

**MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT
INFORMATION NOTE**

September 4, 2014
File: 280-20
CLIFF/tracking #:209296

PREPARED FOR: Honourable Mary Polak, Minister of Environment.

ISSUE: Helicopter Flight Training Impacts to California Big Horn Sheep within Snowy Protected Area

BACKGROUND:

Snowy Protected Area, 30 km southwest of Keremeos, has a primary role of protecting a provincially significant California bighorn sheep herd. The species is blue listed in the province and the protected area contains important winter range and lambing grounds. Recent surveys of the Ashnola/Similkameen sheep population (made up of several herds including the Snowy herd) documented a 50% overall reduction in population numbers from 2006 to 2013. A highly contagious disease, new to Canada (*Psoroptes* or “sheep mange”) is now affecting the population and is of significant concern.

BC Parks and Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations (FLNRO) Wildlife Branch work collaboratively to manage the sheep population and other wildlife in the area. HMZ Ltd. (formerly Canadian Helicopters) operate a helicopter mountain flight school out of Penticton and flight activity in Snowy Protected Area is a critical part of this training because of the desirable terrain. They have been operating the flight school in the area for approximately 65 years and are operating under a Park Use Permit (PUP) in the Snowy Protected Area since protected area establishment in 2001.

Based on recommendations from FLNRO Wildlife Branch, BC Parks initiated discussions this spring with HMZ to explore potential changes to their flight activities to reduce additional stressors to the sheep. It is hoped that through open dialogue mutually agreeable solutions can be found that assist in protecting the sheep population while maintaining HMZ’s required business activities.

BC Parks, FLNRO Wildlife Branch, and HMZ representatives planned to meet August 20th to continue discussions however this meeting has been rescheduled at HMZ’s request to September 10th.

DISCUSSION:

The Ashnola/Similkameen bighorn sheep population is the largest in the region and in 2006 was approximately 485 animals. Recent surveys documented a 50% overall reduction in population numbers from 2006 to 2013. Composition data (lamb ratios, ram ratios) all support declining trends. *Psoroptes* is now prevalent within much of the population with 65% of individuals in many herds showing signs of infection.

The arrival of *Psoroptes* to the Snowy herd has been delayed because of geographical separation (i.e. they are the only high elevation herd in the population) with less interaction with surrounding herds. An infested ram documented within Snowy Protected Area in 2012 suggests infestation of this herd is imminent.

Psoroptes or “sheep mange” is a new disease to Canada first documented in the Ashnola/Similkameen bighorn sheep population in 2011. This herd disease is highly contagious, where mites live and feed on the skin surface, which can cause heavy crusts in and around the ears and over the host’s body and effects to bighorn can include sever itchiness, decreased appetite, weight loss, anemia, emaciation, hearing loss and secondary bacterial infections. Population effects are generally unknown across the disease range primarily in the US but it has contributed to the dic-off of at least one herd. Treatment options are limited and largely unsuccessful.

FLNRO Wildlife Branch management actions to date include implementing a reduction in limited entry hunting pressure across the population effective 2013 and initiating a research project to begin this winter with the objective to assess population effects of *Psoroptes*. FLNRO Wildlife Branch has also identified that reduction of additional stressors to the diseased population including mitigation of intensive low level helicopter disturbance within Snowy Protected Area is prudent. Scientific literature suggest bighorn respond significantly to helicopter disturbance including decreased foraging efficiencies, abandonment of range, increased heart rates up to 3.5 fold, and increased stress hormones which under chronic conditions can impact the immune system. Current helicopter use in Snowy Protected Area conflicts directly with rutting (breeding) areas and season and migration routes to winter ranges.

FLNRO Wildlife Branch staff reviewed special provisions in the HNZ PUP last fall and provided BC Parks some recommendations around the flying season and flight distance that would reduce impact on the sheep. There was a spring meeting between BC Parks and HMZ to review the Wildlife Branch recommendations and to try to find a compromise that would still enable flight training operation while minimizing impacts to sheep. It was agreed that there would be a future meeting (now scheduled Sept 10th) to include FLNRO Wildlife Branch staff to provide more detailed information on *Psoroptes*, helicopter activity impacts on sheep, and to further discuss potential management options.

