A Report on the Public Meeting Hosted by ESRD Minister Diana McQueen
Bragg Creek Community Center, September 25, 2012

Background:
This meeting was a follow-up to two previous meetings and was called to discuss “timber harvesting for FireSmart purposes in the Greater Bragg Creek multiple use area” and to hear the Minister’s views for the first time.

A FireSmart Information Session had been presented by ESRD staff to a large public gathering on August 2, 2012 (see my earlier report at www.abhiking.ca ). As noted in that report, ESRD’s presentation was a , and as reported: “I have never seen an entire audience so negative about a plan that is supposedly for their benefit!”

This August 2nd meeting was followed by a two-day community workshop on the Bragg Creek FireSmart Plan (September 8-9, 2012). Organized by ESRD Assistant Deputy Minister Bruce Mayer, the objective was “to bring forward your best ideas for reducing the risk to Bragg Creek of wildfires”, and to provide recommendations to the Minister who would discuss these at the September 25th meeting. Eight residents/trail users and three Spray Lake Sawmills representatives attended, and five prioritized options were sent to the Minister.

Then, in a letter I sent to Minister McQueen on September 21, 2012, I drew her attention to some detailed and thoughtful suggestions from Alf Skrastins who was on the Advisory Committee that developed the All Season Trails Plan for West Bragg Creek (see below). I ended my letter by quoting Alf who said that if a plan was “done well this would improve public perception of ESRD and Spray Lakes Sawmills”. Unfortunately this was not to be. As you will read below, the September 25th meeting was once again a disaster in public relations for the government.

Impressions of the September 25th Meeting:
The evening of September 25th was stormy and wet. Despite an early 6:30 p.m. start time, the large gymnasium was packed with residents of Bragg Creek and Calgary. The crowd was expectant, even hopeful. The Minister of ESRD was finally in attendance. Would she announce a thoughtful compromise that would preserve the West Bragg Recreation Area and support the Bragg Creek FireSmart objectives while still accommodating some logging? Would she protect this small corner of Kananaskis Country and so honor Peter Lougheed’s vision? NO! As the evening unfolded the audience’s exasperation grew, until once again the disappointed and insulted crowd grew restless, with hissing, booing and loud clapping punctuating the meeting. All speakers were, however, still respectfully listened to.

The Minister’s opening remarks stressed the need for consultation, with the emphasis being wildfire protection and trail mitigation. As reported in the Calgary Herald September 26, 2012, the Minister said “the common denominator for all you folks is ... safety ... and trails”. There was no mention of logging as a priority.

The moderator then commented on the September 8-9 workshop where four other options were added to the single option presented by ESRD. The clear impression was that the Minister had short listed three of these options and that no other options would be considered. At the end of the meeting audience members would be given a blue dot to put on the map option they preferred. The Minister also wanted to identify individuals who could suggest specific trail mitigations in the near future by signing a list. The audience was then admonished to park their mistrust and cynicism and to be polite.

The Assistant Deputy Minister, Bruce Mayer, then made a very uninformative presentation of the three options chosen, using three large maps. No attempt was made to discuss any plans for the protection or restoration of trails after logging.

The question and answer period that followed was increasingly revealing!
Those who had participated in the Aug. 8-9 Workshop noted that the three options just presented were, in fact, NOT taken from the five options submitted to the Minister; rather, cut blocks were taken from different options and combined to equal an area that was more than the 700 hectares originally proposed by ESRD months ago! This deception was quickly recognized by the audience. When a member asked why a fourth option could not be considered, the applause was thunderous.

All recent ESRD sponsored meetings have focused on the fire hazard west of Bragg Creek in K Country, and this meeting was no different. So, it was no surprise to hear questions about: 1) “containment” lines and wildfire “protection” being misleading since a wildfire is impossible to stop if pushed by high winds, 2) the need for cut-blocks used as fire breaks to be permanent rather than replanted as done on a tree farm, 3) the criteria for “acceptable risk” as it pertains to how large fire breaks need to be, 4) why the government spent $4 million on roads and bridges that only benefited the logging company rather than build escape roads for Bragg Creek residents, and 5) the need to encourage residents to reduce the fuel load on their own acreages. Frightening the residents of Bragg Creek was not working, and the rationale for logging’s contribution to the FireSmart plan was in tatters. Bruce Mayer’s answers were consistently unconvincing.

As a postscript to this meeting, Alf Skrastins has carefully examined the maps for the three options presented by ESRD at this meeting. In a letter to the Minister dated September 27, 2012 (see PDF file below), he points out that these maps are a “dishonest representation” of the current fire hazard since the locations of areas that already function as wildfire barriers are omitted from these maps (e.g. bogs, swamps, grass/shrub meadows, aspen groves, previously harvested cut blocks, existing roads and pipeline right-of-ways). Alf says that all that the maps show are the “remaining areas of merchantable timber between previous cut-blocks and naturally unforested areas”. He also said that Ministry staff provided the Minister with a “misrepresentation of the options for fire protection” (please read his letter to the Minister!).

When challenged to explain why FireSmart plans required so much logging on top of trails, the Minister said that business interests associated with logging had written many letters—no examples—and that logging had to go ahead. However, a number of local business owners said they depended upon the West Bragg Recreation Area to bring in customers and were concerned about logging it. Clearly, big business is what the government supports.

Trail mitigation was repeatedly identified as being important to ESRD, but the Department had no action plan. Then, someone complained that last year’s logging South of the Elbow River in the McLean Creek Recreation area had left a mess of destroyed trails that users had to restore themselves, and they then asked if this would happen again. There was no answer to this. Another noted that the one time payment of $190,000 to the government by the logging company was poor compensation for damaging a high value recreation area.

