

SSRP Public Information and Input Sessions

Summary of Public Input



Government
of Alberta ■

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Overview

Alberta's Land-use Framework (LUF) sets out the new approach for managing public and private lands and natural resources to achieve Alberta's long-term economic, environmental and social goals. The purpose of the LUF is to manage growth and to sustain Alberta's growing economy, while balancing this with Albertans' social and environmental goals. One of the key strategies for improving land-use decision-making established in the LUF is the development of seven regional plans based on seven new land-use regions. Each regional plan will address the current conditions in a region, and will anticipate and plan for relevant development related activities, opportunities and challenges in that region over the long-term.

The LUF identified the South Saskatchewan Regional Plan (SSRP) as an immediate priority. In May 2009, the GoA appointed a Regional Advisory Council (RAC) for the South Saskatchewan Region (SSR). The RAC has been asked by the GoA to explore the relationship between conservation and development and provide advice on how trade-offs may be reflected in the regional plan. The Alberta government's Land Use Secretariat (LUS) will oversee the development of each regional plan. It will provide policy analysis, research and administrative support to the RAC. A regional planning team, representing Alberta government ministries and agencies, will work under the leadership of the LUS to develop a draft regional plan for approval by Cabinet. The government will also consider input on the draft regional plan through public, stakeholder and aboriginal consultations.

For the first phase of the SSRP consultation process, public and stakeholder information and input sessions were conducted in 16 locations across the region between November 30 and December 10, 2009. The purpose of the input sessions was to:

- Provide the public and stakeholders with information about the South Saskatchewan regional planning process; and
- Gather input on topics that have been raised in the SSRP terms of reference.

Dates and locations for the input sessions are presented in the following table.

Date	Session Location	
Monday, November 30	Vulcan	Calgary
Tuesday, December 1	Claresholm	Strathmore
Wednesday, December 2	Okotoks	Cochrane
Thursday, December 3	Canmore	Airdrie
Monday, December 7	Brooks	Lethbridge
Tuesday, December 8	Medicine Hat	Fort Macleod
Wednesday, December 9	Taber	Pincher Creek
Thursday, December 10	Milk River	Cardston



The information and input sessions for the general public were held between 4 p.m. and 7 p.m. In each community venue, the GoA set up a series of panels providing background and information about the LUF, the SSRP and the planning and consultation processes. GoA personnel were on hand to respond to questions from the public. Members of RAC were also in attendance at some sessions.

Approximately 500 people attended the 16 public information and input sessions. The numbers varied from a high of 100 in Calgary to a dozen or fewer in several rural communities. Participants represented a diverse range of interests including: farmers, landowners and residents (comprising approximately half of total attendees); parks and recreation interests, industry (including oil and gas, agriculture, forestry and tourism); various stakeholder organizations (such as environmental, Aboriginal and citizens' groups); elected officials and staff from federal agencies and municipalities.

Summary of Public Input

The principal themes emerging from the public sessions are summarized in the following sections.

South Saskatchewan Regional Plan and Process

Many people indicated that their primary interest in the sessions was to obtain information and ask questions about the content of, and process for, consultation and implementation of the SSRP. One of the main areas of concern was the relationship between the SSRP and other plans and processes, such as municipal plans (participants in some sessions were concerned about how the Calgary Metropolitan Plan (CMP) will work within the SSRP), Ghost Access Management Plan, recreation access management plans (RAMP), integrated regional plans and integrated land management (ILM). Answers were provided to these questions as follows:¹

- Local planning and planning processes will need to align with the direction in the regional plan. It is anticipated that there will not be fundamental changes required by municipalities in most cases;
- Existing integrated resource plans will be reviewed to determine whether they need to be amended or updated to align with the SSRP;
- The input from agencies and groups such as the Oldman River Regional Service Commission, Castle Special Place Working Group and Alberta Water Council will be considered in the development of the regional plan if submitted to the RAC and GoA;
- The *Alberta Land Stewardship Act* gives legislative authority to the regional plan and requires all decision-makers in the region to ensure their planning, policy and decisions are aligned with the regional plan. Legislation like the *Land Assembly Project Act* will be used to implement the regional plans; and

¹ The GoA reviewed the questions and provided a common response to each of the questions. These responses are organized in the introductory sections of this summary.

