

Waiparous users jockey for access

By Shawn Logan
The Eagle

Users of different types of off-highway vehicles (OHVs) are lobbying the province for what recreation uses will be allowed in the Waiparous area under an access management plan due next spring.

While a final Ghost-Waiparous Access Management Plan (GAMP) is close, wrangling over what types of use will be permitted in the area continues to dominate the debate, according to Rick Blackwood, manager of the southern Rockies area for Alberta Sustainable Resource Development.

Blackwood said the question of whether OHV will be defined in the GAMP has been a touchy issue for stakeholders.

"That's one of the things we're struggling with," Blackwood said Sept. 27. "In our case, we've got a variety of responses (saying), 'yes you should' or 'no you shouldn't.'"

The Bighorn Access Management Plan, adopted in 2002, defined OHVs and put stiff restrictions on where heavy, 4x4 trucks could go in the area near Rocky Mountain House.

The gulf between groups representing different recreational users continued to grow last week when members of the Alberta Off Highway Vehicle Association (AOHVA) identified impacts left by larger vehicles versus quads and motorbikes. The latter two tend to be the most common vehicles in the area.

Cochrane area resident Darryl Copithorne left his director's position with the Alberta United Recreationists So-

ciety (AURS) earlier this month over concerns the group had shifted its focus to promoting the use of large trucks over other vehicles.

The veteran user of the Waiparous area said the influx of large trucks with massive tires has left its mark in the region.

"Fifteen years ago, the face of cutlines never changed," Copithorne said. "Because of these tires, they are no longer navigable by small trucks and bikes."

Cal Rakach, president of the AOHVA, said while he supports "responsible use" by large truck drivers, it takes only a few to leave a large footprint.

"As the size of the machines and horsepower goes up, the damage goes up too," Rakach said, standing in the midst of an approximately one-year-old bog at the Waiparous gravel pit that has been rutted by heavy use.

Copithorne said while quads and motorbikes are often grouped in the same category as the large trucks, their impact is considerably less.

"Most bike trails are on hill sides or in trees because bikers don't like the mud," Copithorne said.

He said big truck users have begun cutting down trees to widen trails, an illegal act that appears to be on the rise.

"It's just rampant out in this area, the widening of the trails," he said. "The truck people say, 'If it's open for a bike, I want access to it.'"

Rakach said he supports the closure of some trails and in particular supports temporary closures: trails that are off-limits during sensitive times



Cochrane-area recreationist Darryl Copithorne demonstrates the minimal impact of smaller off-highway vehicles in the Waiparous area northwest of Cochrane Sept. 22.
Photo by Shawn Logan

of the year.

"My redneckism is that designated trails get my goat, but if we want to use it, that's what we'll do," he said. "That's the reality and we've got to face it now and make it work."

Both Rakach and Copithorne said they support the implementation of user fees that could be redirected into trail management and upkeep of the area.

But Copithorne is not sure that route will be taken by the province.

"It's political suicide for anybody to suggest that in Alberta," he said. "The OHV community has been under the microscope for so long and that's why the vast majority of the OHV community is in favour of user fees."

Members of the

AURS also support user fees but they are drawing a line against more area closures for a community that has seen far too many in recent years.

Gunther Delong, environmental director for the AURS, said while user fees appear to be a solution, talk of closing any area in Waiparous is not welcome.

"There is no reason we shouldn't have the right to have access," Delong said. "We've seen so much land closed. It started with Kananaskis Country and stemmed from there."

He said other users, such as hikers, contribute to damage in the back country but are not held to the same standard.

"It's a matter strictly of policing and enforcement and education," Delong said.

"There's all kinds of people getting killed by drunk drivers, do we shut the bars down?"

Delong said AURS is opposed to any consideration of defining OHV in the GAMP.

If the province wants to shut down trails in Waiparous, it should open a similar number of trails in an area that have been closed off, he said.

Educating users and an increased emphasis from the province on enforcement is the only route that will work, Delong said.

"Every time we sit down on any kind of (access management process), we still lose trails. We don't see that as a compromise," Delong said. "They're trying to blame the damage on one user and that would be the larger vehicles."

November election delays plan

By Shawn Logan
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The long-awaited Ghost-Waiparous Access Management Plan (GAMP) will sit on the shelf a while longer until after a November provincial election.

Rick Blackwood, Alberta Sustainable Resource Development's manager for the southern Rockies area, said plans for another round of public consultations this fall have been delayed because of the upcoming election.

"It appears to be on hold until after the election," Blackwood said Sept. 27. "Most things wrap up before an election so it's not seen as electioneering."

The access plan for the 1,500 sq. km wilderness area northwest of Cochrane has been through a battery of public consultation since the process began in early 2003.

It had been slated for release in May but with a number of strong voices weighing in on the plan, it has moved along slowly.

Blackwood said while the plan is close to a final draft, it still needs some fine tuning that will be derived from user groups' input.

He acknowledged that to some it "appears we've done nothing for eight months" but the process has tried to reach out to a wide range of stakeholders that use the area.

"Certainly some people think the plan is done," he said. "The big reason it's not released is because it's not done. We're not just sitting on it for the sake of sitting on it."

He noted because the issue is so sensitive to so many users, finding common ground has not been easy. "Every day there's a new twist and turn," Blackwood said.

While the plan must still earn ministerial and cabinet approval, Blackwood said he is continuing to push for the plan to be in place by the May long weekend, traditionally the busiest period for the area.

"That's our desire, to have it in place by May long weekend next year," he said. "This is a high priority."