NEXT STEPS:

BC Parks and FLNRO Wildlife Branch staff plans to meet with HMZ representatives on September 10th, 2014 to continue to explore potential changes to HMZ’s flight activities to reduce additional stressors to bighorn sheep while maintaining their required business activities.

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Reviewed by	Initials	Date
DM	-	-
DMO	-	-
ADM	LH	Sept 4/14
Dir./Mgr.	JT	Sept 4/14

**MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT
INFORMATION NOTE**

Date: September 25, 2014
File: 280-20
CLIFF #: 209818

PREPARED FOR: Dan Doyle, Chief of Staff, Premier's Office

ISSUE: Proposed National Park Reserve in the South Okanagan–Lower Similkameen.

BACKGROUND:

In 2002, members of the local community and some First Nations approached Parks Canada with a proposal to establish a National Park Reserve (NPR) in the South Okanagan–Lower Similkameen region. In October, 2003, Canada and BC signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to study the feasibility of establishing two new marine federal protected areas in BC and a potential NPR in the South Okanagan–Lower Similkameen.

There are three steps required for the establishment of a national park reserve:

1. Feasibility study – in concept, is a NPR feasible and desirable? Is there public support?
2. Establishment Agreement – Bilateral agreement between the Province and Parks Canada about transfer of provincial lands to Canada, economic benefits, management regime, etc.
3. Legal establishment by federal Act of Parliament.

The South Okanagan process completed Stage 1: feasibility study.

The feasibility study began in 2004. The feasibility study included two rounds of broad public consultations in 2004 and 2006, community forums in 2007 and extensive consultations with affected stakeholders. The feasibility study also included a socio-economic impact assessment, and an analysis of potential land use conflicts, in order to determine whether a national park reserve is feasible and desirable.

The proposed NPR boundary originally encompassed approximately 650 km² in the region around Osoyoos, Oliver and Keremeos. In response to feedback during public consultations, the proposed boundary was reduced to approximately 284 km² centred on existing provincial (93 km²) and federal (10 km²) protected areas. An additional 83 km² of multi-use Crown land was proposed for transition to protection under the NPR. 98 km² of private lands were included in the concept boundary, but private land would only be added to the NPR on a willing seller–willing buyer basis (see Attachment 1: proposed boundaries).

The area contained within the NPR proposal is one of the province's most ecologically valuable in terms of rarity, diversity, and species richness, encompassing 41 federally listed species at risk.

The socio-economic assessment concluded that the NPR could potentially have a significant positive economic impact if Parks Canada offices and staff were located in smaller communities. The report predicted that job losses in the resource sector would be small and likely offset by employment gains in the tourism sector.

Consultations during the feasibility study indicated that support among area residents for the NPR proposal exceeded opposition to it by a ratio of approximately 2:1. Most recently, the Western Canada Wilderness Committee sponsored a telephone survey by McAllister Opinion Research of Southern Okanagan-Similkameen residents in 2010. The survey included the question: “Given what you presently know, please tell me if you would favour or oppose protecting a portion of the South Okanagan-Similkameen in a National Park?” 63% strongly or somewhat favoured a national park. 26% strongly or somewhat opposed a national park.

In 2007, the Similkameen Valley Planning Society conducted a “South Okanagan – Similkameen Amenity Migration Study” partially funded by Parks Canada. In response to the question: “Do you support or oppose the establishment of this National Park?” 19.4% of respondents were strongly opposed or slightly opposed. 38.7% were slightly or strongly supportive. 41.7% of respondents were either neutral or didn’t have an opinion or needed more information. Greater opposition per capita was apparent in smaller communities closest to the proposed NPR, such as Keremeos and Cawston, while greater support and greater numbers of undecided residents were evident in larger regional centres such as Penticton.

Opposition to the NPR is primarily from some ranchers, Canadian Helicopters and hunting and off-road vehicle riders groups. See Attachment 2 for a summary of public and key stakeholder perspectives on the NPR. Having been directed to stand down on this file, there has been no recent confirmation by BC Parks that these stakeholder perspectives reflect current views.