- The SSRP has authority over private and public lands under provincial jurisdiction. A federal government representative on the RAC will help the RAC consider federal interests when providing their advice.

Participants in all sessions had questions about the scope of the SSRP.

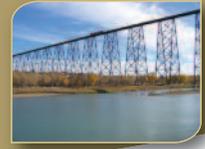
- A sub-regional plan can be triggered through direction in the regional plan or the Government of Alberta can approve any existing plan as a sub-regional plan. (In two sessions for example, strong interest was expressed in sub-regional plans for the Eastern Slopes and southwest Alberta.)
- The contents of the SSRP will be determined by Cabinet based on the terms of reference and input from the RAC and other Albertans.
- Municipalities will determine what is developed on individual land parcels within the context of the regional plan.

How will overlap with the Red Deer Regional Plan be managed?

- Although the Red Deer Regional Plan will be created after the SSRP, the water management policy for the Red Deer Region will be aligned and set within the overall context of the South Saskatchewan Basin. The water needs of the Red Deer Region will be considered in the development of the SSRP.
- The SSRP does not introduce another level of approval for development proposals. Existing authorities continue to make these decisions through existing processes, but must make their decisions consistent with the direction in the regional plan.

Individual comments about the scope and present content of the SSRP included:

- The plan should articulate the trade-offs between achieving land management goals and objectives and facilitating business development opportunities.
- The SSRP needs to be a living document that is reviewed and renewed as needed.
- The task of balancing economic, environmental and social pillars is daunting.
- Regional and sub-regional economic development strategies need to be considered in the development of the plan.
- Land exchanges brokered by municipalities or municipal districts should be subject to a public review.



Water

Of the substantive topics raised at the public sessions, water ranked as a top concern.

Participants had many questions about how the SSRP will or might affect water allocation and governance. Answers to these questions included:

- Regional water systems and watershed management plans will be considered in the development of the SSRP. Future development and implementation of regional water systems and watershed management plans will be encouraged and will need to comply with the direction from the SSRP;
- Although the SSRP may provide direction regarding changes in priority for water, the actual mechanism for doing so will be considered through a separate process led by Alberta Environment to review Alberta's water allocation process; and
- The Government of Alberta, through the leadership of Alberta Environment, will establish parameters for water quality and quantity through the regional plan.

Individual comments on water allocation included the following:

- The SSRP needs to ensure a more equitable distribution of irrigation rights than is presently the case;
- The water usage process needs to be intertwined with the Land-use Framework;
- Aim for the highest and best uses (e.g., residential use) in the allocation of water;
- Allow for flexibility in determining allotments so that daily allotment may be occasionally exceeded so long as the annual allotment is met; and
- Keep in mind the water quality agreement in place with the province of Saskatchewan and the 1909 water agreement with the United States.

The overarching concern about water allocation was the overall supply and quality of water in the SSR. Several people perceived conflicts between urban and rural areas in terms of access to water, including the perception that large urban centres like Calgary have preferential access to water over rural developments and agricultural use. In one session it was asserted that developers are being told they may not drill water wells in their area, but instead must obtain water from existing sources or from other communities. A few people viewed the water supply as the primary factor that will determine future economic growth.

Water quality concerns included contamination from agricultural runoff (especially manure), impacts of oil and gas activity on groundwater quality and the health of the Bow River. Various participants called for action to conserve and provide stewardship over the region's water resources by:

- Developing a consistent definition of headwaters or source waters and their locations;
- Protecting watersheds;
- Conducting an inventory of groundwater supply, quality and demand;
- Feeding information from the mapping of aquifers currently underway into the SSRP as soon as possible;
- Developing an overall water conservation plan;
- Designating some areas of the region as no-growth zones or delimiting the type of development in order to protect water sources, such as on the Eastern Slopes; and
- Determining flood risk and limiting development in flood zones.

