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Kananaskis - Environment group opposes clear cut

By Blair Braitenbach
Staff reporter



When imagining the landscape of Kananaskis Country, one typically pictures vast forests intermingled with gently running streams, fresh air and breath taking views. An environmental group from the Bragg Creek area is arguing that a clear cutting operation approved by Alberta Sustainable Resource Development (SRD) is tearing that image to shreds.

Although Spray Lake Sawmills has been logging in public lands within Kananaskis for decades, the company's current location is within the TransCanada Trail. Lusk Trail, an area of Kananaskis within the TransCanada Trail, and nearby Baldy Pass, are actively being harvested for timber. According to Doug Sephton, member of the Save Kananaskis group — an environmental organization dedicated to the preservation of Kananaskis — the government's approval of logging in such areas is misguided particularly since the Province contributed \$1.2 million towards the development of the national trail.

"What the TransCanada Trail issue shows is the multi-use policy isn't working," Sephton said. "It shows that the (Alberta) department of Tourism, Parks, Recreation and Culture (TPRC), which is responsible for parks and trails, is in conflict with SRD, which is responsible for extracting resources from Kananaskis."

Dave Ealey, spokesperson for SRD, argued that Sephton and his group's opposition to the logging practice is unwarranted. He noted that roughly 56 per cent of the total 4,200 square km of Kananaskis is protected land under the direction of TPRC. The remaining 44 per cent is for commercial logging. However, of that 44 per cent, about half is unsuitable for logging because certain areas are too steep or unsuitable land, so only 28 per cent of Kananaskis is available for timber harvesting of any kind. Within that landscape, less than one per cent is logged each year.

"The Trans Canada Trail is something that is registered, it doesn't give any protection and is not protected elsewhere. There are places it goes across highways and other routes like that. I don't know what specific point people are trying to make here," Ealey said.

The point, according to Sephton, is to bring greater attention to the overall logging practices within Kananaskis. Because of the area's value as a tourist and recreation destination Sephton said the entire area should be protected from any sort of clear cutting.

"The experience of being in the forest provides people with a positive experience, they grow there, they learn, they get fit and draw a lot of personal value in nature," said Sephton. "When you go and see a clear cut, the opposite happens. It's a very dispiriting experience and you get depressed."

Sephton adding that residents living in gateway communities such as Black Diamond and Bragg Creek will experience a loss in property values as tourist numbers decline.

By towing the party line, Sephton said Ted Morton, Minister of SRD and MLA for Foothills-Rockyview, is not representing his constituents. He said Morton is ignoring three surveys that showed 80 per cent of those living within the MD of Foothills-Rockyview want to see all of Kananaskis protected. "We have a minister who is ignoring that request from his electorate and he seems to be looking out for the interest of one saw mill operation," Sephton said.

Again, Ealey said the situation is not nearly as dire as Sephton makes out. He said the Province is being responsible by following the Forest Management Plan. He said the logging agreement with Spray Lake benefits both the company and the forest as a whole. With the Province suppressing wildfires, Ealey said proper forest management entails mimicking natural wildfire processes to maintain the area, adding clear cutting actually aids wildlife.

"What I find most objectionable of some of the tactics taken here is people showing (pictures of) this poor deer surrounded by a few scraggly trees and everything else around it is gone," Ealey said. "When you want to take a look at wild fire, that's exactly what you get. But the next year you start to get fresh growth, and a lot of that is succulent stuff for these herbivores."

Gord Lehn, woodlands manager for Spray Lake Saw Mills, added that the effects of what they call "clear cutting with structural retention" (leaving certain trees alone) are only temporary. Part of the saw mill's mandate within the forest management plan is to reclaim roads and clear cut sites through

re-planting so that the forest will naturally grow back.

“Yes there is a momentary disruption, but you have to take a look a little bit longer in the time frames,” Lehn said.

Both Ealey and Lehn also pointed out that much of the clear cutting is targeted at trees susceptible to the mountain pine beetle.

Lehn also stated the logging helps keep trails open, improves grazing and addresses a safety hazard around oil and gas lines where trees can fall on top of them.

Finally, Ealey said clear cutting in fact often improves the scenery of the forest.

“The forest harvesting actually created openings where (people) see parts of the Spray Valley they wouldn’t have seen otherwise,” Ealey said.

Sephton, however, does not buy this argument.

“If you like clear cut hillsides and you consider that to be an attractive landscape, then good for you. It shows the kind of twisted perception of a value system... These things are really ugly. You can’t pretend that this logging operation is going to add any value to any person who is hiking, cycling or horse back riding in that area,” Sephton said.

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