

Dear Editor,

With the opening of the ski season at Westcastle (aka Castle Mountain Resort) the winter visitor to the West Castle Valley will be impressed by the new developments that have been taking place at the resort over the past couple of years: the award-winning 12,000 square foot day lodge, the “T-Bar Pub and Grub”, the three-storey ski-rental and retail facility, the proliferation of high-end “cabins”, the new sewage lagoon (where once there was a snowmobile parking lot) that will double as a reservoir for snowmaking, the triple and double chairlifts that now give the skier access to three times the former ski terrain, and now the newly cut line that promises to give access to Haig Ridge.

All this will excite skiers. Some visitors may even think about buying a lot from CMR so that they can enjoy “the pristine wilderness” year-round. The only problem with this scenario is that the Area Structure Plan now before the Pincher Creek M.D. Council and other government planning authorities is playing catch-up with the planning process to secure legitimacy for developments that have already taken place, based on the 1998 Concept Plan and Base Development Plan, which were themselves playing catch-up with developments that had already taken place by 1998. The full extent of CMR’s plans for the resort have finally been articulated and, so far as the ski-hill expansion and base residential area goes, are not significantly different from the proposal put forward by Vacation Alberta Corporation in the early nineties. Where Vacation Alberta saw the hill accommodating 2,500 skiers at peak days, CMR’s consultants suggest a maximum of 3,000, with CMR opting for 2,400 as its “comfortable carrying capacity”. The main difference is that CMR is halfway to its endgame already, thanks to its incremental piecemeal approach to the planning process and the sweet real estate deal that has allowed the company to capitalize its infrastructure through the sale of what in 1992 was public land.

The Natural Resources Conservation Board Hearing (1993) that reviewed the implications of expanding the Westcastle Ski Hill recommended that any approval of the expansion (even if it followed “the more realistic cost-shared, phased-in approach”) should be conditional on significant land use zoning changes in the surrounding public lands to ensure that ecological and natural wilderness values would not be compromised. That decision recommended that a Wildland Recreation Area be established “whether or not the project proceeds”. And even in their conditional approval the NRCB recommended that “no further development of accommodation facilities other than staff housing be permitted in the Resort Area”. CMR is proposing 225 “Housing Units” as well as a hotel and a hostel.

The NRCB approval was rescinded in 1994 but their Decision Report still remains the only planning document in the public record that directly addresses the environmental impacts of various development scenarios in the Westcastle Valley. The Castle-Crown Wilderness Coalition will be seeking a review of CMR’s Area Structure Plan by the the Director of Environmental Assessment to ensure that the concerns raised in 1992 are fully addressed. The CCWC’s position regarding the ski hill has not changed since 1993. We accept, and many of our members support, the presence of a viable local ski hill on the same conditions advanced by the NRCB, and most particularly their recommendation for the creation of a Wildland Protected Area. In the absence of any such protected area, the CCWC is opposed to any expansion of the footprint of the ski hill, either in its terrain or its associated real estate developments at the base.

Yours truly, James Tweedie, Past President, CCWC

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Coalition Repeats Call for Public Review of Alberta Forestry Practices

What Minister Pierre Pettigrew is now hearing from the U.S. Department of Commerce is what the Castle-Crown Wilderness Coalition (CCWC) was telling him in June last year: Alberta is subsidising its forest industry at the expense of the forests and the environment.

“The current media focus on job losses in the industry misses the point,” said Mike Sawyer, of Hayduke Associates, who prepared the CCWC’s 30 page report to the U.S. Trade Representative. “What the figures tell us and what the U.S. Department of Commerce is telling us is that we are losing our forests in our haste to subsidise the U.S. home building market.”