Private Property Rights

Many landowners expressed concern that the SSRP may erode private property rights, articulated in one session as inherent rights and privileges traditionally attached to private land. The concerns ranged from the perception that the *Alberta Land Stewardship Act* may permit expropriation of private land, to loss of grazing rights under the SSRP. Several farmers indicated they found the SSRP complex and were concerned their voices may not be heard. Several said the SSRP should continue allowing landowners to act as stewards for their land.

Land Values and Compensation

Closely linked to property rights was the matter of compensation, with a number of participants asserting that landowners should receive compensation if the SSRP precludes them from developing their land as they wish. Some also viewed compensation as due if a landowner makes efforts to protect water courses and wildlife habitat on their land, thereby contributing to overarching stewardship and preservation needs. Landowners were concerned about how any new zoning might affect their land value. Bill 50 was cited as having the potential to depress land prices since it may prevent subdivision of property. Some participants suggested the designation of development nodes and priority growth areas can lead to inequities since it means one person may be permitted to subdivide while his or her neighbour cannot.



Public Lands

Several themes emerged under the general umbrella of public lands. Representatives of off-highway vehicle (OHV) users had strong concerns about the SSRP limiting responsible OHV use on public lands, access to which, they said, is already often blocked by private landowners. Some users called for the creation of designated areas and trails for OHV and snowmobile use, and a few indicated a willingness to pay in order to retain access. Other participants expressed general concerns about the impacts of OHV use, calling for access to be restricted in sensitive areas such as Castle Mountain and the Eastern Slopes. Several people suggested that competing interests can only be resolved through an integrated regional access and trail plan for OHV and other backcountry uses.

Answers to other questions and comments related to public lands included:

- Unless the SSRP provides specific direction, the current policy for access to public lands, including access for grazing will continue;
- Both motorized and non-motorized recreation will be considered through the development of the SSRP. Some limits to recreational use may be considered in the management of future protected areas;
- The plan will also encourage recreational development in some areas in the region;
- The plan may address random camping. Recent changes to the *Public Lands Act* and *Forests Act* will provide additional mechanisms for enforcement;
- The SSRP can facilitate connectivity of recreational trails between various communities; and
- Concern was expressed that the recreation access management plan could lead to paid hunting.

Urban Sprawl

People in many sessions stated a concern about encroachment of urban development onto rural lands. Some residents of rural and semi-rural areas desired protection of lower density lifestyles. Concern was expressed about increasing density in satellite communities surrounding Calgary and other urban centres and about growth in the number of gated communities. In one session it was suggested that conservation easements be used to prevent municipalities from expanding.

Land-use Conflicts

In sessions near Calgary, some in attendance spoke about a perceived blurring of the urban/rural divide, which they felt resulted in some land-use conflicts. Some farmers noted how encroaching residential developments have affected their agricultural activities, for example, they are no longer able to apply herbicides to their land. They described additional nuisances from suburban developments such as garbage, weeds and dogs. Several people said buffers should be required between developments and private lands.

A number of farmers/landowners described other land-use conflicts such as public utilities, oil and gas and transportation. The SSRP needs to define management intents related to compatible and incompatible land uses.

Preservation of Agricultural Land

Farmers and non-farmers voiced concerns about the pressures growth and development are placing on Alberta's agricultural landbase. Participants hoped that the SSRP will help protect this landbase and the rural way of life.

