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# Strategic Review: Back Country Operations

A presentation to the  
Parks Canada Management Committee  
June 14, 2010  
Updated by G.Fenton – 29June2010

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## Objectives

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- To explore implementation of the 2008 Strategic Review decision to reduce backcountry operations, including:
  - Providing background to inform decision making
  - Considering operational, financial and communications implications
  - Proposing recommendations for implementing decision

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## Background

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- Strategic Review decision (2008) that Parks Canada would streamline operations to meet environmental protection and heritage preservation objectives, including rationalizing some activities
- Backcountry use, as measured by overnight user nights, is declining across country (eg. a 25% drop in Banff National Park since 2001)
- Target reduction to backcountry operations of \$1.3 million in \$2008/09, and \$2.5 million in 2009/10 and ongoing (was identified, but not implemented)

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## Implementation of Decision

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- Backcountry use generally defined as requiring overnight stay and minimum 8 km journey from trailhead
- A national indiscriminate cut to field units (many of which have very limited offerings) deemed impractical, and could have deep adverse impacts on operations
- Mountain Parks have most trails and users (hikers, cyclists, horse-back riders)
- Mountain Parks also has greatest overall revenue (from all sources)
- Decision to apply \$2.5 million reduction to Mountain Parks (April 2010)

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## Operating Context – Banff Field Unit

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- Banff Field Unit manages 950 km of Banff's 1500 km of trails, two shelters (Egypt and Bryant), two commercial outfitters, two commercial horse camps, three lodges, 29 primitive and 8 semi-primitive campgrounds, 207 bridges (Class A&B) and responsibility for Ya Ha Tinda
- Signature wilderness experiences include Egypt Lake, Spray and Mystic
- 8,653 overnight permits, 257 commercial grazing nights, 229 private grazing nights
- Wilderness pass revenue is \$161,657
- All trails maintained by 5 FTEs; 3.3 staff at Ya Ha Tinda
- Vast majority of backcountry trails now receive only rudimentary maintenance

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## Operating Context – Jasper National Park

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- JNP has 1,200 km of trails, three commercial lodges, 50 primitive and 45 semi-primitive campgrounds, trailhead horse corrals and info kiosks, 95 bridges (Class A&B), 94 patrol cabins barns and wood sheds
- 10,060 overnight permits
- Signature wilderness experiences include Maligne Lake, Skyline Trail, Tonquin Valley, Brazeau Loop/South Boundary
- Wilderness pass revenue averages \$132,000
- All trails maintained by 4.3 FTEs; 1.5 FTEs for horse program; 1 FTE for Trail Office
- About 50 trails (460 km) receive rudimentary maintenance; crew dedicates most time on front country

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## Operating Context – Lake Louise/Yoho/Kootenay

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- LLYK manages 400 km of trails in Yoho, 200 km in Kootenay and 610 km in Banff National Park, along with 17 cabins, nine alpine huts, two tea houses, five commercial lodges, four semi-permanent horse camps, 26 backcountry camps and 326 bridges (Classes A&B)
- Signature wilderness experiences include Skoki; Rockwall in Kootenay; Lake O'Hara and Yoho Valley
- All trails maintained by 6.8 FTEs
- Wilderness pass revenue is \$205,710 (\$92.2 of which is collected by Alpine Club of Canada); \$51K for Lake O'Hara Campground
- Estimated 90% of budget currently devoted to day-use trails around Lake Louise, Moraine Lake and Lake O'Hara

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## Operating Context – Mount Revelstoke and Glacier

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- Majority of MRG classified as backcountry
- Mount Revelstoke activity focuses on areas beyond Meadows in the Sky Parkway; Glacier backcountry classified as everything outside 500m from the transportation corridor (19 trails totalling 164 km)
- Signature wilderness experiences in Glacier include Illecillewaet, Asulkan, Bostock, Balu Pass, Hermit; Eva, Miller and Jade Lakes in Mount Revelstoke
- All trails maintained by 2.6 FTEs
- Annual backcountry revenue is \$28K
  - Expected to drop to <\$10K when APCC assumes operations of hut/cabin operations
- Most of work already focused on day-use trails

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## Operating Context – Waterton Lakes

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- Popular day-use front-country trail system
- 30 trails totalling 200 km
  - Only 50 km meet backcountry definition (ie. Longer than 8 km from trailhead)
- 9 hiker/horse access campgrounds (35 sites), of which two are defined as backcountry; three patrol cabins
- Signature wilderness experiences include Crypt Lake, Carthew Alderson, Lakeshore Trail
- 1.66 FTEs dedicated to maintaining all trails, 50 km of boundary fencing and 8 km of bison paddock fencing

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## Budget Break-Down

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GENERAL FINANCIALS - EXPENSES	Salaries	General	Total	Revenue Received Projected
TOTAL PROGRAM EXPENDITURE/REVENUE				
			1,070.0	
			61.9	
			69.8	
			115.4	
			335.8	
			1,227.1	

\* 1.25 => shared natly rev.