In April 2000, in response to the “Request for Public Comments regarding Softwood Lumber Practices in Canada”, the CCWC filed a detailed submission to the U.S. Trade Representative that documented the significant economic subsidies that are currently being provided to Alberta’s forest sector and the serious widespread environmental consequences resulting from forestry mismanagement. (CCWC’s submission may be viewed on the CCWC website at <www.ccwc.ab.ca>)

Specifically in the Castle Watershed, adjacent to Waterton Lakes National Park, the Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park and the UNESCO International Biosphere Site, the CCWC’s Report pointed to the devastating effect the industry and the management of those lands by Alberta Lands and Forests has had in recent years. The Alberta Government-approved forest harvesting activities and associated land-management have severely degraded the area leaving a legacy of watershed damage, high road densities and unsustainable mortality rates for some wildlife species that place threatened or endangered species at risk. Under the U.S.’s Environmental Protection Act and Endangered Species Act such management of similar Public Lands in neighbouring Montana would be prohibited.

As well as providing direct economic evidence and analysis of administrative duties (“stumpage fees”), the Report also brought to light the fact that in the previous 5 year period, even with increasing sales and revenues, the Alberta Government’s administrative price for lumber has consistently failed to cover its forestry management costs, such as fire-fighting and reforestation, losing on average US\$1.3 million a year. This represents a systemic failure by the Government to manage our forests on, at a minimum, a cost-recovery basis.

In an attempt to throw light on the question as to whether these subsidies have resulted in an increase of Softwood Lumber exports to the U.S., the Report points to the fact that in a 20 year period Alberta’s industry has shifted from exporting less than 20% of total timber production to the U.S. in 1980 (6.5 million cubic meters) to an 80% export figure (13.4 million cubic meters) in 1998, as a result of the “Alberta Advantage” in forestry management practices. Alberta has now reached the point where production is equal to the Government’s Annual Allowable Cut Allocation, which many scientists believe to be already too high to be sustainable.

Unlike the U.S., Canada established no process for public input on the Softwood Lumber Agreement and the forestry industry is now paying the price. In its letter to the Minister last year the CCWC called on Minister Pettigrew to abandon the Government’s closed-door consultation with “Team Canada’s” industry representatives and conduct a serious public consultation through public hearings. A 1999 Cabinet Directive calls on all Ministers to be “responsible for ensuring that the environmental consequences of their policies, plans and programs are consistent with the Government’s broad environmental objectives and sustainable development goals”. As such, the responsibility for conducting an environmental assessment of an

international agreement like the Softwood Lumber Agreement rests squarely on Minister Pettigrew's shoulders and he has to take full responsibility for the current imposition of countervailing duties.

Apart from what this recent U.S. decision tells us about our forestry practices, Canada's practice of consulting only with private sector corporations on trade matters that have a direct bearing on the management of Public Lands, while excluding the public, is no longer credible nor acceptable.

"It is a poor reflection on Canada's political climate that our only opportunity for input into Canada's Softwood Lumber Agreement was through a public consultation process established by the United States," remarked Mike Sawyer.

For more information, please contact:

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Mike Sawyer, Author of CCWC's Submission to U.S. Trade Representative, 403-270-3455

The CCWC's April 2000 Submission may be viewed at <www.ccwc.ab.ca>

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NEWS RELEASE

Provincial and national conservation groups announce the establishment of an Information Centre near Shell Canada Limited's sour gas well development in the Castle.

For release July 19, 2001

The Castle-Crown Wilderness Coalition (CCWC) and the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) announced today that they have established an Information Centre located approximately 4km south of Shell's sour gas development near the Castle Falls Provincial Recreation Area. The groups charge that the Alberta government has ignored its own landuse, health and safety guidelines in order to allow Shell to drill this hazardous sour gas well.

For more than three decades, conservation groups in Alberta have called upon the Alberta government to put a stop to the continued deterioration of the Castle's ecosystems caused mostly by industrial and commercial development and excessive off highway vehicle use. The Castle region, adjacent to the northern border of the Waterton/Glacier International Peace Park, has some of the highest diversity of animal and plant species in Alberta. The groups' longstanding proposal to establish legislated protection for this approximately 1000 sq. km area in southwest Alberta has been continuously ignored by the Alberta government.

The Information Centre has been set up for the summer to show Albertans the beauty of the Castle Wilderness, and what we stand to lose by allowing Shell Canada to continue to drill in the Castle.

"Legislated protection for the Castle would not only contribute to the long-term ecological health of the region's ecosystems but also would enhance local economies by providing long-term business opportunities associated with wilderness areas such as eco-tourism" said Dieter Gade, Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society.

