



Information on

- **Special Places**
- **Green Area Designation**
- **Forest Land Use Zones**
- **Notation/Reservation Program**
- **Parks**
- **Natural Areas**
- **Reserves**
- **Sanctuaries**
- **Special Operating Conditions on Dispositions**

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Conservation and Protected Areas

Public lands in Alberta include a wide diversity of landscapes and ecosystems. It's important to ensure that management of these lands takes into account their ecological significance and sensitivity. Conservation and protection are important aspects of public land management. Therefore, management criteria are established to protect the land from incompatible use. These are included as part of the management plans for various levels of agricultural, industrial, recreational and commercial use.

The Alberta Government uses a variety of legislation and management mechanisms to sustain the environmental integrity of public land, while specifying the different levels and types of allowable use. These legislative and management tools are established under the *Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves and Natural Areas Act* (WERNA), the *Public Lands Act*, the *Provincial Parks Act*, the *Willmore Wilderness Park Act*, the *Wildlife Act*, and the *Forests Act*.

Special Places

Special Places seeks to balance the need for preservation with the desire for outdoor recreation, heritage appreciation, and tourism and economic development. Areas representing the environmental diversity of the province's six natural regions will be designated for preservation. Existing provincial parks, wilderness areas, natural areas, ecological reserves, wildland parks and the

Willmore Wilderness Park has already been included in this initiative.

The provincial co-ordinating committee is reviewing the suitability of the nominated sites for Special Places status. Some of the nominated lands are now being looked at by local committees that will make recommendations to the Minister of Environmental Protection.

The government will honor any existing surface or subsurface commitments on land selected as a Special Place. These may include oil and gas, timber, recreation or grazing dispositions. Management plans will be developed for each approved Special Places site. As these local plans are approved, the acreage protected under Special Places is expanded.

Green Area Designation

Under the authority of the *Public Lands Act*, the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development may classify land and designate its use. An example of this is the division of provincial public lands into the White Area and the Green Area. The Green Area covers about 51 per cent of the province, or 82.6 million acres. These lands are managed by Alberta Sustainable Resource Development for a variety of purposes including timber, wildlife and water resources. Green Area designation also affords a degree of protection, as these lands are generally not for sale.

ABOUT PUBLIC LANDS

Forest Land Use Zones

A forest land use zone is an area to which legislative controls are applied to solve specific land use problems in the Green Area. They are established under the *Forests Act* and can be used to protect areas containing sensitive resources such as wildlife and their habitats, vegetation, soils or watersheds or they can be used to separate or control conflicting recreational activities. Currently, there are ten forest land use zones in Alberta, including the well-known Kananaskis Country Forest Land Use Zone. In total, they cover 5,643 square kilometres of public land in the Eastern Slopes.

Notation/Reservation Program

Under the *Public Lands Act*, notations are used to identify public land and resources that are set aside to achieve particular land use or conservation objectives. Notations provide for varying degrees of protection, from complete protection to permitting agricultural, industrial or other uses with land use conditions. Restrictive notations can protect soils, wildlife and/or landscape features from incompatible land use.

More than one protective notation can be placed on a parcel of land. For example, steep slopes along a river may have one notation for unstable, erodible slopes, while a second notation is overlapped to identify a wildlife corridor in the same area.

In the White Area, about 3.7 million acres are identified through protective notations for soil and water conservation. Another 150,000 acres are reserved under protective notations as potential natural areas. Through the reservation program, other uses are identified that overlap the above lands, including 1.5 million acres for wildlife habitat, 650,000 acres for timber production and 100,000 acres for other uses such as recreation and historic sites. Agricultural use such as grazing also occurs. It's integrated with conservation objectives on much of the land identified under protective notations.

Willmore Wilderness Park

This park is authorized under the *Willmore Wilderness Park Act* and covers 1,136,000 acres. The *Act* applies only to this specific site. A draft management plan has been developed for the area to guide activities within the park.

Natural Areas

Natural areas are designated under *WERNA* or the *Public Lands Act* and allow low-intensity recreation and opportunities for nature appreciation and education. These areas represent special or sensitive natural landscapes and features. Facilities within these areas may include parking/staging areas, group day use areas, interpretive facilities, and motorized or non-motorized trails. Permitted activities, such as grazing or oil and gas development, are determined on a site-specific basis.

