



INTEGRATED
LAND-USE PLANNING
AND CANADA'S NEW
NATIONAL FOREST
STRATEGY



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Cover photo

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C: Saskatchewan: Athabasca Planning Area and Process

Overview

No neni' g'ka ba ke holuda (Working on Our Land)

The Athabasca Land-use Plan is the result of a unique agreement among the Dené First Nations, the non-treaty communities of the area and the Province. This plan is the largest regional planning exercise ever carried out in Saskatchewan, covering over 15% of the province, about 12 million hectares in the far north. This area includes two of Saskatchewan's eleven ecoregions in their entirety, which together form Saskatchewan's portion of the Taiga Shield Ecozone. It also includes a significant portion of two other ecoregions in the Boreal Shield Ecozone and Saskatchewan's only example of tundra. The area is a continental headwater with portions of the Athabasca/Mackenzie, Churchill, and Kazan/Thelon River drainage basins. Two of Canada's five largest lakes outside the Great Lakes lie partly within the planning area.

This planning area is home to the Athabasca Denésuline, the Dené people of northern Saskatchewan. Their traditional lands also stretch into Manitoba, and north of Saskatchewan into the Territories. The predominantly Dené population of the planning area is concentrated in three on-reserve communities, Hatchet Lake, Black Lake and Fond du Lac, as well as three off-reserve communities, Camsell Portage, Uranium City and Stony Rapids.

An Advisory Panel has been formed that is co-chaired by Saskatchewan Environment and the Dené Vice-Chief of the regional Prince Albert Grand Council. This Panel includes representatives from all six communities and two outside groups, the Saskatchewan Mining Association and the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society Saskatchewan Chapter. Meetings are held about eight times per year, usually in the planning area. Meetings are conducted in Dené and English with simultaneous translation. The planning process has an office with one full-time staff person from Fond du Lac Denésuline First Nation.

The planning process involves three phases. The first focuses on a 50 kilometre wide corridor flanking the recently completed winter road into the area – the plan for this initial phase is currently in draft pending approval in 2004. Work on all three phases is expected to be completed by late 2005. One of the goals of the planning initiative will be to create a regional Management Board that will take on,

over time, significant responsibilities for the implementation of the land-use plan, as well as management of provincial resources.

A significant accomplishment has been the Traditional Land-use and Occupancy Study which involved interviews with over 600 traditional resource users and resulted in a data base of over 67,000 information points. The Traditional Land-use Study has provided a solid basis for community decisions on protected area and special management zones.

The major economic development in the area outside of traditional uses is mining, followed by tourism (sport hunting, canoe tripping, ecotourism and fishing). Forestry is undertaken in local areas on both a commercial and traditional basis. Small sawmills are located in several communities to provide rough lumber for local needs and for the mining industry. In addition, firewood is a significant local product. There are no long-term timber allocations; forest resources are available only through short-term annual permits for specific areas and products. As the road through the Athabasca becomes a permanent all-weather travel route, pressures on forest resources will increase. Two adjacent land-use plans abutting the Athabasca area to the south include new forestry allocations.

The Athabasca Denésuline are a caribou-based culture, and life still revolves around the annual arrival of the Beverly and Qamanirjuaq barren ground caribou herds on their winter range in northern Saskatchewan. Although this landscape has recently been impacted by the development of roads and mines, it still, for the most part, maintains its wilderness qualities. The Athabasca Land-use Plan is focused on ensuring that up-to-date planning, land-use policy and resource allocation practices are used to manage the landscape sustainably and protect its ecological and cultural values.

Assessment based on Indicators: Athabasca planning initiative

Clear Goals and Terms of Reference	Y/N/S	Comments
Environmental, social, cultural and economic objectives are clearly stated.	Yes	The Principles for the land-use plan include the integration of environmental, economic, social and cultural needs, balanced against provincial interests.
The maintenance of ecosystem function, structure, composition and biodiversity is a clearly stated objective and priority of the planning process, and is premised on:	Yes	The Goal of the Agreement is “conserving the integrity of the ecosystems...while optimizing social, cultural, economic and other benefits.” The Scope of the plan includes the proviso that “[t]he planning process will consider, as far as possible, all ecosystem values, biological diversity, air and water quality...and traditional...heritage values.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> representing the full spectrum of ecosystems, across their natural range of variation, in protected areas, 	Somewhat	For each of the ecoregions within the planning area one or more large protected areas, other smaller protected areas, and specific target protected areas will be established.