Despite recommendations by the Natural Resources Conservation Board to protect the southern part of the Castle and an acknowledgement by the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board that the current land use policy is outdated and inadequate in addressing present and future levels of human activities in the region, industrial development continues to degrade the area.

The groups are encouraging Albertans who visit the Castle Wilderness, as well as people who are concerned over the future of the province's wilderness and wildlife to take action. One of the tools the groups are using is an online Action Centre which allows to send free faxes to the Alberta government.

"Shell's ongoing activities in this ecologically sensitive Castle region, is another example of Ralph Klein's "energy to burn" policy in action," says Stephen Legault, Executive Director of Wildcanada.net. Legault's group, along with the Alberta Wilderness Association developed the Castle Action Centre. So far over 2,000 letters have been sent to the Premier and other decision makers.

Recently, Shell rejected to support a proposal by the CCWC and CPAWS which would have accommodated further limited industrial activities in the Castle as well as the establishment of legislated protected areas.

"It is time that Shell acknowledge its corporate social responsibility," said James Tweedie, spokes person for the Castle-Crown Wilderness Coalition, a local conservation group. "The expansion of Shells' activities into the north end of the Castle are against public interest because these developments significantly impact the quality of watersheds, wildlife habitat and recreational wilderness experiences."

The online Castle action centre is at <http://www.cpawscalgary.org>.

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NEWS RELEASE

AEUB DENIES PUBLIC HEARING REQUEST AND APPROVES CRITICAL SOUR GAS WELL ONLY 300 METERS FROM A MAJOR PUBLIC CAMPGROUND

May 16, 2001, Calgary, Alberta: The Alberta Energy and Utilities Board (AEUB) has denied a request from the Castle-Crown Wilderness Coalition and local outfitter Mike Judd (CCWC) for a public hearing into a level 4 critical sour gas [\[1\]](#) well that Shell Canada Limited (Shell) is proposing to drill immediately adjacent to the very popular and heavily-used Castle Falls campground, located in the foothills southwest of Pincher Creek. Shell has indicated that the well would contain over 32 percent hydrogen sulphide (or sour gas). Hydrogen sulphide is a deadly toxin that, even in very low concentrations, can seriously injure or kill humans or animals. Because of the proximity of the sour gas well to the campground, Shell has acknowledged that it would be difficult or impossible to safely evacuate the public in the event of a poisonous gas leak. Shell's proposed solution is to simply "buy out" the public campground from the private concessionaire who operates it, and then to close the campground to public use for the entire 2001 summer season. Not only will the public lose access to the campground, but also the private operator stands to pocket a season's income for doing nothing but locking the gate.

In its decision, dated May 11, 2001, the Board rejected out of hand all of CCWC's environmental and public safety objections and held that no one had standing to obtain a hearing. Of particular concern in this decision is the AEUB's decision allowing Shell to reduce the calculated emergency response zone (ERZ) from an area within an 8.5 kilometer radius of the proposed well to an ERZ of 3.0 kilometers. The original ERZ contained over 150 rural residences including the hamlet of Beaver Mines. The reduced ERZ contains no permanent residences but does contain three provincial campgrounds and a minimum-security prison with over 75 inmates. The decision to reduce the ERZ was made without any supporting analysis (i.e. air quality modeling) or public consultation. The AEUB decision to reduce the ERZ is inconsistent with its own written policies and is contrary to the recent recommendations of the Provincial Advisory Committee on Public Safety and Sour Gas.

CCWC is particularly concerned about the potentially devastating impacts of the AEUB's decision on the safety and health of the hundreds of Alberta families who regularly use the Castle Falls campground and the surrounding Castle River valley for camping, fishing and other outdoor recreational pursuits. The AEUB has a long-established policy that level 4 critical sour gas wells must be "setback" at least 1.5 kilometers from any "public facility" to provide more time for evacuation in the event of an emergency. In this case, the Board chose to not apply this rule, deciding instead that the 46-site Castle Falls campground was not a public facility in spite of the fact that the AEUB's own internal documents define "public facilities" as including campgrounds with 20 or more sites.

