

The Future of Trail Funding in Alberta

The Alberta government is reportedly planning to establish a delegated administrative organization (DAO) for trails with legislation to be presented at the 2013 fall sitting. If and when this DAO is established, it will have great significance for hikers in Alberta.

A DAO is a self-financing organization established by legislative authority to carry out mandated functions at arms-length from the provincial government. A DAO for trails would have authority to control and direct funding for trail construction and maintenance (including motorized, non-motorized, and mixed-use trails) on crown lands in Alberta. Whether this will include trails in provincial parks is unclear at this time. (National parks would not be affected.) The DAO would be directed by a board of directors, presumably all appointed by the provincial government.

It is the self-funded nature of DAOs that will lead to the greatest impact on hikers. Examples of other Alberta DAOs currently in operation are the beverage container management board, funded through deposits and administrative fees on containers, and the Alberta Recycling Management Authority, funded through recycling fees on tires, paint and electronics. (For more information on DAOs, see <http://environment.alberta.ca/01876.html>.) The only currently available funding for a DAO for trails is from additional licensing fees for ATVs and snowmobiles. As a result, the off-highway vehicle community feels it should have the dominant voice in how these funds are spent.

Currently, the provincial government provides some of the funding for trails in Alberta through grants to Alberta TrailNet (ATN), which funds organizations building and maintaining trails in Alberta, including Alberta segments of the TransCanada Trail. ATN receives funds from a variety of other sources as well. Hikers are represented on the ATN board by a representative appointed by the Alberta Hiking Association. Other trail-using organizations also are represented on the ATN board. The role of ATN after a DAO for trails is established is unclear.

There are two possible consequences for hikers of a DAO for trails. One is that some attempt will be made to find ways to extract fees from hikers for using trails. The other is that hikers will have no voice in decisions on trail construction and maintenance on crown lands in Alberta. It is possible that both consequences could occur.

Hikers who think about these matters generally believe that foot access to crown lands is a right, that they have no significant environmental impacts, that the healthy activity of hiking is of benefit to society through a happier, healthier population, and that their taxes should be sufficient contribution to trail construction and maintenance. Many will contrast this to the environmental damage that follows ATV use, and the cost to society of the health effects of ATV and snowmobile accidents.

It is also clear that attempts to enforce user fees for any trail user categories would cost much more than they would return, and enforcement would be particularly difficult for hikers.

The upside of a DAO for trails is that any funding for hiking trails generated by the DAO would likely be funding not currently available. Presumably, however, current provincial funding to ATN would end.

The DAO will not be open to public discussion until the legislation is introduced. However, it is not too early for hikers to make their positions clear to the Premier, the Minister of Tourism, Parks, and Recreation, the Minister of Environment and Sustainable Resource Development, and their MLAs.

It is the position of the Alberta Hiking Association that hikers must be represented on the board of a DAO for trails, and that it is inappropriate and counterproductive to discourage hiking and snowshoeing by user fees for these activities.