There are 153 natural areas covering about 206,000 acres. They are designated by Order in Council. Another 150,000 acres are under protective notation for potential natural area sites. The long-term strategy of the government is to develop management plans for all natural areas. In September 1987, a volunteer steward program was initiated to enhance site management and promote public involvement. The volunteers are individuals, groups or organizations who observe record and report activities in natural areas. The volunteers are assigned reporting duties based on their interests (e.g., noting various species of birds, reporting storm damage).

Wildland Parks

Wildland parks are designated under the *Provincial Parks Act*. Since late 1995, three wildland parks (approximately 375,000 acres) have been established in the Green Area. These are large natural land bases where human developments and interference are kept to a minimum. Intensive recreational development isn't permitted, but primitive backcountry campsites and a few motorized trails may be allowed. The Kakwa Wildland Park is an example of such an area.

Provincial Parks

Provincial parks in Alberta cover a total of 370,000 acres. These areas provide opportunities and facilities for a wide range of outdoor recreational and educational activities. Many parks have interpretive programs such as guided hikes or self-guided interpretive trails. The 65 provincial parks, designated under the *Provincial Parks Act*, offer protection to significant natural, historical and cultural landscapes and features.

ABOUT PUBLIC LANDS

Wilderness Areas

In the 1960s, the Whitegoat, Siffleur and Ghost Wilderness Areas were established. These three areas are managed under WERNA, and cover 250,000 acres of undeveloped land that has been relatively unaffected by human activities. There are no permanent structures, improvements or developed campsites in these wilderness areas. Motorized travel, hunting, fishing and trapping are prohibited. There are no developed trails and visitors can only go in on foot. Management plans are in place for the three areas.

Ecological Reserves

There are 14 ecological reserves (67,000 acres) designated under WERNA. This land, which is used primarily for scientific research and educational opportunities, is protected from recreational and industrial development. While staging/parking and/or interpretive facilities may exist on the perimeter of some ecological reserves, surface disturbance within the reserve isn't allowed. An example of an ecological reserve is Kennedy Coulee in southern Alberta. It was established in October 1987. Management plans for the ecological reserves are in various stages of development.

Habitat Conservation Areas

Five habitat conservation areas (over 10,000 acres) have also been designated for protection under the *Wildlife Act*. Antelope Creek and the Cross Ranch are two of these areas.

Wildlife Sanctuaries

Wildlife sanctuaries are designated as protected sites under the *Wildlife Act*. In addition to prohibiting hunting, restrictions are placed on other activities in these areas. Ministik Lake is one example of a wildlife sanctuary.

Special Operating Conditions on Dispositions

One of the most effective tools in the integrated management of public lands is the use of operating and development conditions on dispositions issued under the *Public Lands Act*. When an activity is approved, conditions are placed by the land manager in consultation with other resource management and referral agencies. These conditions regulate certain aspects of the activity and ensure it's carried out in a way that considers the environmental sensitivities of the site. For example, timing restrictions can be placed on activities that affect the beds

and shores of waterbodies, or specifications may be stipulated on project development or reclamation criteria.

A special operating condition is sometimes applied to a public land parcel when it's sold. At that time, buffers adjacent to Crown-owned watercourses can be protected from future development through the use of restrictive covenants. These are registered on the land title as caveats. These buffers, known as ecological corridor agreements, provide for protection for the vegetation adjacent to a stream. Such an agreement can provide a range of conservation benefits by protecting water quality and soil resources. Some wildlife species benefit through the protection of fish habitat. The shrub and tree cover also provides nesting sites and travel corridors.

This information is intended for convenience of reference only. The current relevant acts and regulations should be consulted for all purposes of interpreting and applying the law.

If you require updated information, contact any of the offices below:

Alberta Sustainable Resource Development
Lands Division
Rangeland Management Branch
South Tower, Petroleum Plaza
9920 - 108 Streets
Edmonton, Alberta T5K 2M4
Telephone: (780) 427-3595

Forestry Division
Forest Management Branch
9920 - 108 Street
Edmonton, Alberta T5K 2M4
Telephone: (780) 422-4590

Alberta Community Development
Parks and Protected Areas
9820 - 106 Street
Edmonton, Alberta T5K 2J6
Telephone: (780) 427-7009

OR call the Lands Division office, or Natural Resource Service office in your area.

OR you can visit the Lands Division Website:
http://www.srd.gov.ab.ca/land/c_1.html