial sectors is required. Efforts should be taken to regulate recreational use of access routes. Solutions are available and we provide specific recommendations below.

Recommendations Regarding Development of New Access Routes

On the issue of the creation of new access routes, the ACTWS recommends:

1. The Government of Alberta should develop an explicit, long-term vision of the future landscape of Alberta's Green Zone. Only with a specific target can planning initiatives find the balance between ecological sustainability and economic development. Long-term plans are required to ensure that wildlife species which require areas with lower human activity are provided for.
2. Strategic-level planning must be implemented across government departments and industrial sectors. Following an approach of Integrated Landscape Management, activities of multiple land users should be planned simultaneously to facilitate shared access and minimum surface disturbance. The Access Management Program recently initiated by the Government of Alberta, under the lead of Sustainable Resource Development, is encouraging. We urge that this program be allocated sufficient staff and financial resources to meet its mandate in a timely manner.
3. Department of Energy policies must be coordinated with policies of the Departments of Sustainable Resource Development and Environment. Conflicting departmental policies of resource development and conservation, respectively, currently preclude the consideration of ecological sustainability in resource development decision-making.
4. Land tenure arrangements across industrial land users must be harmonized. The current system of overlapping tenures leads to the creation by different companies of multiple access routes into the same area. For example, by linking sales of oil and gas resources with forestry operations in the same area, timber harvest and access development can simultaneously serve both industries. As oil and gas rights come up for sale, efforts should be taken to coordinate these with timber harvest plans.

Extending the tenure of oil and gas rights (from 5-10 years to 20-30 years) would help facilitate this coordination.

5. Oil and gas rights could be sold in blocks of land (e.g. township) similar to Forest Management Agreement areas. This would provide a mechanism for long-term planning by a single company in contrast to the current policy of selling rights on a section-by-section basis. The current system of overlapping tenures leads to multiple companies, from both energy and forestry sectors, with differing planning horizons and priorities developing the same land area with little or no coordination.
6. Cooperation and coordination among industries for access creation should be made mandatory. Currently there is little or no cooperation on access development between the energy exploration, energy extraction, pipeline, and forestry sectors. A requirement to minimize access creation through cooperation should be built into the legislation governing each industry.
7. Develop zoned thresholds of a maximum density of linear developments that will be permitted. By placing limits on the amount of access that can be created, cooperation amongst land users can be ensured. Over long planning horizons, the areas in which more access is allowed can be moved around in accordance with long term resource development plans.
8. Efforts by industry to defer harvest in reference areas should be supported, and policy barriers to legislative protection removed. (For example, current policies prohibit a Forest Management Agreement holder from establishing a 'benchmark landscape' where timber harvest would not occur). Permanent reserves are most important, but those that shift location over long time horizons ('floating reserves') can contribute also.
9. Minimal impact seismic exploration should be mandatory across the province, and remote operation technology should be encouraged for oil and gas development. Standards for low impact seismic are well established, and the remote operation of sweet gas fields has been shown to be viable. Major innovation in seismic technologies has occurred, and continued improvements in this area should be pursued. The application of low impact seismic standards in the western portion of the province provides a good example that should be applied across the province.

Recommendations Regarding Management of Public Access

On the issue of the management of public use of new access routes, the ACTWS recommends:

1. A baseline policy and supporting legislation is required that would effectively regulate motorized public use of new access routes. The current practice of unregulated motorized access, except on designated closed routes, must be reversed.
2. An aggressive public education campaign be developed and implemented to enhance the understanding of Albertans relative to unregulated use of access into

previously remote areas of the province and the consequence of damage to our fish and wildlife populations.

3. The Government of Alberta is encouraged to use its power to close some access or restrict motorized human use of access in specific areas where existing access and public use thereof has been demonstrated to be detrimental to wildlife. Bill 49, passed in late 2003, has amended the Public Lands Act to grant the government this power. This legislative tool should be used to full advantage.
4. The early development of an effective policy governing all-terrain vehicle use in the Green Zone should be pursued. A regional system of zoning and assignment of designated trails would likely be effective in this regard.
5. An effective, mandatory method of reforesting access features should be developed for those features that are not required to conduct the business of resource extraction. In this regard, although seismic companies must pay timber damage fees to the Forest Management Agreement holder, they should also be responsible for reforesting their rights-of-way. Legislation to eliminate further vehicle use of these rights-of-way must be used to allow the reforested lines time to recover fully.

Access management in the Ghost and Big Horn regions has been successful, and we commend the Government of Alberta for these efforts. We are also encouraged by the Access Management Program recently initiated, and by discussions about Integrated Landscape Management by industry. However, we remain concerned about the rate of proliferation of new access, and a lack of control over the use of access routes. We urge all parties to take concrete actions as suggested herein to ensure that a healthy environment does not fall victim to our economic well-being.