Clear Goals and Terms of Reference	Y/N/S	Comments
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> maintaining viable populations of all native species in natural patterns of abundance and distribution (including commitments to wildlife corridors), 	Somewhat	The planning process will consider all ecosystem values and biological diversity.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> sustaining ecological and evolutionary processes within their natural ranges of variability. 	Somewhat	Again, only insofar as the planning process will consider all ecosystem values and biological diversity.
All participants have agreed to the above objective.	Yes	Yes, in terms of signing the Agreement or accepting seats on the Advisory Panel.
The responsible government body has set clear policy targets that include a requirement to identify and designate protected areas through the planning process.	Yes	
The terms of reference contain no restrictions on areas to be protected and no pre-authorized agreements for timber volumes, roads or other resource allocations.	Somewhat	Restrictions do not affect mineral claim staking but do affect access to minerals, such as road construction.
There is agreement that no new major development permits (including for access roads), licenses or increases in tenure will be approved inside the planning area during the land-use planning initiative.	Somewhat	The Agreement provides a land-use freeze within the Phase 1 area initially, then in each subsequent area as planning proceeds. In practice a protocol has been adopted through which issuance of dispositions or resource allocations are reviewed by the Advisory Board for the whole planning area, with recommendations to the Minister.
There is agreement that the planning, development and management of road access will be addressed through the planning process.	Yes	The plan was initiated as part of the process of constructing seasonal road access into the area. Roads are included in the land-use freeze noted above.
If other regulatory reviews/processes that could impact the outcome of the planning initiative are occurring, these are coordinated with the land-use planning process.	Yes	This is provided for in the Agreement.
The roles and responsibilities of the parties involved in the planning process are clear at the outset.	Yes	The Agreement is signed by all local parties and the Province, and lays out the creation of the Advisory Panel and the process of planning.
The concerns of Aboriginal Peoples regarding land stewardship, jurisdiction, treaty and Aboriginal rights are taken into account.	Yes	
SCOPE		
The boundaries of the planning area are based on natural and/or cultural landscape features.	Yes	The planning area was based on the traditional land base of the local Aboriginal communities.

Scope	Y/N/S	Comments
The scale of the integrated-land-use planning process is large enough to encompass whole watersheds and provide habitat for far-ranging and migratory wildlife species and predator-prey relationships.	Somewhat	While the planning area is large enough and the scale is comprehensive, it was not designed to include specific whole watersheds or ecological features.
The process is designed to ensure that cumulative ecological impacts from industrial and recreational activities are taken into account.	Somewhat	The Agreement provides that the plan will address protection of the environment with respect to existing or potential environmental impacts.
The time-line for the planning process is adequate and clearly articulated.	Yes	The time-lines are clearly laid out in the Agreement for each of the three phases.
The process is adequately resourced (funding and personnel).	No	The parties are responsible for their own funding and personnel. There have been delays in the process on both sides due to lack of funding.
The process takes into account all activities potentially detrimental to forest ecosystems (i.e., mining, hydro, oil and gas, forestry).	Somewhat	The mining industry plays an active role in the planning process and other industrial activities such as forestry are also taken into account.
The process is designed to result in management guidelines for both protected areas and special management areas.	Yes	

STAKEHOLDER AND ABORIGINAL PARTICIPATION

All interested parties are at the table, including relevant local, provincial, territorial and federal government authorities, Aboriginal Peoples, local communities, environmental organizations, industry, labour, hunters, trappers and outfitters.	Somewhat	All local and Aboriginal communities are represented, as are the regional Grand Council and three departments of government. The Saskatchewan Mining Association and the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society Saskatchewan Chapter sit at the table. The outfitting industry has declined ongoing involvement and attends as needed. Hunters and trappers are represented by their communities and/or First Nations.
The planning process is led by an independent facilitator with experience in the area and knowledge of local conditions and/or is chaired by an independent chair.	Somewhat	The process is co-chaired by representatives of the major parties to the Agreement, the Province and the Aboriginal Communities. There is an independent planning consultant engaged to lead and facilitate the technical aspects of plan creation and production.
There are community meetings and information available inside the planning area.	Yes	Community meetings are held as needed to review issues and drafts of the plan. All communities have a representative on the Advisory Board. A newsletter is sent to all homes and businesses in the planning area several times a year.

