

South Saskatchewan Regional Plan - RAC Advice

Comments For Forest Management

The **Eastern Slopes** of the South Saskatchewan Region are a thin strip of public land between the Rocky Mountains and the Grasslands. *Their ecological importance is far greater than their physical area.* These forests are the “water towers” that ensure clean, abundant drinking water for communities across southern Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. They provide habitat for a rich array of wildlife, including threatened species such as grizzly bear, cutthroat trout, and limber pine. They are also the recreational area for more than one million Albertans. At the same time, these forests are also managed to supply other resources, primarily timber and oil and gas.

CPAWS has been working with multiple organizations over the years to influence the policies, regulations, and management of these forests to ensure that their ecological integrity remains high. **The South Saskatchewan Regional Plan** represents an opportunity to ensure increased protection of these forests becomes legislated and that these forests are managed to conserve landscape scale ecosystem processes and attributes.

There is an urgent need to create an *alternative model* of forest management in Alberta. CPAWS and our partners envision a new model based on ecosystem management, guided by independent scientific expertise and augmented by local community participation and benefit. We are not opposed to all logging. Instead *we support the development of a forest management model that maintains healthy forest ecosystems as its primary function, and offers sustainable benefits to communities from the wise use of forests.*



FEEDBACK REGARDING RAC ADVICE:

The RAC recognizes the Eastern Slopes for their natural beauty, water resources, and wildlife habitat. The RAC, however, does not directly tie these attributes to large, *connected* patches of *intact* forests. The RAC also does not recognize that an increasing **linear disturbance** density from seismic lines, roads, and trails as well as habitat loss due to commercial **clear-cut logging** is often compromising the ability of the Eastern Slopes to continue to provide those valued attributes. **Full-cost accounting** that incorporates impacts to ecological goods and services (e.g., clean water, erosion and flood control) should become standard practice in this area.

The need to protect the **headwaters** of the Eastern Slopes is recognized by the RAC, but just *how* that protection will be achieved is not defined. Protection of the headwaters is not only the protection of mountain tops, but also the protection of ground-water-fed tributary streams that are significant contributors to overall river flow rates. *This should involve increasing the*

network of protected areas along the Eastern Slopes, improving forestry management practices, and working with rural land owners to incent conservation on private lands.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE DRAFT PLAN:

Improving the management of the Eastern Slopes to achieve conservation objectives will benefit every Albertan across the South Saskatchewan Region since this is where all the water for the region originates. Some basic ways to increase protection of these valuable headwaters are:

- *New parks and protected areas* should be established in the public lands of the Eastern Slopes, particularly in the Castle Special Place and along at least a portion of the Livingstone Range.
- All resource extraction activities should require an *environmental impact assessment and rare species surveys* (for both plant and animal species) prior to approval.

- All development proposals should undertake a *robust public consultation process* with local landowners and stakeholders – local input should be incorporated into development plans.
- All management and planning should effectively *prioritize the health of the headwaters*.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING FORESTRY AND OPERATIONS:

To maintain resilient, productive forests that support biological diversity and ecosystem processes, a number of specific landscape-level management principles should be applied. Among these principles are: *maintaining old forests and interior forests, limiting the size and number of disturbed patches (e.g., cut blocks), maximizing the size of forest remnants within these patches, and maintaining riparian buffers*. Of utmost importance is the continued *long-term monitoring and evaluation* of ecological goods and services and cumulative effects.

For the SSRP, we recommend a **holistic management approach** that integrates both natural and human-based disturbances to ensure that ecosystem function and integrity are maintained, or ideally, enhanced. Accessible, accountable, and transparent public consultation processes are also required for forestry planning and management to be effective and publicly supported.

Specific recommendations include:

- *Incorporate retention planning* (areas of forest cover that will not be salvage-logged or treated even if attacked by an insect pest) into the management plan for forests in the southeastern slopes of Alberta.

- Put aside a certain amount of forest within existing logging leases and *leave it unlogged*. Fires should also not be suppressed in these areas.
- Areas of remnant forest between disturbed patches should be of a size and shape that *maximizes interior forest conditions*.
- Management decisions about cutblock size, shape, location and number must be made with *explicit consideration of the local distribution and movement patterns of species of concern* (e.g., grizzly bear, moose, wolverine, western toad, pileated woodpecker).
- Decisions should be based on *scientific and anecdotal data* from consultations and collaborations with local research scientists, residents, and concerned stakeholders.
- Residual stands should be at least *80 m in diameter and maintain pre-harvest conditions*.
- Forestry management plans should include the *retention of a buffer* of greater than 30 m around streams.
- Forest managers should *assess slope and aspect* when devising riparian protection strategies.
- Buffer widths should be designed with *flexibility* depending on ecosystem characteristics for sensitive or fragile ecosystems.
- The ability of a harvested landscape to provide key ecological goods and services should be *monitored over time*, and a *minimum threshold for each of the services mentioned above should be established*