On a regional basis, approximately 20 per cent of the South Okanagan region (defined as the Okanagan – Shuswap Land and Resource Management Plan boundary south of Penticton), is included in a variety of provincial conservation designations, including provincial parks, ecological reserves, protected areas, wildlife management areas, *Land Act* reserves and private lands and donations acquired by the Province. There are no national parks in the region.

Class A Parks	33,770 hectares
<i>Environment and Land Use Act</i> Protected Areas	45,897 hectares
Ecological Reserves	145 hectares
Federal protection, <i>Land Act</i> and other conservation designations	3,236 hectares

36% of the current NPR proposal is made up of:

- South Okanagan Grasslands Protected Area (provincial) 9,328 ha
- Vaseux – Bighorn National Wildlife Area (federal) 812 ha
- Vaseux Lake Migratory Bird Sanctuary (federal) 188 ha

In 2010, senior officials representing BC and Canada agreed that the feasibility study, with the exception of First Nations elements, was substantially complete and that the proposed NPR in the South Okanagan–Lower Similkameen was feasible.

DISCUSSION:

In January 2011, Government determined that the province would not proceed with establishment of the NPR at that time due to local opposition to the proposal. This information was communicated to the public beginning in December, 2011.

Since the Government of BC's announcement in 2011, Parks Canada has not undertaken further work on the feasibility study, with the exception of completing its contractual obligations with the Okanagan Nation Alliance (ONA) to complete their own feasibility study. After initial opposition to the feasibility study and to the NPR proposal, the ONA and its member bands decided, in 2010, to resume participation in the feasibility study. On February 6, 2012, the ONA completed its own feasibility study and issued a press release urging the governments of Canada and British Columbia to "revisit their premature and hasty decision to abandon the South Okanagan Park proposal until full consultations have taken place with the First Nations". A number of regional and municipal governments, chambers of commerce and tourism organizations passed resolutions or have written to the Minister of Environment in 2012 – 2013 requesting that the Government of BC re-engage in discussions on the national park reserve.

Since December, 2011, some park advocates, including the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society and the South Okanagan – Similkameen National Park Network have been working to mobilize support for the national park concept. There has been significant correspondence since the 2011 announcement from a variety of stakeholders, including local governments and representatives of the tourism sector, requesting that BC re-engage in discussions with Canada about establishment of a NPR. There has also been correspondence, although fewer in number, urging BC to maintain its current position. BC's response to date has been consistent with the December, 2011, announcement.

On July 3, 2014, Minister Polak met with a delegation of community stakeholders, including Holly Plante (South Okanagan Chamber of Commerce), Glenn Mandziuk (Thompson-Okanagan Tourism Association), Mayor Stu Wells (Osoyoos), Mel Woolley (Penticton & Osoyoos Indian Bands) and Jim Wyse (BC Wine Institute), regarding the national park reserve proposal. Minister Polak confirmed B.C. was not prepared to further consider the proposal at this time. She did commit to engaging in a dialogue with FNs, community interests and stakeholders to look at local objectives related to tourism, conservation, recreation and economic opportunities.

Planning is underway to meet first with the Okanagan Nation Alliance and then community stakeholders in October to initiate a dialogue on these objectives.

Current Key Messages:

Between 2003 and 2011, the Province engaged collaboratively with Parks Canada to assess the feasibility of establishing a national park reserve in the South Okanagan–Lower Similkameen.

B.C. is not considering a national park reserve at this time, as we recognize that there remains a significant amount of people opposed to the proposal.

9,300 hectares of the area proposed for the national park is already protected in the South Okanagan Grasslands Protected Area. Overall, just over 20% of the land base in the South Okanagan is set aside under some kind of provincial protection.

Attachment 1: Original 2006 and Revised 2010 National Park Concept Boundaries

Attachment 2: Summary of Public and Key Stakeholder Perspectives

Attachment 3: Feasibility Study Timelines for South Okanagan-Lower Similkameen National Park Reserve

Contact:

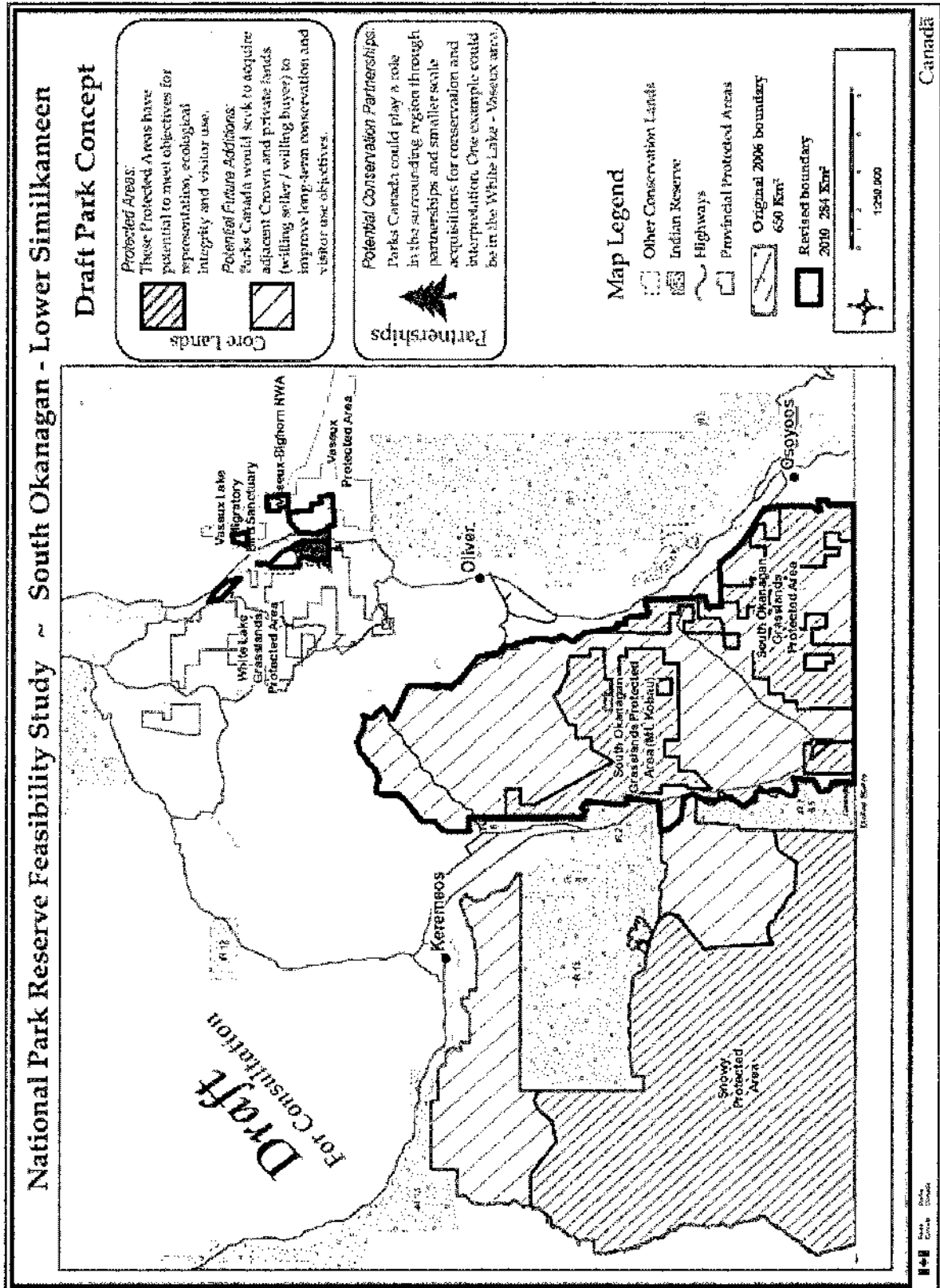
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BC Parks and Conservation

Officer Service

250-387-9997

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DM	WS	Sept 26/14
DMO	VJ	Sept 25/14
ADM	LH	Sept 25/14



Attachment 2: Summary of Public and Key Stakeholder Perspectives on South Okanagan-Lower Similkameen National Park Reserve

1: Summary of Quantitative Indicators of Public Opinion During the Feasibility Assessment

