

Draft Concept Plan

for the

**Proposed Saskatoon Mountain
Provincial Recreation Area**



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Introduction

For many years, the Department of Tourism, Parks and Recreation has received requests from the County of Grande Prairie to reclassify Saskatoon Mountain Natural Area as a means to implement a better management regime at the site.

In 2012, the County of Grande Prairie hired O2 Planning and Design to develop a plan for recreation and conservation of the site. The County approved the consultant's recommendations, and directed their administration to work with Alberta Parks to move the recommendations forward. The primary recommendation from O2 Planning and Design is that the Natural Area be reclassified to a Provincial Recreation Area.

This proposal is a result of the collaboration between the County of Grande Prairie and Alberta Parks to build on the consultant's report and move forward the County's request for reclassification of Saskatoon Mountain to a Provincial Recreation Area.

Proposal Summary

The proposal for the Saskatoon Mountain Natural Area (SMNA) includes three main components:

- Reclassification from a Natural Area to a Provincial Recreation Area (PRA);
- Addition of adjacent vacant crown land as well as other crown lands under disposition; and
- A draft concept plan for the proposed Saskatoon Mountain Provincial Recreation Area

The reclassification of SMNA to a PRA will provide a wider suite of legislative and policy tools to effectively manage recreational use at SMNA. The policy and legislative tools available under a PRA classification are not available under a Natural Area classification. These tools include things such as campground development, trail designation and signage. The reclassification will also help visitors understand what kinds of recreation opportunities are available at the site.

The proposal also includes the addition of unoccupied crown lands (about 194.59 hectares) and crown lands under disposition (about 116.82 hectares). The unoccupied crown lands have been reserved for inclusion into the Natural Area since 2000.

The draft concept plan provides background information and outlines the management and development intents for the proposed Saskatoon Mountain Provincial Recreation Area. It proposes that recreational trail use, both motorized and non-motorized, be offered, and that the current hunting regime continue with the addition of hunters requiring a firearms discharge permit. Proposed facility development includes designated OHV trails, non-motorized multi-use trails for activities such as hiking, biking, and cross-country skiing, a campground and an upgraded day-use area. The plan also recognizes the conservation values of the site and proposes to protect the areas of highest conservation value.

1.0 Description of the Proposed Saskatoon Mountain Provincial Recreation Area

1.1 Regional Context

Saskatoon Mountain Natural Area (SMNA) is located approximately 30 kilometres (km) west of Grande Prairie and 10 km north of Highway 43. It is the highest point in the surrounding gently rolling landscape and offers views of agricultural lands with the Rocky Mountains in the distance. The site is currently 722.6 hectares (ha) in size (see Map 1).

1.2 Natural Values

SMNA is located in the Boreal Forest Natural Region and in the Dry Mixedwood Sub-region. The site is characterized by steep slopes on the west and south faces and more gentle slopes to the north and east, which is a wetter area. The south-west face is a prominent escarpment and the top is plateau-like.



The site is locally significant. Due to its elevation, it has an assemblage of plants that are commonly found in wetter lower foothills areas, making it unique in the Grande Prairie region (Cottonwood Consultants 1982). The area has a high diversity of vegetation including five tree species, at least a dozen shrubs, and over 100 species of flowering plants, ferns and club mosses. The cool, moist conditions support approximately 28 species normally found in the foothills region, including thimble berry, lady fern, twisted stalk and mountain ash. Rare plants include purple sedge and great spurred violet.

Significant Boreal songbird breeding populations (35 species) occur in the Natural Area, including black-throated green warbler, Canada warbler, Western tanagers and Swainson's thrush. Saw-whet owl migration has been studied onsite by local wildlife biologists during the last few years. The site has a high population of ungulates, providing refuge and food particularly in winter. One portion in particular of the Natural Area has the highest density of moose in the Grande Prairie region (Dave Hervieux, personal communication).

1.3 Recreation Values

SMNA is currently used as a recreation destination for the surrounding communities of Grande Prairie, Wembley and Beaverlodge. The site has opportunities for nature-based recreational activities such as hiking, scenic viewing, picnicking, photography, cross-country skiing, biking, trail riding and hunting.

Informal off-highway vehicle (OHV) trails exist throughout the current Natural Area and proposed land additions. Over time, random motorized use has increased. There is evidence of site degradation resulting from this use, especially from large 4x4 trucks and OHVs, as well as from inappropriate uses such as public drinking and vandalism. This has deterred visitors looking for more low-impact, nature-based experiences.

A day-use site managed by the County of Grande Prairie is located adjacent to the natural area on the plateau of the mountain and includes picnic tables, firepits, a single toilet and trash bins. It is accessed by a County road going west from Range Road 92. Two viewpoints are near the day-use site.

