

## Water now a top priority for trail development



Signs have now been erected at some spots in the Bear Creek area as part of a project to better manage dirt biking trails in the area.

*Judie Steeves/Capital News*

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By [Judie Steeves - Kelowna Capital News](#)

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There's a moratorium on new trail development in the Bear Creek area while work gets underway to establish a water advisory committee for that watershed, according to Peter Walters, the provincial assistant deputy minister of tourism development.

Two fencing contracts currently underway as part of a project to reconstruct trails for dirt biking in that area, will continue.

Following a meeting in January between area water utilities, West Kelowna, Westside-Kelowna MLA Ben Stewart, and tourism minister Kevin Krueger, it has been acknowledged that the water issues in that watershed are paramount, said Walters.

He was speaking to members of the Okanagan Water Stewardship Council Thursday afternoon, where provincial trails manager John Hawkings did a presentation on motorized recreation in the Bear Creek area.

Walters said there's a great deal of information that hasn't been circulated about the contentious issues swirling around the project, and it's time there was better communication.

Since the provincial trails strategy was completed, and as a result of public consultation, Hawkings told directors there has been a revision of the document, reflecting public concerns about the lack of focus on the environment and water.

Now, he said, in the guiding principles, the environment is tops.

In the Bear Creek area, which totals 35,000 hectares in the watersheds of the Westbank and Lakeview Irrigation Districts, there is a history of unmanaged trail use, he said.

In 2001, it was established as a B.C. recreation site, an important step, because that brought it under the forest recreation regulations, said Hawkings.

In addition to the estimated 300 km of user-built trails and 800 km of forest roads in the area, there are now 450 km of fire guards as well, along with a wide variety of user groups.

Of the four “Es” of successful recreation management, he said education is the most efficient and effective use of money, so they are working on educating users about why trail management is needed: about trail etiquette, invasive weeds, spark arrestors, trail rules and regulations, prohibited areas, water quality and the environment.

Engineering is a key component he said, but engineered solutions must produce reasonable alternatives to the undesirable uses, to be effective.

As far as enforcement is concerned, he said there is a memorandum of understanding with the Conservation Officer Service, as well as the forests ministry, RCMP, recreation officers and there are peer patrols as well.

The message to trail users is simple, but clear: stay on the trails or stay home, he said.

In the past couple of years, a million dollars has been spent on mitigating water quality in the area by closing and rehabilitating trails, fencing, erecting signs, doing education, volunteer patrols, enforcement and building sustainable trails, he noted.

“I hope it’s a comprehensive approach,” he added.

It’s important to keep cattle and people away from waterways, he said, and range fencing is being built to protect certain areas, like Bald Range.

Creation of a successful, sustainable trail system in the Bear Creek area is critically important for the ministry, because the hope is that it will become a model for dealing with similar problems in other watersheds in the province, he said.

Okanagan Basin Water Board executive director Anna Warwick Sears asked what the carrying capacity of the watershed is, and noted that the better the area’s reputation among off-road users, the more will come here.

Hawkings didn’t have an answer, but he noted exclusion and enforcement never work.

[jsteeves@kelownacapnews.com](mailto:jsteeves@kelownacapnews.com)