Stakeholder/Aboriginal Participation	Y/N/S	Comments
There are other public meetings outside the planning area, in major urban centres, regarding the planning process.	Somewhat	Not at this time. The newsletter is available to anyone who expresses an interest. There is also a website. General public meetings will be held in major provincial centers when each phase draft plan is due for approval.
An up-to-date registry containing all minutes, presentations, and technical information is available to the public.	Yes	The planning office has copies of all materials and can provide them as needed.
Participants are adequately funded, so they can participate to their full capacity on a timely basis.	Yes/No	Community participants are funded by the Grand Council, although there have been funding problems. Government and outside stakeholders (mining and conservation) are responsible for their own costs.
KNOWLEDGE BASE		
Adequate information is provided for the following areas:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> natural and/or historic range of variability of key ecological processes (fire, blowdown, insect outbreaks, successional patterns, predator-prey dynamics) 	Yes	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> comprehensive inventories and distribution maps of natural communities and easily surveyed species groups 	Yes	Available provincial databases have been provided to the planning table.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> needs, including habitat range, of individual and focal species 	Somewhat	Where such information exists it is provided, though not much is known in this far north area of the province.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> areas of high conservation value (old-growth forests, intact forests, wetlands, areas of cultural significance, critical wildlife habitat, including migratory corridors) 	Yes	Both the provincial Representative Areas Network program and the Provincial Parks Branch provided information. The Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society did its own analysis which was tabled with the Advisory Board and included in the mapping database and zoning.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> existing forestry tenure applications 	Yes	However, it should be noted that industrial scale forestry is not an issue in the area at this time. Information on local sawmill and community forest use has been made available.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> existing industrial applications 	Yes	This includes mainly uranium mining.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> locations of oil and gas deposits 	N/A	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> boundaries for commercial timber 	Yes	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> values for remote tourism 	Yes	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> existing and proposed hydro corridors 	Yes	Yes for existing. There are no major new proposed projects at this time.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> existing and proposed roads 	Yes	

Knowledge Base	Y/N/S	Comments
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ecoregions and degree of representation in protected areas (gap analysis) 	Yes	The government has undertaken this analysis and released the results. The Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society has done its own coarse filter analysis and tabled its results.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> levels of carbon stored in the forest and predicted effects on carbon storage of different management models 	No	
With permission from Aboriginal communities, the traditional knowledge of Aboriginal Peoples is incorporated into the planning process.	Yes	A comprehensive Traditional land-use and occupancy planning project has been carried out by Aboriginal Peoples that now includes data from over 600 traditional resource users and has generated over 67,000 data items. This is one of the largest databases available, and is a priority for decision-making.
Aboriginal Peoples have received adequate support to develop information systems based on traditional knowledge and to map their traditional use and occupancy of the land and resources.	Yes	Aboriginal Peoples funded the land-use and occupancy project with help from the Federal Government and charitable donors.
A thorough socio-economic analysis for the planning area has been conducted that examines and predicts the impacts of different management scenarios on levels of employment, traditional Aboriginal activities, recreational activities, tourism and recreation-based businesses, potential non-timber forest-based economies and the costs and benefits of ecological services.	No	Not for this plan, although other existing studies have been made available.
All relevant information is provided to participants on a timely basis.	Yes	The Prince Albert Grand Council maintains an office for the planning process, and the government has dedicated staff who assist with information distribution.
Pertinent public policies and legislation regarding land-use, land tenure, land rights and land protection are brought to the attention of participants, and access to such policies and legislation is provided.	Yes	Information has been brought to the table by relevant experts inside and outside government.
APPROVAL AND IMPLEMENTATION		
The plan and recommendations from the planning initiative are subject to a public review.	Yes	The draft plan will be available for public review once it has been agreed upon by the parties to the Agreement. Public meetings inside the planning area are assured. Meetings outside the planning area are indicated in the Agreement.
Approval of the plan is contingent upon a collective endorsement by key parties and Aboriginal Peoples.	Yes	
The government is obligated to fulfill the plan, and these obligations are not weakened by discretionary wording.	Yes	The Government has agreed to implement the plan.

Approval and Implementation	Y/N/S	Comments
All comments, including “minority reports” are made public.	N/A	
There is a process in place to address situations where the plan contradicts existing rights, land-use, public policy.	Yes	The final plan will be administered by a locally-based Athabasca Management Structure, although the level of delegation of provincial authority has yet to be determined.
There is a transparent process for making changes to the plan.	Yes	This will be one of the responsibilities of the eventual Athabasca Management Structure.
An ongoing and well-supported multi-sectoral management committee is established to oversee the implementation of the plan, and to deal with amendments and to set up plan review activities.	Yes	This is the basis for the eventual Athabasca Management Structure. All members of the Advisory Board are eligible for membership in the Management Structure.
Adequate funding is in place for implementing the plan.	No	There are no guaranteed implementation funds at this time.

Discussion

The Athabasca Land-use Plan is still a work in progress. To date, there is a draft plan for the Phase 1 area and data, including traditional resource use and conservation information, have been collected for the whole planning area. It is expected that the Phase 1 plan will be approved by the summer of 2004. Work on Phase 2 planning has already begun.

One significant and unique feature of this plan is its basis in an Agreement among Aboriginal communities, off-reserve communities (which are largely Aboriginal) and the provincial government. This Agreement covers all aspects of the planning process throughout the three phases, and has dispute resolution mechanisms built in. The planning process will lead to the creation of a local management body that will be involved in the implementation of the plan and aspects of management of the resources of the area.