1.4 Lands Proposed for Addition

The proposed expansion to Saskatoon Mountain includes the addition of 2 definable areas:

1. Crown lands adjacent to the north boundary of Saskatoon Mountain Natural Area. These lands are cool, moist wooded slopes that are mainly undisturbed. They were removed from grazing in 2000 with the intent of adding them to the natural area.
2. Crown lands located between the two disconnected parcels of the current Natural Area. These lands include 11 dispositions for communication towers, the recreation lease held by the County of Grande Prairie, as well as other dispositions such as road allowances and utility easements. Much of this land was previously disturbed by a federal Department of Defence radar base which operated from 1950-1988. A Doppler radar station remains on an 8 hectare parcel of federal government land which would not be included in the proposed PRA. As well, a small parcel of land owned by Telus would not be included in the proposed PRA. Facilities such as a campground would be located on part of this addition.

The addition of these areas of land would consolidate the land base into a newly established Saskatoon Mountain Provincial Recreation Area. The proposed expanded site would total approximately 1034.01 hectares in size (see Map 2).

2.0 Rationale for Change

2.1 History of Saskatoon Mountain

The site has a long history of use by Aboriginal Peoples for hunting and gathering, as evidenced by archaeological digs conducted between 1988 and 1991 which found remnants of camping sites dating back 9500 years. In more recent times, Cree and Beaver people gathered on the mountain to pick saskatoon berries.

In 1919, the first homestead was established on the top of Saskatoon Mountain. Other homesteads followed, but within 20 years all were abandoned or the title cancelled. By 1929, local citizens were petitioning to protect the area for park purposes and the government responded by setting aside 11 quarter sections of land by Order-in-Council (OC) in 1936. However, in 1952 the OC was found to be invalid and rescinded.

In 1950, the federal Department of National Defence took over approximately 88 hectares for a Pine Tree line radar station, a component of the Defence Early Warning Line (DEW Line), and the site was closed to the public. From 1954 to 1962, the United States Air Force operated the radar station. In 1962 the Royal Canadian Air Force took over operations until closure in 1988.

Facilities included three radar towers and power plant, residences and administration buildings, a communications centre and a water line from nearby Cutbank Lake. After closure, all structures were removed with the exception of the Doppler radar station, which still exists. The site was then once again open to the public, and local people began to use the site for recreation activities.

In the meantime, local citizens concerned about the future of the mountain petitioned again for protection of the area and in 1979 Saskatoon Mountain became a candidate Natural Area, excluding the radar station site and communications tower disposition sites. Much of the area was established as a Natural Area by Order-in-Council in 1995.

2.2 Previous Planning for Saskatoon Mountain Natural Area (SMNA)

Pre-2009

In 1992, a management plan was prepared for the candidate Natural Area by a committee of local residents and government staff for the Public Lands Division of Alberta Forestry, Lands and Wildlife. The plan set out intent and management guidelines for SMNA, including management of motorized recreational use. However, as motorized recreational use increased and expanded to new areas, management of the site became more difficult.

2009 Grande Prairie Regional Parks Plan



In 2008-09, Alberta Parks developed a proposed Grande Prairie Regional Parks Plan for 10 parks within an hour's drive of Grande Prairie. The proposed strategy for SMNA was reclassification as a provincial park to offer a higher level of protection and broaden the range of outdoor recreation opportunities, including a campground and day-use area. As a provincial park, motorized trail use and hunting would be prohibited. This strategy was presented at five open houses and posted on the Alberta Parks website for a 60-day

comment period. A majority of responses from the public participation did not support this proposal and the decision was made to continue with the status quo for the time being.

2012 Plan for Recreation and Conservation at Saskatoon Mountain

Since 2009, the County of Grande Prairie has lobbied for more provincial involvement in the Natural Area. In 2012, the County, with the support of Alberta Parks, commissioned O2 Planning and Design Consultants to develop recommendations for management of SMNA. The consultants worked with local communities during this time via a web-based questionnaire, two open houses and a stakeholder workshop and produced *A Plan for Recreation and Conservation at Saskatoon Mountain Natural Area*.

The Grande Prairie County Council formally accepted the consultant's recommendations on February 11, 2013 and directed its administration to work with Alberta Parks to move forward with a formal PRA reclassification proposal.

