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Provincial Government slams the door on Albertans' outdoor pursuits

Opinion: Brent Hodgson, AOHVA

Over the past 30 years, responsible user groups, such as the Alberta Off Highway Vehicle Association (AOHVA), invested millions of dollars and thousands of volunteer hours to build trails for motorized recreation in Alberta. We have hauled material, built bridges and created a sustainable trail network to ensure that responsible trail users have a safe place to ride, hike, mountain bike and generally enjoy the wilderness of our great province. We did this without any government support.

We believed the government agreed with our aim of limiting environmental impacts while encouraging safety. We believed that responsible trail usage in the Castle could continue. We believed these things because the Alberta government told us so, repeatedly and in writing.

Then, with the stroke of a pen, Premier Notley decided Albertans could not use any of the trails in the Castle area. Just like that. And we expect these land use parameters are to be the template for the rest of Alberta.

Despite clear messages from the government, land use process workshops, and statements repeatedly made by Minister Phillips herself that designated trail systems would remain, the fact is: this Minister and the Premier had the Order in Council amending the South Saskatchewan Regional Plan (SSRP) passed January 20, 2017; banning OHVs and random camping - even though they tout public input sessions running through to March 20, 2017.

This is deeply disappointing, because many OHV users optimistically and perhaps foolishly believed that this would be the government that would work with us to build a more interconnected, environmentally sustainable and safer trail network, not just in the Castle, but throughout Alberta.

When MLAs stand up and say "Healthy watersheds, sustainable resource development, and responsible recreational activity are not mutually exclusive" (MLA Cam Westhead, Hansard, March 10, 2016) Albertans should be able to take them at their word. Apparently not. We will, however, stand by our word -- the AOHVA and responsible OHV users support the creation of multi-use parks and we believe motorized recreation can continue in the Castle if it is managed properly.

That's why we're calling on the government to work with AOHVA to determine what trails should be revitalized and which ones may need to be reclaimed before any decisions on OHV use in the Castle are finalized.

If you love Alberta's outdoors, it is time to take notice. Our wilderness is now political cannon fodder. Anglers, hunters, snowmobilers, fur harvesters – we are all in this together.

The AOHVA, in collaboration with other Albertans have repeatedly informed the provincial government of our interest to rapidly develop the framework for a user-funded, sustainable, environmentally responsible trail network; a system that could not only improve Alberta's environment but also act as a significant economic driver through increased tourism – a model proven successful in other provinces.

OHV users, and all Albertans, are ready for the difficult conversations the government has called for but make no mistake -- we want to see some meaningful action out of them rather than political posturing at our expense.

We're ready to do our part, are you Minister?