"Given the extremely close proximity of the proposed sour gas well to the campground there would be virtually no time to even notify the public of an emergency situation, let alone evacuate them" said Mike Judd, a local outfitter who regularly uses the Castle River valley near the proposed sour gas well. "The AEUB is playing god with my family and client's lives but refuses to even provide a public hearing so we can voice our concerns about Shell's plans." he added.

James Tweedie, President of the CCWC, said "The AEUB develops its various environmental and safety policies to purport to resolve public concerns about activities licensed by the AEUB. However, this decision shows that those policies are not worth the paper they are written on, because the AEUB is so quick to ignore those policies even in the most compelling circumstances for applying them."

In what may be the most egregious aspect of this decision, the AEUB denied the CCWC members' request for a public hearing. The CCWC had based its legal "standing" for this hearing on potential harm to its members while they were exercising their legal rights of access to the Castle Falls Recreation Area and other public lands in the vicinity of the proposed well. The AEUB rejected these claims because it was "not convinced . . . that legally recognized interests can include non-monetary interests".

"This is an outrageous conclusion" stated Mike Sawyer, Campaign Coordinator for the CCWC, "What the AEUB is

saying is that if you stand to lose money, you have a legally recognized interest and will be granted a hearing. However, if you simply stand to die, suffer some extreme physical harm short of death, or suffer physically or mentally in any other way, your harms are not “legally recognized” and you will not receive a hearing.”

The CCWC is reviewing the decision with legal counsel and is anticipating filing a legal appeal with the Alberta Court of Appeal. The CCWC is also reviewing its other options to oppose Shell’s proposed sour gas well.

For more information contact:

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CCWC Webpage: www.cwc.ab.ca

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[\[1\]](#) The AEUB has a scale from 1 to 4 representing the potential public safety risks associated with sour gas wells. A level four well is the most dangerous.

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March 6, 2001

The Castle Wilderness is suffering from Alberta government neglect

Calgary — One of Alberta's most precious environmental treasures, the Castle Wilderness, is being harmed by provincial government neglect.

That is the key message of an advertising campaign to be launched on March 7, 2001 by the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) and the Castle-Crown Wilderness Coalition (CCWC). The advertising campaign, which includes newspaper and radio ads (<http://www.cpawscalgary.org/castle/>), is the first of this magnitude for both organizations.

"We want the provincial government to account for its lack of action to protect environment," says Dieter Gade, a CPAWS spokesperson.

The Special Places 2000 program was announced by the Alberta government in 1995 to establish a network of protected areas representative of Alberta's 6 natural regions and 19 sub-regions by the year 2000. Little progress has been made. Today, large tracts of ecologically significant provincial lands remain unprotected and threatened by industrial and commercial developments and off-highway vehicle use.

The "Castle" covers 1,040 km² in southwestern Alberta between Waterton Lakes National Park and the Crowsnest Pass. The region is home to sensitive animal species such as grizzly bear, wolf, and wolverine and 161 rare species of plants. It also provides a key migration link in the Yellowstone to Yukon corridor. The ecological integrity of the Castle is being threatened by the government's multiple-use management policy which allows commercial and industrial development to expand at the expense of the environment.

For decades, provincial, national and international conservation organizations have called for legal protection of this legendary land. In December of 1993 the Natural Resources Conservation Board (NRCB) echoed these calls. As a condition of the board's decision to allow Vacation Alberta to develop a four-season resort in the West Castle Valley, the NRCB required that most of the remainder of the Castle be protected as a Wildland Recreation Area. Further, they recommended that the area be protected *whether or not* the resort development proceeded. The Alberta Government approved the development and protected area but then, a few months later, rescinded the approval. Since then, new owners have taken over, and development at the site has proceeded on a piecemeal basis.

"Sadly, we have come to the cross point where we stand to lose a very unique Alberta landscape with an exceptional diversity of animals and plants to resource development and off-road vehicle use" says Mike Sawyer, CCWC campaign coordinator. "We hope our advertising campaign will prompt the public to call on the government to fulfill its promise to protect provincial lands that preserve the broad diversity of animal and plant species found in Alberta."

For more information, please contact:

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