

B.C. cyclists' rail-to-trails dream dashed

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The B.C. government has officially killed the goal of making a "world class" rails-to-trails network exclusive to non-motorized recreational activities such as cycling and horseback riding.

The network, part of the famed Trans Canada Trail, covers about 550 kilometres of former rail corridors — including the Kettle Valley Railway from Brookmere to Midway, the Slocan Valley Rail Trail, and the Columbia and Western Rail Trail from Midway to Castlegar.

But the province now says it lacks the resources to police such corridors and keep out motorized vehicles, such as ATVs, dirt bikes, four-by-fours and snowmobiles, adding there is not universal support among communities along the corridors for strictly non-motorized use.

Its proposed solution is to zone the railway corridors according to rural or built-up areas to try to separate competing users.

The decision is a blow to groups that for years have lobbied and worked at trail building and creating a non-motorized recreation corridor as B.C.'s contribution to the Trans Canada Trail.

"It's very disheartening," said Leon Lebrun, interim president of the Trails Society of B.C. "Compromise has dire consequences for the Trans Canada Trail."

The government's flip-flop is welcome news to the motorized sector which has argued its members have a long history of use of the rail corridors and no legislation has ever been enacted to keep them off.

Terry Wardrop, land and environment co-ordinator for the Quad Riders ATV Association of B.C., said it is important to realize motorized enthusiasts require access to sections of the rail corridors to reach other interconnecting resource roads.

He noted former premier Gordon Campbell should never have adopted a non-motorized policy for

the corridors before canvassing affected communities, some of which derive revenue from ATV and other motorized sectors.

"It's very unfortunate we can't get along," he added.

The province's Spirit of 2010 Trail policy says the rail corridors can provide a "unique recreational experience" and defines the "primary activities" as cycling, walking, hiking, horseback riding and cross-country skiing.

The Trans Canada Trail encompasses about 17,000 kilometres of free recreational trails connecting nearly 1,000 communities. The organization cites six "preferred outdoor activities," with snowmobiling "on designated trails in winter only" as the only motorized allowance.

The Trans Canada Trail did not return calls to Postmedia.

Beside noise, dust, pollution and safety, motorized vehicles are blamed for churning up the rail corridors to the point that cyclists avoid them altogether. Wardrop said ATVs help compact trail corridors and enthusiasts work on their maintenance.

"By default, motorized recreation is taking over," Lebrun said. "It would be very nice if motorized recreation and non-motorized were compatible, but we're not."

The grade on the rails-to-trails network does not exceed 2.2 per cent, making it perfect for non-motorized users.

Lebrun did note there has been some success with opposing groups working together in the Chilliwack River Valley so some areas are off-limits to motorized access.

In a letter to Lebrun dated Aug. 13, 2014, Gary Townsend, assistant deputy minister in the Ministry of Forests, Lands, and Natural Resource Operations, writes: "Despite significant capital investment from the Province, federal government, Trans Canada Trail and dedicated stewardship groups, it has been very difficult to achieve the vision for a world-class network of primarily non-motorized rail trails."