



ALBERTA WILDERNESS ASSOCIATION

"Defending Wild Alberta through Awareness and Action"

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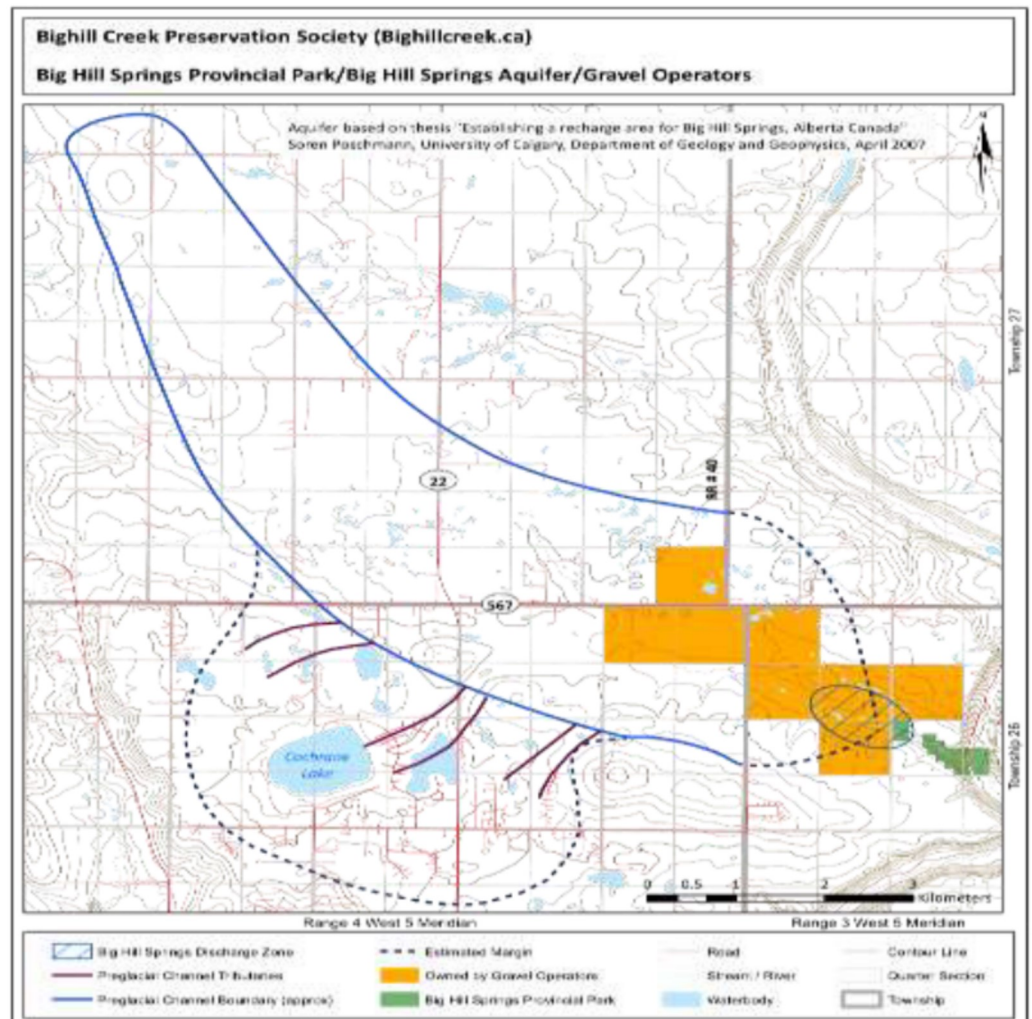
February 15, 2021

AWA Submission to Rocky View Country Aggregate Operations Land Redesignation Hearing,
Bylaw C8051-2020, PL20200031, Mt. Ash LP.

Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA), founded in 1965, works throughout Alberta towards more representative and connected protection of the unique and vital landscapes that are the source of our clean water, clean air and wildlife habitat. With more than 7,000 members and supporters AWA remains committed to ensuring protection of wildlife and wild places in Alberta for all Canadians.

It has come to our attention that Rocky View County (RVC) will consider an application for redesignation of agricultural land at a public hearing March 2, 2021, that would allow the first of four aggregate operations immediately northwest of Big Hill Springs Provincial Park.

The proposed aggregate operations would be developed on lands above the aquifer that feed the unique springs that are vital to the functioning and vitally important natural features of the park. The map on the right provided by the Bighill Creek Preservation Society clearly shows the Big Hill springs aquifer and proposed gravel operations.