\* 1.25 => fl. MM PkS

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## Strategic Considerations – Financial Management

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- EMC and field units have not defined backcountry use and related expenditures consistently
  - STAR PAA Report for 4141 "Backcountry Use and Camping" captures various expenditures, some related to ecosystem management, trail office, front country trails
    - Coding realignment to correct PAA underway now
- Shared Revenue pool for Mountain Parks can absorb a proportion of cut (\$1.25m annual reallocation already factored into three-year forecast – May 2010)
- Field Units report that backcountry operations already rationalized, so that further cuts will impact immediately on front country and iconic offerings
- Strict formulaic apportionment of cut across five field units may be difficult to manage, as some already operating at a deficit

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## Strategic Considerations – Operations

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- Workload and budget pressures mean that trail crews already dedicating most of their time to front country (which often forms gateway to backcountry)
- Public safety/code compliance issues with failing to monitor Class A&B bridges and hazardous trees
- Field units collecting revenue for wilderness passes, which implies service standards (already minimal) and challenges communications

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## Strategic Considerations – Communications (External)

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- Hiking is an iconic activity in Mountain Parks, with 73% of visitors reporting hikes as part of visit (Ipsos Reid, 2009)
- No indication of pending cuts in new Management Plans, and may appear contrary to stated directions
- Expect public or private opposition that PCA is reducing iconic experiences while promoting more controversial offers
  - ID-9, The Lake O'Hara Trails Club, Lake O'Hara Lodge, Calgary Cross Country Ski Club, Alpine Club of Canada, ski areas, Fairmont, Skyline Hikers, Trail Riders of the Canadian Rockies, Friends of Jasper, Outward Bound, Friends of Mount Revelstoke and Glacier and others likely to oppose decision
- Third-party support possible from environmental groups, especially related to species at risk (Wild Canada Conservation Alliance, CPAWs)
- Public debate on cut likely to quickly polarize

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## Strategic Considerations – Communications (Internal)

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- Announcement of reduction to backcountry program will be difficult to manage in field units, as many staff have deeply held connection to wilderness experience and believe program is already fully rationalized
- Cuts may result in Workforce Adjustment situations, elimination of horse programs and layoff of long-term staff in term positions, impacting on already low ResCon morale
- Feed of internal opposition to external stakeholders likely

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## Financial Management: Option 1

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Achieve \$2.5m saving by cutting \$1.25m from Shared Revenue and apportioned reduction of \$1.25m to STAR PAA 4141

- Reduction allocated based on three-year average expenditures in backcountry as shown in Slide 10
- Cuts would impact front-country operations
- Ability to maintain signature wilderness experiences would be compromised
- WFA situations probable

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## Financial Management: Option 2

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Achieve \$2.5m saving by cutting \$1.25m from Shared Revenue and \$1.25m to Field Unit A-Bases

- Allows field units more flexibility to manage operational demands, and ensure protection of front-country and high-use backcountry offerings
- Will still impact front country and signature wilderness experiences (impact will vary depending on park financial situation; WFA still a possibility)
- Recommended that Mountain Parks management team identify a strategic approach to apportion reduction fairly across field units
- Risk that field units will fail to implement cut, and move further into operational deficit

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## Communication Strategy: Option 1

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Proactively communicate decision to staff and stakeholders

- Demonstrates Parks Canada's commitment to implementing Strategic Review decision to invest taxpayers' dollars wisely (backcountry use is on decline, and investments are being altered accordingly)
- May result in protracted, polarized debate about future of Mountain Parks
- Difficult to manage negative reaction from staff and stakeholders (although potential to leverage support from wildlife protection groups)

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## Communication Strategy: Option 2

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Low-profile reactive communications about decision

- Helps to avoid internal outcry and public debate about cutting backcountry
  - Although there may be challenges in communicating service level reductions in some parks
- May fuel staff's impression of lack of transparency by senior management
- Could be perceived as part of a "death by a thousand cuts" financial management strategy

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## Recommendation

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It is recommended that Parks Canada consider Options 2 for financially managing (A-base cut) and communicating (low-profile) decision, with following conditions:

- Devise strategic apportionment approach, followed by clear direction to field units to implement reduction without incurring new additional operational deficit; response must include some rationalization of backcountry and associated infrastructure in each field unit
- Work toward a financial coding structure that more accurately reflects trail program
- Explore new initiatives with stakeholders and voluntary organizations to improve visitor experience in the backcountry

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## Feedback and Next Steps:

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- DG agrees with recommendation #2
- DG challenges:
  - Better description of what the iconic/signature service offers really are
  - for areas under 1000, challenge to change service offer and reduced infrastructure
  - – align change in LOS with Caribou Strategy 
  - communications to reflect change in LOS and consistent with Mgmt Plan direction
  - different LOS and reductions for big vs small parks, with burden of cuts in Banff, Jasper

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## Feedback & Next Steps:

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- not all reductions need to be targeted at wilderness service offer
- develop detailed implementation strategy for approval by DG and special subcommittee of PCA Ops Committee:
  - includes communications strategy / key messages
  - notional apportionment of \$312.5K / \$163.3K
  - LOS and Infrastructure adjustments
  - Some options
- Draft strategy due: July 16<sup>th</sup>

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