Activity	Key Results/Indicators	Date
Petition sponsored by Grasslands Park Review Coalition opposing national park reserve proposal	Approximately 6000 signatures	2005
Report on Phase II Open Houses held by Parks Canada in Spring 2006. Feedback form included the question <i>"How well does the draft Park Concept support your vision for the long term conservation, enjoyment and appreciation of the natural landscape of the South Okanagan-Lower Similkameen?"</i> 950 people attended 10 open houses. 542 written feedback forms were received.	An average of approximately 61% answered the question with "well or very well". An average of approximately 18% answered with "poorly or very poorly". There were significant differences in amount of support and opposition between communities. For example, in Keremeos 47% responded "poorly or very poorly" and 26% responded "well or very well". In Penticton, 74% responded "well or very well", and 17% responded "poorly or very poorly".	2006
Note: These open houses were not designed to yield a statistically valid quantitative assessment of support or opposition. <i>The numbers reported are indicators only.</i>		
Petition sponsored by South Okanagan- Similkameen National Park Network supporting national park reserve proposal	Approximately 19,000 signatures	2007

Activity	Key Results/Indicators	Date
<p>Similkameen Valley Planning Society conducted a "South Okanagan – Similkameen Amenity Migration Study" partially funded by Parks Canada. It contained several questions on the proposed national park reserve, and provided results differentiated between respondents based on area of residence, length of residence, and other factors.</p>	<p>In response to the question: "Do you support or oppose the establishment of this National Park?" 19.4% of respondents were strongly opposed or slightly opposed. 38.7% were slightly or strongly supportive.</p> <p>The strongest opposition came from local persons (life time residents), with much higher strong opposition in the Similkameen (52.4%) than in the South Okanagan (31.3%).</p> <p>41.7% of respondents were either neutral or didn't have an opinion or needed more information</p>	2007/08
<p>South Okanagan-Similkameen Conservation Partnership contracted a survey of area residents' views on environmental issues. No questions were directly related to the national park reserve proposal.</p>	<p>75% of survey respondents agreed with the statement: "It is important to protect endangered species and their habitats in the long-term even if that means putting restrictions on economic development".</p> <p>19% agreed with the statement "It is more important to have immediate economic development (like housing developments, industrial developments and vineyards) than to protect endangered wildlife species and their habitats".</p>	2008
<p>Western Canada Wilderness Committee sponsored a telephone survey by McAllister Opinion Research of 405 randomly selected Southern Okanagan-Similkameen region residents. Survey included the question: "Given what you presently know, please tell me if you would favour or oppose protecting a portion of the South Okanagan-Similkameen in a National Park?"</p>	<p>63% strongly or somewhat favoured a national park.</p> <p>26% strongly or somewhat opposed a national park.</p> <p>Survey methodology yielded a margin of error ±4.8%, 19 times out of 20</p>	2010

2: Summary of Key Stakeholder Perspectives on NPR

Organization	Position	Date of last correspondence	Perspective/Concerns	Proposed Mitigation in NPR concept
City of Vernon	Resolution requesting that BC re-engage in the formal park establishment process with Parks Canada and First Nations	Nov. 14, 2013		N/A
North Okanagan Regional District	Resolution passed requesting Province of BC to re-engage in the park establishment process with the government of Canada.	Nov 6, 2013		N/A
Kelowna Chamber of Commerce	Support for NPR; request that BC re-engage in discussions with Canada and First Nations	Oct. 23, 2013	NPR would enhance region's economy	N/A
George Bush, Director, Electoral Area A, Regional District Okanagan Similkameen	Opposed to NPR proposal	Oct. 7, 2013	Loss of ALR for cattle production	Some grazing would be continued under "an adaptive management framework that supports continued livestock grazing in the park in a manner consistent with ecological objectives and park values." Some ranches would be purchased on willing seller basis.
Destination Osoyoos	Resolution urging BC to re-engage in discussions regarding NPR establishment with Canada and First Nations, and that the NPR be established as soon as possible.	September 25, 2013	Believes that NPR would be beneficial for local tourism sector.	N/A