2.3 Current Situation

Since 2012, Alberta Parks and the County of Grande Prairie have worked together to prepare a proposal for the future of SMNA. The proposal is based on the following rationale:

- The reclassification from a Natural Area to a PRA will enable more effective management of recreational use by providing a wider range of management tools (e.g., campground development, trail designation, provision of signage) which are not accessible or compatible with a Natural Area classification. The reclassification will also help visitors understand what kinds of recreation opportunities are available at the site.
- Inclusion of the parcels of land would create one distinct unit that would allow for more effective management of recreation use on the entire land base.
- Public safety would be improved by the ability to minimize fire risks associated with random camping and random fires.
- More effective management of the site will enhance both the recreational and natural values of the site.

The vision for Saskatoon Mountain Provincial Recreation Area is:

Saskatoon Mountain Provincial Recreation Area is a locally unique site in the Grande Prairie area. It provides a variety of nature-based recreation opportunities for local people and particularly families, including motorized and non-motorized trail activities, supported by facilities such as designated trails, campground and day-use area. The areas of intact boreal forest areas will be conserved for wildlife habitat and low-impact recreational use.

3.0 Proposed Management Direction

Building upon the 2012 plan, and after discussions with the County of Grande Prairie and AESRD, the following management direction is proposed for the newly established Saskatoon Mountain Provincial Recreation Area.

3.1 Site Management

Alberta Parks will have responsibility for managing the new PRA, but will look to the County of Grande Prairie and other stakeholders to assist in operations and facility development.

3.2 Recreation

Motorized Recreation

Saskatoon Mountain Provincial Recreation Area would offer a family-type experience for local OHV riders of novice to intermediate abilities. Alberta Parks would work with the local OHV community and other stakeholders to identify a designated trail network for motorized recreation that would include an OHV staging area. These trails would be developed within a specific area of Saskatoon Mountain Provincial Recreation Area west of Range Road 92. Once a designated trail system is in place, existing disturbed trails outside of the new trail system would be closed and reclaimed. Motorized recreation on these closed trails or random motorized recreation would not be permitted.

The type of motorized vehicles allowed on designated trails would be quads and dirt bikes. Highway vehicles and snowmobiles would not be permitted on the trail system in the PRA.

Motorized recreation on the trail system would be permitted from May 1 to Nov. 30, and prohibited from the beginning of December to the end of April.

Non-motorized Trail Use

Other trail activities, such as walking, biking and trail riding would be appropriate activities in the new PRA and would be permitted to continue.

Hunting

In order to effectively manage local ungulate populations, hunting would continue to be allowed in the PRA. Saskatoon Mountain Natural Area is currently designated as a Primitive Weapons Area under Wildlife Management Unit 357 where shotguns, muzzle loaders and archery equipment can be used to hunt big game during the hunting season (Alberta Guide to Hunting Regulations). This hunting regime would continue with the requirement that hunters obtain a firearms discharge permit from Alberta Parks before hunting in the PRA.

Day use

The County of Grande Prairie currently leases land to operate a day-use area adjacent to SMNA. Day-use opportunities would continue to be offered in the PRA.



Use of the viewpoints is a popular activity at the site and access and maintenance of these viewpoints would continue.

Camping

There are currently no camping facilities in SMNA, however random camping does occur and has posed issues for the site. Random camping is not allowed in a PRA and therefore it is intended that in the future a campground will be built in the new PRA.

3.3 Facility Development

Alberta Parks would work with the County of Grande Prairie and other interested stakeholders to develop a full-service campground on the land that was formerly disturbed by the radar station site.

Alberta Parks will look to the OHV community and other stakeholders to build and maintain designated OHV trails and to assist with reclamation of the many random trails on the site.

The day-use area would also be upgraded and could include amenities such as a playground.

3.4 Conservation

The wet northeast facing slopes of Saskatoon Mountain have the highest ecological value as an outlier of wet-site foothills vegetation. Since the unoccupied crown lands proposed for addition as well as the current Natural Area east of Range Road 92 are within this area of highest ecological value and are relatively undisturbed, no high-impact development is planned there in order to conserve the vegetation and wildlife habitat. The rest of the area also has ecological resources, but much is disturbed by the former radar station and random OHV activity and will be the location for facility development.

3.5 Disposition Management

The lands occupied by dispositions, for instance communication towers, will be added to the PRA and managed by Parks Division, Alberta Tourism, Parks and Recreation, Parks Division fee structure will apply.

4.0 Next Steps

A decision regarding the proposal will be made after the 60-day public comment period is over and all comments have been considered. First Nations consultation is subject to requirements of Alberta's First Nations Consultation Policy on Land Management and Resource Development.

Along with public and First Nations feedback, site management, public safety and further environmental reviews will be considered before making a final decision on this proposal. A summary of public comments and the resulting proposed action(s) will be posted on www.albertaparks.ca once a decision has been reached.

