

Chester-Sawmill Winter Trail Plan

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In the June, 2015 Newsletter, we mentioned that Alberta Parks was exploring the concept of expanding the Chester-Sawmill trail system. We're happy to share there has been development regarding this initiative. To recap on what this initiative is all about, here's a bit of context:

Project Overview

Chester-Sawmill trails area is located in Peter Lougheed Provincial Park, approximately 43km southwest of Canmore and 140km from Calgary. The area currently features a mix of snowshoe, ski, hiking and biking trails ranging from popular designated trails, to undesignated and unmaintained ski trails. Most of these trails resulted from the Spray Lakes Sawmills logging activity that took place in the area prior to being designated as part of the Peter Lougheed Provincial Park. From 1985-1992 the area was designated as a groomed cross country ski trail system, further becoming a designated snowshoe trail system in 2005. The area receives consistent and significant snowfall, with no or low avalanche hazards, making it a natural destination for snowshoeing, cross country skiing, and fat biking activity.

This plan process will explore the Chester-Sawmill winter recreational opportunities and experiences that merit consideration while carefully considering the approved park management plan. It will set forth recommendations to enhance and expand the winter trail system within the planning area. Additional new trails may be considered as part of the plan, but it is expected that the majority of the plan will incorporate the existing and former trail systems in order to reduce forest disturbance and maintain existing ecology and wildlife habitat.

Conceptual Plan - Terms of Reference

The Chester-Sawmill Advisory Committee was formed with representatives from Alberta Parks, the Friends of Kananaskis Country, and stakeholders from the snowshoeing and cross country skiing communities. This group compiled a Terms of Reference (TOR) to inform Kananaskis Region decision makers (Kananaskis Trail Committee, planners, ecologists and operations-management team) about the proposed *Chester-Sawmill Winter*

Trail Plan.

The purpose of the Chester-Sawmill Winter Trail Plan is to develop recommendations for a trail network in the Chester-Sawmill plan area of Kananaskis Country. The following objectives were presented at the Kananaskis Trail Committee meeting in November:

- 1 To identify existing gaps for winter trail use;
- 2 To assess the feasibility and desirability of these defined needs based on existing supply as well as known natural and cultural values and other provisions of the park management plan;
- 3 To consider additional snowshoe trails by restoring the previously maintained cross country ski trails and incorporate destination look-outs;
- 4 To determine where/if fat biking access is appropriate on existing and recommended snowshoe trails (considering multi-use trail access);
- 5 To determine where/if cross country skiing access is appropriate on existing and recommended snowshoe trails (considering multi-use trail access);
- 6 Options for reintroducing cross country ski grooming on recommended ski trails;
- 7 To consider potential summer use impacts subsequent to increased winter use;
- 8 To recommend connections and linkages with the TransCanada – High Rockies Trail;
- 9 To enhance educational opportunities in the area for the following programs: Kananaskis County - Environmental Education Program; Avalanche Awareness; Wildlife, Habitat and Ecology; Public Education and Interpretation; Trail etiquette, respect and use;
- 10 To consider the installation of up to two longer-term warming huts, one at the Chester Day Use and the other at the Sawmill Day Use.

The above objectives were well received, with the exception of #6, "Options for reintroducing cross country ski grooming on recommended ski trails". The reality is, Parks can't support the resumption of grooming because they have no budget for the equipment and manpower required. Although Parks recognizes the benefits and merit of having groomed trails in this area, it simply isn't feasible at this time. The compromise will be to include recognized non-groomed cross country ski trails in the trail system. In addition, while the consideration for seasonal yurts at each Day Use area hasn't been ruled out, there are several logistical components to be

evaluated.

Next Steps

Now that we have direction on what Alberta Parks is willing to consider, we are moving into the Detailed Design phase of the proposal, which will illustrate and outline proposed new trails, destination look-outs, yurt style and location, and an implantation plan. The Committee is aiming to submit the Detailed Design proposal to Alberta Parks for review in April.

We anticipate that this project will create volunteer opportunities in the summer of 2016, which will include brushing and clearing old ski trails and logging roads. We will keep you posted on further developments of the exciting initiative.