Other Land-use Issues

The topic of land reclamation was raised in a few sessions, the key comment being that reclamation standards vary between public and private lands and government needs to enforce reclamation agreements on private land. Three issues were raised concerning transportation and utilities:

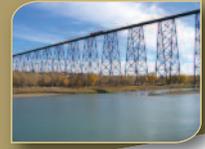
- Concern that planning for highway and road access to smaller communities is declining, yet access is vital for these communities;
- Concern about limitations on the movement of farm equipment along public roads;
- Some felt municipal regulations for development are onerous; and
- A few people wondered how transfer of development credits will be used, and how these will affect development on private lands where people want to subdivide for economic gain.

Conservation and Stewardship

Questions and comments regarding conservation and stewardship were part of every public session. The answers to the main questions can be summarized as follows:

- The best data available has been provided and/or acquired to support the development of the SSRP, including biodiversity data. The Government of Alberta continues to support the Alberta Biodiversity Monitoring Institute in establishing sites to monitor biodiversity at a regional scale;
- Conservation tools have been established under the *Alberta Land Stewardship Act*. Regulations clarifying how conservation tools will work are being developed over the coming year.
- There are a number of modeling tools, including ALCES, that are being used to support the development of the regional plan;
- The identification of conservation areas in the regional plan will consider species at risk in the region; and
- The regional plan will consider riparian management with respect to livestock grazing and will support programs like Cows and Fish.

Participants at several sessions commented on valued landscapes. A number of people said it is vital that the SSRP offer protection, stewardship and acquisition of native grasslands. A model grasslands project was proposed and it was suggested that as the largest landowner in Canada, the Eastern Irrigation District, might take responsibility for grasslands protection. Conservation of wetlands was also a primary concern for some participants, with wetlands in the Ghost area receiving specific mention.



Other comments related to conservation and stewardship included:

- Farmers need help with stormwater management;
- Wildlife corridors must be protected;
- Farmers can play a key role in wildlife management and their practical knowledge should be sought and heeded, rather than relying on academic knowledge;
- Concern about road density: too many roads are fragmenting the landscape and habitat;
- Better understanding is needed of the impacts of wildlife on rangeland as it is not necessarily overgrazing alone that is affecting the land;
- Regulations governing manure management should be based on phosphorus content, not on nitrogen content as is the present case;
- Some concern about a disproportional focus on conservation and its impact on private land;
- Some concern about how ecological goods and services are valued; and
- The GoA should provide funding for forest guardians.

Economic Development and Industry Impacts

A concern expressed at several public sessions was that the SSRP will slow or limit development opportunities. It was noted that some portions of the region (e.g., Vulcan and Pincher Creek) need long-term economic growth, especially with regard to the oil and gas industry. Industry representatives had a concern that the SSRP will hold industry to a higher standard than other users. Some called for single-use zones for industrial development. Below are industry-specific questions and comments.

Oil and Gas

- Some concern was expressed about the increased regulatory complexity with respect to oil and gas activity and its impact on industry's ability to conduct business. Some hoped that ALSA and the regional plan will help in this regard.

Forestry

- Some small timber operators were concerned that they may lose their timber quotas under the SSRP; and
- Industry representatives expressed concern about how conservation restrictions may affect their business.

Recreation and Tourism

- Some felt that the SSRP should support a number of tourism opportunities; and
- Several expressed the belief that ecotourism opportunities around water features need to be encouraged.

Aboriginal Issues

In two sessions, Métis attendees expressed concern about the lack of specific reference to Métis interests in the SSRP terms of reference and that there was no Métis representation on the RAC. Involvement of the Métis Nation of Alberta needs to be formalized.

Other aboriginal issues raised in individual sessions included the need to engage not only chiefs and councils, but aboriginal citizens as well

Social and Cultural Issues

Several participants in rural sessions said there is a disconnect between rural and urban lifestyles in Alberta, such that urban dwellers do not recognize the contribution rural areas make to the economy and to Alberta's way of life. Participants said the SSRP process needs to raise general public awareness about agriculture as a business and economic activity, and about the societal values (e.g., cultural, environment and community contributions) that citizens enjoy as part of the Alberta way of life.

