

Summary Paper: Understanding Forest Management of Alberta's Southern Eastern Slopes



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Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society – Southern Alberta Chapter

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Alberta's Southern Eastern Slopes

The Southern Eastern Slopes of the Alberta Rocky Mountains are a narrow band of land on the western edge of Alberta extending from the Red Deer River along the Rocky Mountain Front and south to the Canadian border with Montana (Figure 1).

Although this area is mostly forested, it contains a mosaic of vegetation types including coniferous and mixedwood forests, open grasslands and rich riparian areas. These varied and unique ecosystems create areas of high species diversity including pockets containing the highest biodiversity in the province.

The forests of the southern Eastern Slopes are vital to the Albertans health and quality of life. These lands offers more than gorgeous vistas – the Southern Eastern Slopes house the headwaters of clean-flowing rivers, support a diverse community of large mammals such as grizzly bears, cougars, elk, mountain goats and bighorn sheep, native fish, including bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout, numerous birds and a high diversity of insects. They also provide a wide range of recreational opportunities for families and intrepid adventurers.

The Issue with Current Forest Management

The Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society – Southern Alberta Chapter (CPAWS SAB) is concerned that despite the economic, social and environmental importance of the forests of the Southern Eastern Slopes, environmental and social objectives are not being met by current forest management practices. Alberta's population has grown quickly and steadily, during the past one hundred years, and, by the last census in 2011, exceeded 3.5 million. This 35-fold growth in population has created an equally large demand on the province's resources. CPAWS SAB believes that forestry policies and practices have not kept pace with these changes.

CPAWS SAB asserts that the principles governing current forestry practices in Alberta are rooted in a model in which the primary focus is timber extraction. Widespread clear-cutting and the association roads network created by logging activities, and other industry, has major impacts on watershed values and wildlife. Forest clearing, increasing densities of linear access disturbances, in part from forestry activities, and the accompanying off-highway vehicle use throughout the region have led to decreases in water quality, changes seasonal runoff patterns, and disturbances or degradation to key wildlife habitats.



Source: Government of Alberta 2012

Figure 1 Alberta's Southern Eastern Slopes

Although the multiple land-uses in the Southern Eastern Slopes all contribute to the cumulative effects in the region, the scope of this work focusses on the forest sector and overarching policies that guide forest management decisions.

CPAWS SAB Approach to Understanding Forest Management

This report provides an understanding of public perceptions of forest management of the Southern Eastern Slopes based on CPAWS SAB online survey and workshops, identifies ecosystem-based management as a potential approach to management, and describes management policy barriers to implementing an ecosystem-based approach. The CPAWS SAB conducted the following three-stage approach:

- 1) A public survey and workshops in southern Alberta were conducted by CPAWS SAB from September 14-November 1, 2012 to explore the views and concerns of local stakeholders regarding current forest management.
- 2) Scientific literature was used to define the concept of ecosystem-based management.
- 3) Current forest policies in Alberta and the Southeastern Slopes were reviewed to determine barriers to implementing an ecosystem-based approach; and
- 4) Alberta's policies were compared and contrasted to other jurisdictions that have recently made changes to their policies towards meeting non-timber objectives.

Public Perceptions of Forest Management

In order to understand how diverse stakeholders (families, interest groups and individuals) broadly perceive forest management on the Southern Eastern Slope, CPAWS SAB conducted an online survey and five community workshops between September and November of 2012. In total, 128 people accessed the online survey and 48 people attended the workshops.

In general the majority of participants in the CPAWS SAB online survey and workshops identified non-timber values such as water quality and quantity, wildlife and fish habitat and recreation as priorities for management on the Southern Eastern Slopes. According to the results of the CPAWS SAB study, most people did not feel that current forest management effectively managed for these values. Participants also expressed concern over whether public input had been incorporated into forest management planning, and they indicated that they felt that current forest management practices were not transparent, and did not facilitate independent planning process.

Ecosystem-based Management

Based on these public perceptions and values, and a review of scientific literature, CPAWS SAB believes that ecosystem-based management is an appropriate approach to the management of the Southern Eastern Slopes. Such an environmental management approach recognizes the complexity of interactions and values of an ecosystem, including humans—as opposed to considering a single issue such as timber-volume. Accordingly, using an ecosystem-based approach in management of the Southern Eastern Slopes could both incorporate and prioritize the identified social and ecological objectives.

Alberta's Forest Policies

In order to identify the major objectives of current forest management policy in Alberta and barriers to introducing ecosystem-based management, the CPAWS SAB reviewed the current policies that most influence how forests are managed in Southern Alberta. These policies include the Forest Act, the Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act, the Policy for Resource Management on the Southeastern Slopes and the draft South Saskatchewan Regional Plan (SSRP) which has been underway, through a public consultation process, for the past two years. The CPAWS SAB also examined the role that forest monitoring bodies play in Alberta. The major issues (identified by the CPAWS SAB) in the Government of Alberta's (GOA) forest policy relate to following main factors:

- 1) Forest management policies and tenure systems prioritize timber yield over other social and ecological values;
- 2) The requirements for forest companies to incorporate public input into forest management and how public input is used are unclear to stakeholders.
- 3) There is no requirement for third-party evaluation of forest management practices and their environmental impacts.

Although the GOA's policies on the Southern Eastern Slopes broadly identify the importance of the area for water and other ecological values, these policies are not statutory and, therefore, are not enforceable. Additionally, designation of the Southeastern Slopes as a "multiple-use" area does not, in the opinion of CPAWS SAB, adequately address the cumulative effects of such multiple uses. Based upon this review, we conclude that management policy on the Southern Eastern Slopes must include provisions for ecosystem-based management.

By examining forest management reform in other jurisdictions that have started the process of moving towards an ecosystem-based management model (BC, and Montana), CPAWS SAB identified some preliminary "lessons learned" which could be

help inform the facilitation of ecosystem-based management on the Southern Eastern Slopes. These preliminary “lessons learned” include:

- Independent science-based monitoring of environmental impacts and review of forest management practices facilitates the use of the precautionary principle and creates trust in forest management decisions.
- Output based forest management, rather than timber-based annual allowable cut as an input, allows for management of broader ecological and social objectives.
- Forest policy must explicitly include legislated ecosystem and social objectives and outcomes in order to manage the whole forest ecosystem rather than primarily timber.
- Increased meaningful public participation that has a defined process for incorporating decisions into management plans creates confidence in forest management decisions and allows for management of ecological and social objectives.

Conclusion

The Southern Eastern Slopes are a unique and important landscape. This work presents a preliminary look at forest management policy by CPAWS SAB that will set the stage for further studies of forest management of the Southern Eastern Slopes. Growing concern over the management of this region indicates that we need to re-examine the current forest management policies, adopting an ecosystem-based management approach to ensure that ecosystem services and functions are available for current uses and those of future generations.