



March 2019

**Plan for a Sustainable Recreation Trail System
in Alberta**

(without appendix)

AOHVA Plan for a Sustainable Recreation Trail System in Alberta

BACKGROUND

Since coming to power in 2015, the NDP Government has been enacting the biggest change to the land use framework in the province in 30 years.

First positioned as pragmatic and driven by science with focus on biodiversity, it is now clear to Albertans that the decisions of the Minister of Environment and Parks, Shannon Phillips, with regards to Public Land Use have been ideologically driven and heavily influenced by foreign funded Environmental Non-Government Organizations (ENGOS) seeking to land lock Alberta oil.

The impact of such decisions has not only been felt by industry, but by families whose access to the Eastern Slopes has been significantly curtailed as well. Hardworking Albertans who have recreated and looked after the backcountry for generations, who have raised their families to respect and enjoy the great outdoors (whether it be by hunting, fishing, horseback riding, open camping or OHVing) do not go to national or provincial parks where the outdoor experience is completely different than in the backcountry. As a result, they have become the undeserved target of government actions in recent years and are being displaced from public lands.

Minister Phillips has acted on her intent to systematically remove OHVs and open camping from public lands. This has resulted in the closure of 70% of OHV trails across the Easter Slopes.

Dedicated to finding the right balance between conservation and proper use of the outdoors, responsible backcountry users know that a comprehensive and transparent planning effort is required before making decisions on the landscape. That effort can begin with a new UCP government coming to power, with a new Minister taking the reins and setting a new direction for the bureaucracy.

The primary goal of AOHVA is to establish a Sustainable Recreation Trail System legislated through a new Alberta Trails Act - retaining all Albertans' opportunity to recreate on public lands.

To achieve this goal, all stakeholders must contribute to the development and implementation of a comprehensive plan for a Sustainable Recreation Trail System in Alberta which importantly includes a new Alberta Trails Act.

We believe the AOHVA Plan for a Sustainable Recreation Trail System in Alberta provides the framework required to achieve success.

Most Jurisdictions Across Canada and Much of the US Have Figured This Out. Alberta is one of the last jurisdictions to establish a formal structure to facilitate financially sustainable, environmentally responsible OHV use.

The PROBLEM: OHV user and open camping access to the backcountry is significantly curtailed

1. 2017: Minister Phillips banned OHV activity and open camping from the Castle Parks with severe restrictions in place NOW and a complete ban by 2020.
2. 2018: Minister Phillips announced what is effectively a ban on OHV activity and open camping in the Porcupine Hills with severe restrictions in place NOW. She severely restricted open camping and removed OHVs from 70% of the existing trails in the Livingstone region; and she ensured that any remaining designated trails provide such a poor riding experience that no one would want to go out. Many closures are in place NOW.
3. 2019: Minister Phillips announced the creation of Bighorn Country, once again, leading to a ban of OHV activity and open camping across the entire eastern slopes. Many closures are in place NOW.

Underlying ISSUES: NDP ideology drives important decisions

1. Foreign influence on government decisions has been prevalent under the NDP placing the mandates of foreign organizations to land lock Alberta oil sands above the best interests of Albertans.
 - a. actions to increase the amount of public land under protection and conservation is linked to random foreign (UN) targets
2. Irrelevant science, cherry picking scientific studies and applying certain findings out of context to the Alberta landscape has resulted in questionable decisions being made.
 - a. linear disturbance has been determined and applied to the detriment of achieving desired outcomes for recreation management planning
3. Public consultation activities have been manipulated such that Albertans with a proven life experience and a vested interest in the backcountry have been overlooked in favour of those who align with the NDP position as a means of ensuring predetermined outcomes are achieved.
 - a. government operations consistently demonstrate a bias against OHV use, open camping and OHV users.

The SOLUTION:

Open, transparent, and pragmatic decision-making by government is required to cast off the dispersions of ideological or political motives behind the actions taken during the tenure of the NDP. Looking ahead, a UCP government and the bureaucracy would be well served to establish guiding principles that promote integrity in conducting true Public Consultation, the use of relevant Science and the discontinuance of Foreign Influence on local decisions.