Also highly significant is the completion of a comprehensive Traditional Land-use and Occupancy mapping project. These data ensure that for the first time in Saskatchewan, local people come to the planning table with their own maps and information to compare with and balance against the information tabled by the government, resource industries and other groups from outside the area.

The final impact of the Athabasca Land-use Plan will not be known for some years, but the participants agree that the process has provided insights into the issue of balancing environmental and cultural values with the need and desire for economic development and jobs. The planning process has led the participants (and through their feedback, local communities and the province) to address many wide-ranging issues such as the delegation and co-management of natural resource-

es and the fair distribution of revenues from northern development to those who live in the area.

Although there are commercial forestry pressures, they are, at this time, local and small in nature. Harvested timber is processed in local sawmills for local needs and firewood, and for the rough timber needs of the mining industry (support beams, framing etc.). The major inhibitors of larger-scale forestry development in this area are limited access (seasonal roads), distance to markets and the scattered nature of stands of commercial interest. There are areas of high quality wood and large trees but they are too expensive to harvest at this time. There is a high level of interest from the mining industry in resource extraction within the planning area.

Success in meeting EBM objectives

The fundamental goal of the Agreement behind the plan is “conserving the integrity of the ecosystem... while optimizing social, cultural, economic and other benefits.” A founding principle of the plan is that its processes and structures “maintain healthy processes and biodiversity for sustainable ecosystems.” The planning process is bound to consider “...all ecosystem values, biological diversity, air and water quality, and traditional, recreational, spiritual and heritage values.”

The Advisory Board has worked to ensure that the goals and principles listed above served as the foundation for the land-use plan. In addition to the traditional land-use mapping, this has been accomplished by inviting resource people from inside and outside government to present relevant information, ensuring environmental issues were at the heart of discussions, and listening closely to Elders and community members who stressed these issues. A constant message at the planning table is the insistence of local people that their land and resources must survive development and continue to provide them with a healthy traditional lifestyle. As one Elder said during a community meeting, “after you guys are through all this mining and forestry, we still want to live in this land.”

Decisions have been based on the precautionary principle, leading to increased protection in the setting of zoning boundaries and buffers around sensitive natural and cultural resources. The planning team is still negotiating the parameters for industrial development (mining and forestry) and a revenue sharing and co-management framework. The first draft of the Phase 1 plan zoned a relatively high percentage of the area for protection – a relatively high percentage given that three of the six communities and the only road and power line are located in this area. The percentage of protected areas in phase II and III is expected to be to be substantially higher.

A number of provincial programs recognize land-use planning as an essential element of decision-making. The Provincial Parks System Plan, the provincial Representative Areas Network of protected landscapes, and the Biodiversity Action Plan lay out the need to work within land-use planning processes and

outline some parameters for success. These documents were introduced in the Athabasca planning process and their requirements are on record. In addition, the provincial government has confirmed that land-use planning processes will drive the completion of Representative Areas Network. None of these requirements is enshrined in legislation, however, leaving participants ultimately reliant on the government acting in good faith.

Stakeholder and Aboriginal participation

One could argue that public participation is somewhat limited. Outside of the provincial government, local communities and Aboriginal Peoples, there are only two other stakeholder groups sitting at the planning table: the Saskatchewan Mining Association and the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society. The Saskatchewan Outfitters Association was invited to participate, but prefers to audit the process and participate directly on specific issues of concern. In effect, these groups are tasked with representing the breadth of their constituencies at the table. Another limiting factor is funding, as participants must finance their own participation.

While the process has not been as widely inclusive as might be desirable, ongoing and planned review of the draft plans in three phases will provide wider opportunities for the public and other interest groups to be involved. Concerns about participation are also mitigated, to some extent, by the fact that there will be opportunities for other stakeholders and the public to participate in the final Management Structure for the plan, which will include some degree of resource management delegation.

Political will

In response to the mining industry's desire to maintain free access to mineral depositions within the planning areas, as is the current practice, the government of Saskatchewan exhibited a strong commitment to the ecosystem-based management objectives of the planning process. Its recent Biodiversity Action Plan commits to the establishment of a minimum of 12% protected areas, wherein mineral exploration and development will not occur.

On a broader scale, one of the strengths of the Athabasca Land-use Plan is the comprehensive Agreement among the participants that created and guides the process. This Agreement is an expression of the political will of the parties, acting on behalf of their constituents, to plan for the best possible future in this area from all points of view. Ultimately the success of the plan relies on both the will of the provincial government and on the will of the Aboriginal Communities and off-reserve communities who negotiated the Agreement. The planned Athabasca Management Structure that will administer many aspects of the plan is intended, over time, to delegate authority increasingly to local community members and ensure co-management of the area.