Big Hill Springs Provincial Park is small in size at only 70 acres, but stands out as one of the first parks established in Alberta because of features that have drawn visitors for more than a hundred years. Its beauty is based on a variety of nationally and provincially significant features of ever greater value to a recreating public. The park is well known and used today, with at least 250,000 annual visitors. In recent years, AWA provided interpretive opportunities at the park that saw children examine the waterfall, learn how to do kick samples and examine under microscopes pond insects all helping them learn how important this welcoming little stream and waterfall area could be for them and for wildlife.



It is the unique and intriguing springs that will be in jeopardy if gravel mining is allowed on their aquifer. Surprisingly to some, Big Hill's springs are ranked in a 1984 Parks Canada survey of springs, conducted by S.J. Houseknecht, as being "*one of the top four mineral springs found in Canada,*" and yet, they have been poorly recognized or properly protected. This past year the province closed the park for a full year so work could be done to help protect the increasingly popular park and its unique and appealing water features and landscapes.

These mineral springs are truly unique in that they produce at the rate of 84 litres/second and maintain an almost constant flow and temperature throughout the year. And, over thousands of years, they have also deposited the mineral calcium onto vegetation and debris, forming an unusual rock called tufa. The tufa has built into a series of formations that the creek attractively tumbles over to the delight of visitors. These springs features are recognized as provincially and nationally significant. The springs also supply 50% of the flow in Big Hill Creek that enters the Bow River at Cochrane, bringing reliable amounts of high quality water. Such water is increasingly precious as the effects of climate change become more threatening.

The fact that the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans have recognized the waters of Big Hill Creek around the Provincial Park and springs as critical habitat for threatened bull trout is also significant and indicates the absolute importance of maintaining the aquifer, springs, and the temperature and flow rates of water in the creek.

The park and natural landscapes in the vicinity, including the deeply incised meltwater coulee that leads downstream from the park to Cochrane, are recognized as ecologically significant in that this is one of the few existing areas protecting the Foothills-Parkland Subregion of Alberta. Today less than 2% of this subregion has any provincial protection; losing any of the protection currently afforded this natural region threatens our native biodiversity and the health of our environment. The province has made a commitment to protect 17% of our province, underrepresented natural regions like the one here need to be increased dramatically.

Equally important is the protection of connectivity. Because the park and surrounding lands remain in a relatively natural state, a wide range of wildlife is supported and allows movement through travel corridors to the Bow River Valley and Glenbow Ranch Provincial Park, as well as north to Dog Pound Creek, west to Horse Creek and beyond to Grand Valley and east through routes into the Nose Creek basin. Big Hill's valley functions as an oasis for species from the Grasslands, Parklands and Foothills ecological regions that includes an amazing blue heron colony known to be more than 100 years old and nest sites for peregrine and prairie falcons. Even sharp tail grouse leks are known in the vicinity. Other animals include moose, elk and two deer species, both black and grizzly bear and wolves have been seen in the valley in recent years. Cougar are regular residents, along with coyotes, foxes, mink, weasels, bob cats, porcupine, ground and red squirrels, garter snakes, and chorus frogs are abundant and leopard frogs are known. At least 126 species of plants are found in the area, not including mosses, fungi, lichens or liverworts, along with 132 species of birds.

It is extremely important that the natural features of Big Hill's Valley, Park and Creek be maintained as lands surrounding it are increasingly developed. It is also critical to maintain the connecting corridors integral to the area that allow for the continued flow of biodiversity and recognizes the importance of a network of connected protected areas.

Because of the many unique and fragile features of Big Hill's ancient aquifer, its springs, the rare tufa formations and the array of ecological and wildlife values the area supports, AWA respectfully submits that it would be wise to increase protection for these values and help gravel developers move operations to other less sensitive sites.

Indeed, increasing the size of Big Hill Springs Park, as has long been requested both officially and by citizens, could provide a great service to those living in the area and far beyond. The site has the possibility of becoming a valuable interpretive park that would be an important tourist attraction with lasting economic value. A value that could well exceed that of a gravel operation.

AWA respectfully requests that the application to redesignate the land from Agricultural, General District to Direct Control District to facilitate aggregate operations be denied.

Sincerely
ALBERTA WILDERNESS ASSOCIATION



Christyann Olson
Executive Director

