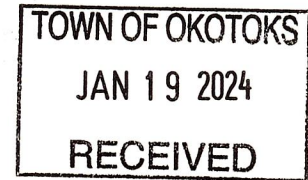




Forestry and Parks

Office of the Minister
MLA, Central Peace - Notley



AR-18144

JAN 15 2024

Her Worship Tanya Thorn
Mayor, Town of Okotoks
Office of the Mayor
PO Box 20, Stn. Main, 5 Elizabeth Street
Okotoks AB T1S 1K1

Dear Mayor Thorn:

My colleague, Honourable Rebecca Schulz, Minister of Environment and Protected Areas, forwarded your November 24, 2023 letter regarding timber harvesting in southern Alberta and the rules governing these activities. As Minister of Forestry and Parks, I appreciate the opportunity to respond on behalf of Alberta's government.

All forest management activity in Alberta is based on the Alberta Forest Management Planning Standard, developed in accordance with *Canadian Standards Association Z809-02 Sustainable Forest Management: Requirements and Guidance* document. Timber harvesting activities are governed by the *Forests Act* which legislates the long-term sustainability of forest resources and requires Alberta's forests be managed in accordance with sustainable forest management principles. All forest companies are required to demonstrate how they will manage for many factors including the maintenance of watershed values such as water quality and water quantity.

As our forests age, they become increasingly susceptible to catastrophic wildfire. Normally, wildfire is a natural process of regeneration in the boreal forest, but as we have seen this year, catastrophic wildfire can be devastating not only to the landscape, but also to people's homes, lives, and livelihoods. Harvesting is an important part of responsible forest management in that it removes some of the fuel that enable catastrophic wildfires to start and spread. Forestry companies are responsible for the reforestation of the area that is logged, and forest management plans are developed using an integrated planning approach that incorporates watershed, aesthetics, fisheries, wildlife, pest risk and damage, wildfire, and recreation.

Forest management activities are further informed by the higher-level South Saskatchewan Regional Plan that recognizes timber harvesting as an approved activity on the landscape and maintains the view that healthy resilient forests help support a dynamic forest industry and community stability over the long term.

Forest management plans are developed using an integrated planning approach that incorporates watershed function, aesthetics, fisheries, wildlife, pest risk and damage, wildfire risk, and recreation. Harvest areas are designed to maintain cover and different habitat types for a variety of species and areas requiring additional protection, such as watercourses, are protected with unharvested buffers based on the watercourse size and function.

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Her Worship Tanya Thorn
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Predicting the impacts of forestry activities to water quantity is a requirement under the Alberta Forest Management Planning Standard. To inform the province's forest management decisions, the department's assessment and hydrological modelling are based on the best available science and practices. Our forest hydrologists are constantly evaluating research and best practices to improve forest management policies to ensure the long-term health of all our forest resources. Current analyses of the approved 2023 harvest in the Upper Highwood area indicate the activity poses low risk of negative impact to the hydrology of the area's watercourses and, consequently, downstream users.

Adherence to all relevant legislation and regulation is an expectation of timber disposition holders operating on public land in Alberta. The Alberta Timber Harvest Planning and Operating Ground Rules (2023) (available at <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/timber-harvest-planning-and-ogr-2023>) has specific provisions to mitigate risk and protect water values. Sections 2.17 and 2.18 outline specific provisions the company must follow to ensure important hydrological and wildlife values are maintained.

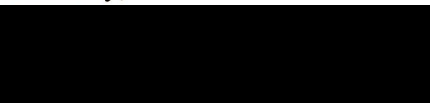
The proposed harvest in the Highwood area mentioned in your letter was scheduled to take place between 2021 and 2031, as part of the Spray Lake Sawmills Forest Management Plan (available at <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/spray-lake-sawmills-2021-forest-management-plan>) approved in 2021. The timing of the harvest, commencing in late 2023, does not represent an acceleration.

The Government of Alberta has a variety of engagement processes to address the needs of the public, key stakeholders, and Indigenous peoples. Indigenous consultation per *The Government of Alberta's Guidelines on Consultation with First Nations on Land and Natural Resource Management (2014)*, and *The Government of Alberta's Proponent Guide to First Nations and Metis Settlements Consultation Procedures (2019)* was conducted on the Forest Management Plan at Level 3 (extensive), and the associated General Development Plan at Level 2 (standard). The adequacy of those consultations was a critical consideration in the plan approvals. As industry engagement with the public and First Nations are ongoing processes, I encourage you to seek opportunities to share your ideas and concerns directly with Spray Lake Sawmills.

Considering the importance of managed disturbance to the health and integrity of our forests, their ecosystems, and the myriad services they provide to Albertans, the ministry does not support a moratorium on harvesting in the eastern slopes. Responsible forest harvesting is a critical tool in ensuring the sustainability of our forest resources.

The Government of Alberta routinely evaluates policy and practices for improvements that reflect science, societal, cultural, economic, and environmental information and the *Forests Act* was recently amended in 2020. If you would like to hear more about our Forest Management Planning processes and our compliance/enforcement framework, please contact Erica Samis, Calgary Forestry Manager, Forestry and Parks, at 403-644-1734 or erica.samis@gov.ab.ca.

Sincerely,



Todd Loewen
Minister

cc: Honourable Rebecca Schulz
Minister of Environment and Protected Areas