The tone of the meeting was captured by the response to two Ministerial responses. Asked if she had looked at the impact logging would have by walking some of the trails, she said she had done a fly-over. She also said that the options presented were focused on fire prevention rather than logging. Both comments drew boos from the audience.

The end of the meeting was chaotic and NO one used a Blue dot to approve any of the three map options posted at the back of the room. I was not the only disillusioned person in the room (see the September 28th Calgary Herald for a letter to the editor which ended with: “I think this situation is appalling and I am left feeling discouraged and frustrated by the way it is being handled”).

**Summary:**
Was this meeting called to discuss “timber harvesting for FireSmart purposes” or was it called to deceive the public about ESRD’s real motivation? The evidence is now indisputable.
The only intelligent conclusion is that the government’s hands are tied for some reason (ideology or dollars) but they are not willing to be transparent about their priorities. A clear statement saying that they have leased K Country to Spray Lake Sawmills as a tree farm and that they intend to honor that lease in its entirety would at least be honest!

Recent newspapers have been full of commentary on government transparency:
2) “Alberta’s appalling record on openness” (Don Braid, *Calgary Herald*, September 25, 2012)

The Redford government has a lot of work to do to convince Albertans.

For those who looked forward to a new type of PC government under Alison Redford, one that emulated the vision of Peter Lougheed, the handling of the West Bragg logging issue is disappointing indeed. K Country is an important part of the Lougheed legacy: “the showpiece of the parks system was Kananaskis Country which includes both Peter Lougheed Park and Spray Valley provincial parks --- During a speech in June, Lougheed ranked the creation of the park as one of his top three accomplishments. “I really think that was something, that we took that area and developed it,” he said at a dinner recognizing him as Canada’s best premier in the last 40 years.” (Collette Derworiz, *Calgary Herald*, September 14, 2012).

Where do we go from here? I believe that the Alberta of the 21st century needs some visionary leadership. We need to ask Premier Redford to emulate her mentor Peter Lougheed and provide a sensible resolution to this issue.

-Maurice Gaucher, Director, Alberta Hiking Association
Chair, Coalition of Calgary Seniors’ Outdoor Clubs

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**Letter to Minister McQueen**
Below, is a carefully considered letter to the Minister of Environment and Sustainable Resource Development by Alf Skrastins. His revealing comments about cut block locations based on "merchantable timber " and not fire breaks makes it clear that the "FireSmart" logging options presented by ESRD are not actually about firebreak protection for Bragg Creek or about the new-found concern for the protection of the West Bragg trails system, but in fact is about logging first and foremost. As he states, “the greatest concern is the dishonest representations used to sell this logging to Albertans."

September 27, 2012

Honourable Minister McQueen,

I would like to thank you for attending the September 25 public meeting in Bragg Creek. It was not likely to be a sympathetic audience, but your personal involvement was helpful in terms of improving the sense of openness and communication on behalf of the government.
I have enjoyed the recreational opportunities of Kananaskis Country since 1978 and I was heartened to hear you say that you have heard the public’s interest in preserving the trail systems and the recreational values of the portions of Kananaskis Country that are managed by ESRD.

However, I was disappointed by the three options presented at the meeting. I realize that you are not personally familiar with the West Bragg Creek area and I believe that staff within your Ministry have provided you with a misrepresentation of the options for fire protection and trail recreation.

I was part of the advisory committee that developed the Greater Bragg Creek All Season trails Plan, which was approved by your government. During that process, we did hear from SRD officials about the proposed logging to create fire containment lines, but early on in the process, the west containment lines were removed from consideration as an option. Thus, I was surprised to see that all three options you presented contained the additional logging of a west containment line.

I was also surprised to see that the proposed maps did not illustrate any of the existing areas where forest fuels already represent a low hazard level.

1. Naturally unforest areas, such as bogs, grass or shrub meadows. These include extensive swampy areas in the “Moose Loop” area and upper portions along the Bragg Creek drainage. There is a huge bog/meadow area that extends north from the West Bragg Creek road, all the way along the east boundary of Kananaskis Country. And there are boggy areas between the Iron Springs and Elbow trails. These areas have no trees and will act as natural fire breaks.

2. Previously harvested blocks. About 40% of the forest in this area has already been previously harvested 20-30 years ago. As such they do not represent areas of high hazard forest fuel. Treatments to these existing cut-blocis, such as tree thinning would further reduce the fuel loads and extend the time-frame during which these areas could offer fire protection.

3. There are existing roads, pipeline right-of-ways and cleared wellsites, which provide breaks in the forest cover and offer a level of fire protection. These were not shown as non-fuel areas on the maps.

All that the map showed is the remaining areas of merchantable timber between previous cut-blocks and naturally unforest areas. In other words, not much forest would actually be left!

Finally, although assurances were made that trails and recreation would be protected, your staff could not provide a single specific example of protection or mitigation. Given that you understand the importance of trails and the aesthetics of outdoor recreation to the majority of Bragg Creek and Calgary residents, I was very surprised that ESRD staff have appeared to have done no work at all on this part of the issue.

Let me say in closing that I fully appreciate the need for wildfire containment barriers. And I am not at all opposed to forest harvesting as a means of achieving a healthy, multi-aged forest, with benefits to wildlife and fire protection. And that I believe that forest harvesting can be done in a way that respects and even enhances the outdoor recreation experience of trail users.
It is my hope that you direct your staff at ESRD to do a more honest and thorough job of achieving that balance and presenting the information in a way that the public can understand and support. This did not happen at the September 25 public meeting.

Alf Skrastins