While the UCP has committed to putting a stop to the Bighorn Country Proposal and to acting on the previous recommendations of the North Saskatchewan Regional Plan (NSRP), AOHVA respectfully suggests that the Minister responsible for environment and parks take swift action to correct past actions of the NDP and repair the relationship between the OHV community and the government.

1. Recognize OHVs as a form of sustainable recreation enjoyed by many families in Alberta; introducing new legislation through an Alberta Trails Act.
2. Revisit all NDP parks designations and trail closures brought in by the NDP.
3. Implement the AOHVA Plan for a Sustainable Recreation Trail System on Alberta Public Land.

The AOHVA Plan for a Sustainable Recreation Trail System in Alberta

Since 2006 when discussions regarding recreation trails began, neither the government nor any other group representing recreationalists in Alberta has come forward with a comprehensive solution to addressing the problems and the underlying issues regarding public consultation and the science. Through the years, AOHVA has consistently offered advice to the government and presented well thought out plans with practical recommendations to achieving sustainable back country recreation – to no avail.

This plan is the culmination of concepts, ideas and work that began with the proposal to establish a Delegated Administrative Organization (DAO) and to conduct rigorous trail planning in 2010. Reflecting social, environmental and economic changes that occurred over the years, that particular plan evolved into the 2017 AOHVA 4-Point Plan for Environmentally Responsible OHV Use.

So, now we have the 2019 AOHVA Plan for a Sustainable Recreation Trail System in Alberta encapsulating a framework that will achieve a balance between responsible recreation and environmental sustainability from a position of strengthened oversight and partnerships amongst stakeholders.

Currently, the government addresses a few elements identified in the plan. However, it is evident that a comprehensive, end-to-end solution is still lacking and still required.

It is important to understand that the plan itself cannot be implemented until the government sincerely collaborates with user groups like AOHVA, ensuring a strong foundation to enable teamwork which is paramount to success.

The AOHVA Plan for a Sustainable Recreation Trail System on Alberta Public Land plan is intended to provide a model for all backcountry user groups to adopt and follow.

The Key Elements of the plan are:

1. **Oversight:** Legislation, Regulation, Policy, Process & Enforcement
2. **Partnership:** Planning, Implementation, Stewardship and Education
3. **Environmental Sustainability:** Design, Engineering, Development and Repair
4. **Accessibility:** Recognition, Designation and User Experience
5. **Financial Viability:** User Fees, Government Programs and Volunteers

1. Oversight:

Legislation, Regulation, Policy, Process & Enforcement

Create a legislative and regulatory foundation that will drive sound decision making and enable the work required to establish Alberta as a leader in sustainable backcountry recreation.

The cornerstone of a sustainable recreation trail system is an Alberta Trails Act. This legislation will provide a foundation of clear rules and processes, allowing for timely and proper decisions to ensure environmental impacts are minimized and partnerships flourish.

Under the umbrella of an Alberta Trails Act, provincially designated service delivery organizations will generate user-based funding that will in turn be distributed to their respective clubs who for the construction, management and maintenance of shared trail networks to the accepted standards, making Alberta the model for shared recreational trails.

Such a model could be replicated and implemented by all user groups.

Underpinning this important work is the premise that the Alberta government would uphold the principles of transparency and integrity where science is used to guide decisions, where public consultations are conducted and where those promoting the interests of foreign funded organizations are concerned.

2. Partnership:

Planning, Implementation, Stewardship and Education

Establish meaningful partnerships between government, stakeholders and user groups to ensure sound decision making and facilitate the important work required to create a sustainable trail system in Alberta.