Organization	Position	Date of last correspondence	Perspective/Concerns	Proposed Mitigation in NPR concept
Okanagan Basin Water Board	Resolution urging BC to re-engage in discussions regarding NPR establishment with Canada and First Nations	Sept. 19, 2013	Support water source protection and minimizing growth of demand for water. Request consultation during process	N/A
Regional District of Central Okanagan	Resolution urging BC to re-engage in discussions regarding NPR establishment with Canada and First Nations	Sept. 16, 2013	Request consultation during process	N/A
South Okanagan Chamber of Commerce	Support for NPR; request that BC re-engage in discussions with Canada and First Nations	Sept. 12, 2013	NPR would create jobs and attract visitors	N/A
NGOs including: Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society; Wilderness Committee; South Okanagan Naturalists Club; World Wildlife Fund; Okanagan Similkameen Parks Society; Nature Canada;	Support for NPR	Aug. 30, 2013		N/A
Tourism Penticton	Endorse continuation of talks between BC, First Nations and Canada with the objective of having "more equitable data".	Aug. 23, 2013	NPR could generate strong economic return for South Okanagan; further data required to support.	N/A
Grassland Park Review Coalition	Opposed to NPR	April 18, 2013	Coalition of farmers, hunters, ORV riders, etc. opposed to loss of access to lands for recreation and potential adverse economic impacts	N/A

Organization	Position	Date of last correspondence	Perspective/Concerns	Proposed Mitigation in NPR concept
Outdoor Recreation Council	Resolution urging the Premier and the Minister of Environment to immediately express support for a new NPR in the South Okanagan and take steps necessary to create the national park reserve.	June 13, 2012	NPR would provide opportunities for nature-based recreation	N/A
BC Cattlemen's Association	Opposed to NPR	May 30, 2011	Concern over loss of Crown grazing lands, impacts to agricultural support industries	Some grazing would be continued under "an adaptive management framework that supports continued livestock grazing in the park in a manner consistent with ecological objectives and park values." Some ranches would be purchased on willing seller basis.
Thompson Okanagan Tourism Association	Support for NPR	May 25, 2011	NPR would enhance tourism growth	N/A
Regional District of Okanagan-Similkameen	Resolution requesting that BC re-engage in formal discussions with Canada	April 19, 2012	Regional District should be kept updated on progress of discussions	N/A
Town of Osoyoos	Resolution urging BC to re-engage in discussions with Canada regarding NPR establishment	April 5, 2012	Request consultation during process	N/A

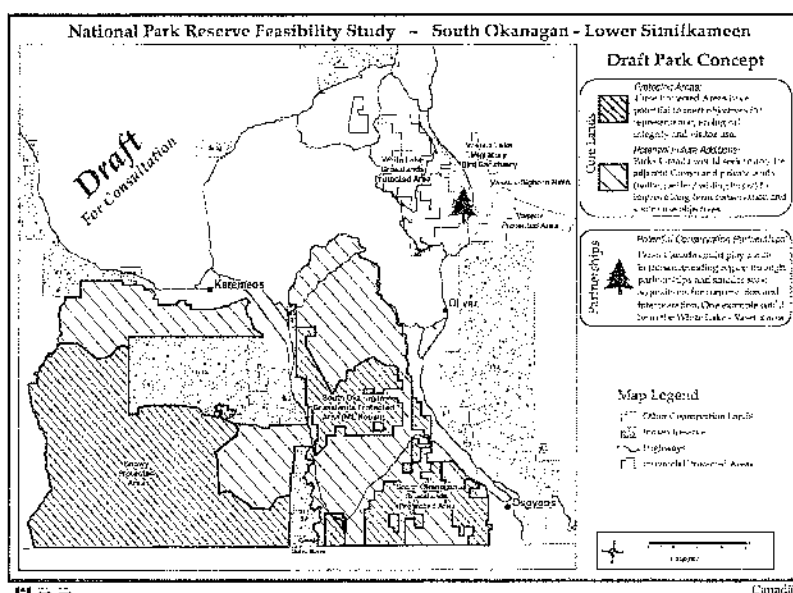
Organization	Position	Date of last correspondence	Perspective/Concerns	Proposed Mitigation in NPR concept
Southern Interior Stockmen's Association	Opposed to NPR	April 18, 2012	Loss of grazing opportunity, affects on agriculture support businesses	Some grazing would be continued under "an adaptive management framework that supports continued livestock grazing in the park in a manner consistent with ecological objectives and park values." Some ranches would be purchased on willing seller basis.
Tinhorn Creek and Burrowing Owl wineries	Support for NPR; request BC to re-engage in establishment process	April 12, 2012; April 18, 2012	NPR would be good for both environment and tourism economy	N/A
Ranchers in affected area (N=3)	Support for re-engagement in establishment process	May 16, 2011 April 12, 2012 March 29, 2012	Interested in option of selling ranches to Parks Canada, or continuing ranching under Parks Canada management	N/A
Organic farmers in South Okanagan (petition 24 signatures)	Support for NPR; request BC to re-engage in establishment process	April 2012		N/A
Oliver Fire Department	Opposed to NPR	Feb 1, 2011	Concerned about increased probability of urban interface wildfire due to reduction in grazing	Parks Canada would have own wildfire response staff in NPR, grazing would continue under adaptive management framework, and Parks Canada would undertake fuel management to protect adjacent property where necessary.