If the decision is to accept the proposal, this concept plan would take effect upon reclassification of SMNA to a PRA.

References

Alberta Government 2012 Alberta Hunting Regulations. Produced annually

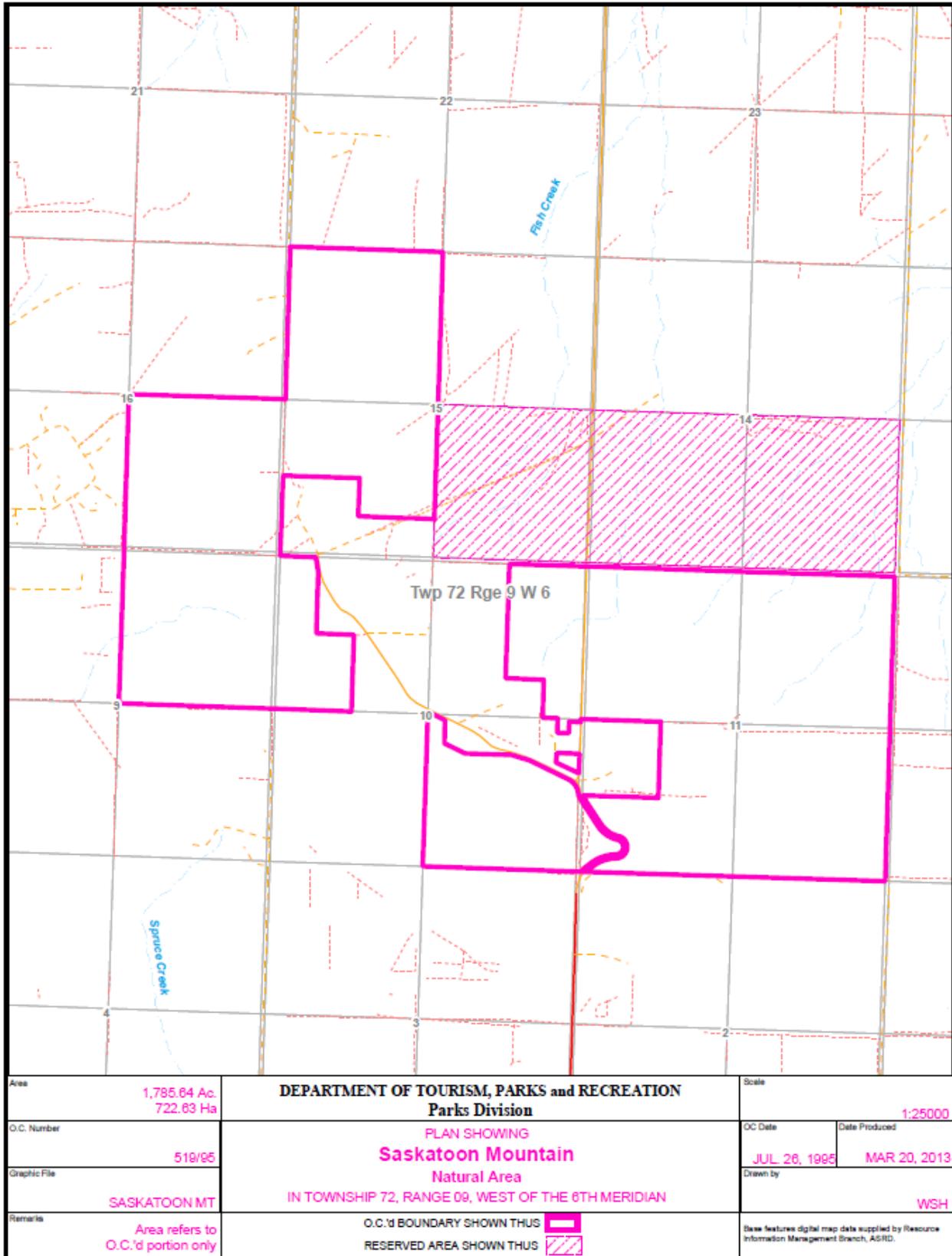
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O2 Planning and Design September 2012 A Plan for Recreation and Conservation at Saskatoon Mountain Natural Area. Prepared for the County of Grande Prairie

Personal Communication July 2013 – Dave Hervieux, Fisheries and Wildlife Program Manager, Grande Prairie, Fisheries and Wildlife Management, Environment and Sustainable Resource Development.

Saskatoon Mountain Management Committee 1992 Saskatoon Mountain Natural Area Management Plan. Prepared for Forestry, Lands and Wildlife, Public Lands Division, Natural and Protected Areas Section.



Map 2: Proposed Saskatoon Mountain Provincial Recreation Area

