July 29, 2018

RE: Engage BC – Wildlife and Habitat in BC

To whom it may concern,

My name is Andrew Van Vliet and I live in West Kootenay Region. I am a regional director for the BC Chapter of Backcountry Hunters & Anglers as well as a member of several organizations including BCWF, Wild Sheep Society of BC, Rocky Mountain Goat Alliance, and West Kootenay Fly Fishing Club. Professionally, I am also a member of the Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of BC.

I am happy to see the government acknowledge the degraded state our wildlife and habitats are in and have began the process to implement change. I am encouraged that this review will lead to real and meaningful changes to the wildlife and habitat management system in BC. Wildlife and its supporting habitats are being degraded at an alarming rate. There are many factors contributing to this current state and many of the issues are complex and affect many stakeholders. However, the massive amount of work ahead should not be a deterrent to take action now before it's too late. I feel strongly that wildlife and habitat management is the government's responsibility. I am not here to tell government how to manage wildlife and habitat as the government employs professional personnel who are educated in this regard. I can only make suggestions towards what I feel require the most effort and attention. Below are my personal comments on some of the specific issues.

Challenge 2: Increasing Involvement and Shared Stewardship

All the opportunities listed for this question needs to be acted upon. There is a myriad of groups including Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, Wild Sheep Foundation and Wild Sheep Society of B.C., the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Rocky Mountain Goat Alliance, Mule Deer Foundation, B.C. Wildlife Federation, Ducks Unlimited, Trout Unlimited, as well as local and regional outdoors and conservation groups that have funds and manpower to achieve conservation goals in conjunction with the BC Government. The formation of local/regional wildlife boards is an excellent idea with the inclusion of local stakeholders who can help make decisions for their specific area as well assist with implementation. the more people are involved, the more they will care.

The lines of communication need to be opened and user stakeholders (those that hunt, fish, and recreate) need to be listen to more opposed to the multi-national environmental and conservation groups whose views are often supported by city dwellers who rarely immerse themselves and experience the backcountry of BC.

Wildlife Management and Habitat Conservation decisions need to be based on science, not emotion or political gains.

Challenge 3: Declining Wildlife Populations

The opportunities listed for this Challenge need to be acted upon. It needs to be done in a multi faceted approach, and include industry (forestry, oil & gas, etc.) and ensure their practices are best practices for wildlife populations and habitat conservation and restoration.

Habitat loss, alteration and fragmentation is a huge part of declining wildlife populations. Logging roads increase access to previously undisturbed areas, and increased ORV access takes over after the logging is complete. Road de-activation and increased protection of our unspoiled wilderness needs to happen. BC has some of the highest road densities in western North America, and we are struggling to maintain healthy animal populations; it is unsustainable.

We only need to look to the US and the implementation of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation to see the success it brings. The creation of provincial forests and wildlife refuge areas will increase protection and give wildlife areas to thrive. Engagement of local and regional stakeholders is key, not engaging multi-national, well funded, conservation groups.

Challenge 4: Increasing Human Activity

Increased human activity is hampering wildlife populations from recovering. Urban expansion, explosion of ORV use, and the increase amount of recreation users of the backcountry needs to be managed. Deactivation of logging roads (not gates, but complete destruction) needs to become common practice to restrict human activity in sensitive areas.

Industry needs to be brought on board. They need guidance on best practices as well as enforcement of those practices. Self regulation has been a failure.

A huge amount of effort needs to be put into managing humans in order to see wildlife recover and thrive. The public needs more education on what conservation truly is. Building trails for hikers can be just as bad as a road. We need more 'boots on the ground' with increased numbers of Conservation Officers in BC. BC has some of the lowest density of CO's in North America and it’s evident.

Challenge 5: Wildfires and Extreme Weather

Communities need guidelines for reducing wildfire impacts. Controlled burning and fuel removal needs to happen all over the province. Poor silviculture practices create swathes of unnaturally dense forests which burn more extensively than natural, mosaic forests with open meadows and staggered growth. Again, self regulation has been a failure. We are reaping what we have sown, and unless practices are going to change, we will not see a change going forward until the whole province burns.

Controlled burns in key wildlife areas need to happen to restore habitats to a more natural state. As the cliché goes, we need to fight fire with fire.

Challenge 6: Better Information

Natural resource management legislation needs to ensure natural resource management decisions not only consider wildlife and their habitats, but need to be integral part of the process and include science-based decisions. Our wildlife and habitats should not be political pawns and policies should not be made based on emotion, political gains, or best economics.

Information needs to be readily available for all citizens, not just special interest groups, and should be posted on government websites for all to view and reference.

Challenge 8: Funding

Of course, to achieve everything that is being discussed, we need more funds to improve of wildlife populations and habitats. We need to look no further than south of the border where state and federal funding models generate millions for wildlife and habitat conservation. The Pittman-Robertson Act is a great example of an excise tax that generates funds from users. While I never want wilderness recreation to become a sport of the rich, I do believe we need a 'pay to play' system that recovers funds from those that are recreating and impacting our wild places. This should not only include hunting and fishing gear, but also biking, watercrafts, and ORVs, etc.

BC's hunting licences and species tags are ridiculously cheap in relation to other jurisdictions. This year I've purchase a licence and tags for seven big game species for under $275. In many North American jurisdictions, a single species tag could cost that amount! Additional tags for wildlife that currently do not have tags, such as turkey, grouse, etc. could be implemented to generate more funds from hunters.

Organizations building trails on crown land should have to pay a lease fee to keep their trails active. The low cost of trail building helped cause an explosion of trails across the province. If user groups had to pay to keep trails, perhaps less trails, and more well-thought out trails would be made, and funds generated from leases could go back into habitat restoration to offset the destruction generation from the building and ongoing use of trails.

To ensure the sustainable utilization of our wildlife resources in BC, the new model must establish that hunting and fishing is ensconced in the conservation fundamentals of the plan. Hunting and fishing is applied conservation. As a director of The British Columbia Backcountry Hunters & Anglers and a member of several other conservation organizations, I look forward to collaborating with stakeholders and engaging government on this important initiative. Thank you for the opportunity to engage.

Yours in Conservation,

Andrew Van Vliet

Regional Director, British Columbia Backcountry Hunters & Anglers