AOHVA is a volunteer-led organization as are our local member clubs and, in turn, their members as well. The collective representation, knowledge base and experiences of AOHVA and our members ensure a solid foundation from which to partake in important discussions, to inform important decisions and to collaborate on important initiatives and importantly, to make things happen on the ground. OHV users and open campers are recognized for volunteering countless hours and providing significant funds for repairing and maintaining OHV trails, infrastructure and open camping areas across the province. Additionally, they have actively participating in delivering education and stewardship programs through Alberta schools and local community groups.

Alberta can lead the way in recreation trail development with backcountry user-led organizations like AOHVA being recognized as a true partner. Valued for their expertise and experience, AOHVA can contribute to the planning, development and maintenance of a sustainable recreation trail system and lead environmental stewardship and education activities as a means of eliminating improper use of the back country.

3. Environmental Sustainability: Design, Engineering, Development and Maintenance

Incorporate best practices from across North America and implement innovative approaches to make Alberta the model for sustainable, shared recreational trail development and management.

Working with the Government of Alberta, municipalities, and other stakeholder groups, AOHVA's experienced members will contribute to designing and developing trails and trail heads that are sustainable and environmentally-sound, while repairing damaged trails.

It is a proven fact that designed engineered trail systems mitigate environmental concerns, offer safe, high quality experiences for users, provide links between communities and reduce or eliminate conflicts with neighboring landowners and other users.

With a number of resources available to guide sustainable OHV trail design and engineering, AOHVA has found the recommendations from NOHVCC (2015) *Great Trails: Providing Quality OHV Trails and Experiences* to be exceptional – considered a gold standard amongst jurisdictions across North America.

4. Accessibility: Recognition, Designation and User Experience

Gain formal recognition that OHV use and open camping are acceptable forms of responsible backcountry recreation as the starting point to successful recreation management planning. From there, the intent is to design, build and manage trails and infrastructure that meet the needs of users - providing high quality, diverse experiences.

It is well known that poor or limited trail options that do not provide the user experiences desired on a trail will prompt users to fulfill these experiences off trail – requiring increased enforcement and unnecessary funding due to poor design and implementation. Creation of trails that provide these experiences through design and understanding, deliver the experiences recreationalists desire and thus, reduce the demands on enforcement.

When considering rider experience, one cannot overlook the need for inclusive access to public lands for many Albertans. For an aging population and a group with limited mobility, OHV access provides the only opportunity to experience and enjoy the wonder of the backcountry.

5. Financial Viability: User Fees, Government Programs and Volunteers

Formalize a financially sustainable approach to recreation trail planning, development and maintenance which is important to ensuring that the taxpayers of Alberta do not bear the burden of the costs of the recreational pursuits of others - be they hikers, berry-pickers, photographers, campers, mountain bikers, equestrian, skiers, snowmobilers, or OHV users and open campers.

We recommend that the current annual OHV Registration Fee of \$54 that goes to general revenues be dedicated for enforcement.

Under an accountable, transparent AOHVA Service Delivery Structure, as legislated in the Alberta Trails Act, 100% of a new annual \$50 OHV User Fee will be dedicated to tackling important issues like proper trail planning, design, construction, maintenance and user education.

Volunteers are a pillar of the OHV community, offering countless hours and providing funds for both stewardship and education activities. This group is integral to the ongoing success of the plan and the plan is essential to sustaining volunteer motivation and contributions. When everyone contributes, everyone is engaged, everyone is energized – everyone is part of the solution and everyone benefits.

The BENEFITS

Based on a financially sustainable funding model directly tied to backcountry users themselves, this plan will be instrumental in driving tremendous value and benefit for user groups, stakeholders and all Albertans.

Key benefits will include, but are not limited to:

- **Minimize the environmental footprint** due to motorized recreation in the backcountry
- **Increase in the quality of trails available** and the types of user experiences available to various backcountry user groups
- **Significant contribution to the local and provincial economy** attributed to recreation, tourism and a world class trail system
- **A thriving user community with strong support** for provincial associations, local clubs and a reinvigorated volunteer base

When all OHV users and open campers contribute, everybody is part of the solution, part of the team working together to ensure responsible OHV users and open campers have continued access to public land.