Organization	Position	Date of last correspondence	Perspective/Concerns	Proposed Mitigation in NPR concept
Okanagan Chapter, BC Wildlife Federation	Opposed to NPR	Jan. 31, 2011	Opposed to loss of hunting opportunity	N/A: hunting would be prohibited in NPR
South Okanagan Sportsmen's Federation	Opposed to NPR	Jan. 28, 2011	Opposed to loss of hunting opportunity	N/A: hunting would be prohibited in NPR
Keremeos Cawston Sportsmen's Federation	Opposed to NPR	Jan 27, 2010	Opposed to loss of hunting opportunity	N/A: hunting would be prohibited in NPR
Southern Interior Hounds Association	Opposed to NPR	Jan 31, 2011	Opposed to loss of hunting opportunity	N/A: hunting would be prohibited in NPR
Canadian Helicopters	Opposed to NPR	Jan 27, 2011	Concerned that NPR would restrict or eliminate Mountain Flight Training School	Parks Canada committed that helicopter flight training would be accommodated in a NPR, "under permit, subject to an environmental assessment and an agreement outlining the management of the activity." Canadian Helicopters remains opposed to the NPR because they feel Parks Canada's proposal does not provide adequate certainty that their operations would continue unaffected.
South Okanagan Recreational Vehicle Club	Opposed to NPR	Jan 19, 2011	Opposed to loss of opportunity for ORV use	N/A: ORV use would be prohibited in NPR
Guide Outfitters Association of BC	Opposed to NPR	Nov. 15, 2008	Opposed to loss of hunting opportunity	N/A: hunting would be prohibited in NPR
BC Wildlife Federation	Opposed to NPR	May 20, 2008	Opposed to loss of hunting opportunity	N/A: hunting would be prohibited in NPR

Organization	Position	Date of last correspondence	Perspective/Concerns	Proposed Mitigation in NPR concept
Ranchers in affected area (N=6)	Opposed to NPR	Jan 22, 2011 Feb 2, 2011 Jan 30, 2011 Jan 24, 2011 Feb 1, 2011 Jan 2, 2011	Loss of crown grazing rights, viability of industry in area	Some grazing would be continued under "an adaptive management framework that supports continued livestock grazing in the park in a manner consistent with ecological objectives and park values." Some ranches would be purchased on willing seller basis.

Attachment 3: Feasibility Study Timeline South Okanagan-Lower Similkameen National Park Reserve

- 2003 Memorandum of Understanding signed between BC and Canada to assess the feasibility of a national park reserve (NPR) in the South Okanagan-Lower Similkameen
- 2004 Feasibility study is initiated by Parks Canada. First round of public consultations are held.
- 2006 Second round of public consultations, including review of a draft park concept which included a proposed boundary of approximately 650 km². This concept included phasing out of grazing tenures over time. This was the last round of formal public consultations.



- 2007 Okanagan Nation Alliance formally withdraws from the feasibility study process due to perception that consultation and accommodation were inadequate.

Parks Canada commissioned a survey of local residents in order to better understand how residents would use a national park reserve, how a national park reserve might affect desire to live in the area, and to obtain an indication of public support for national park reserve establishment. Results of this survey indicated that overall, supporters outnumber opposition by approximately 2:1.
- 2008 Socio-economic impact assessment completed. The assessment concluded that there could be a significant positive economic impact associated with the establishment of a national park reserve, if Parks Canada staff and facilities were located in smaller communities. The assessment also predicted no significant negative socio-economic impact from changes to regional land use.

