

# Yard Work

Exploring Natural Capital Public Policy Issues

## How Do We Manage Growth? Protecting Natural Capital Through Land Use Planning

### Introduction

For both residents and non-residents of the region alike, western Canada evokes images of vast prairies, endless skies, extensive forests and towering mountains. These things are part of our natural capital: the urban, working, and wild landscapes that are invaluable to our way of life. That way of life, however, is increasingly stretching the limits of what our natural capital can accommodate. Our land provides us with emblematic scenery, resources for our economies, and irreplaceable ecological goods and services that sustain our very lives. But our land is finite. As economies produce more, activities multiply, and demand for land increases, there is no corresponding growth in the land base available in western Canada to support everything that is occurring. The results are obvious as we begin to butt up against each other more and more in our everyday lives. The solution is less clear, but revolves around the issue of how we manage these confrontations.

Those who follow the work of the Canada West Foundation will note that this is not unique commentary. In fact, the Foundation has been working on issues of land and water use for the better part of the past three years as part of our Natural Capital Project. Thus, what follows is by no means novel; it has been said before. The purpose of this document, however, is twofold. First, it exists to redraw attention to land use concerns and highlight the importance of work currently being done in western Canada on the issue, specifically work being done by the Government of Alberta on the development of a comprehensive land use framework for the province. And second, it exists to act as an introduction to what will be an ongoing Canada West Foundation series, Yard Work. To wade through the complexity of land use issues, the Yard Work series will propose for government easy policy changes or ideas that can provide momentum on the journey towards a comprehensive, integrated land use framework. Though this first Yard Work discusses the larger issue of land use as a whole, future installments will examine the challenges, benefits and implications of specific changes to land use policy in western Canada.

### The Challenge

The challenge of conflicting land uses is a complicated one, but the issues stem from increasing demand for the development of our land. Urban growth swallows up adjacent agricultural lands. Agricultural lands conflict with oil and gas development. Oil and gas development requires access to forestry lands. Every land use has the potential to affect watersheds. The list goes on. Add the importance of recreation and conservation to the mix—not just as values, but also for the economic and ecological benefits they bring—and the result is a complex list of land users wanting to do different things on the same parcel of land at the same time.

Land policy faces the challenge of wading through this complexity. Key to the need for a comprehensive land



The term “Yard Work” is a spin on a statement frequently made by Alberta Premier Ralph Klein: “It’s time to get our economic house in order.” As well as getting our economic house in order, we believe that it is important to work on the “yard.” The Canada West Foundation’s **Natural Capital Project** is based on the premise that the “yard” (i.e., our stock of environmental assets) is critical to not only western Canada’s quality of life, but to its long-term economic prosperity as well. As such, the Project seeks to close the counterproductive gap that exists between environmental and business interests, and stresses that natural capital is not a luxury, but a primary economic asset. The Yard Work series contributes to this by identifying, exploring, and encouraging debate about natural capital issues and ideas for improving public policy in this critical area.

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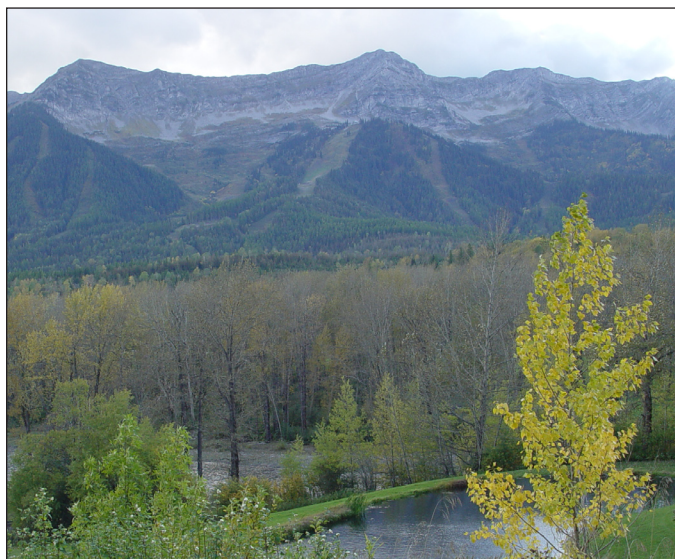


photo: Barry Worbets

### Alberta's Case

Issues around land use arise anywhere that there are conflicting demands for access to the land, and thus affect virtually all of western Canada. In Alberta, however, there is a particularly unique dimension to this challenge: a tremendous natural resource bounty beneath the surface of the land. These resources are found in virtually every corner of the province, affecting virtually every user of the land, and Albertans benefit economically and socially from their development. What is less often discussed, however, are the costs of such widespread development.

As resource prices increase, the ability to get at what is in the ground does as well. Because the subsurface resources in Alberta are so widespread, the potential for access conflicting with other land uses—from agriculture and forestry to cities and tourism—is much more than in other jurisdictions. In a province where everything seems to be growing except the size of the land, it is essential to design a land use policy that ensures conflict over the land does not negatively affect our natural capital.

### For Example

The Alberta land use debate also involves concerns beyond the effects of subsurface resource extraction on the land. Just as in other parts of western Canada, managing the negative cumulative effects of development is key in Alberta. While one decision to develop may not have a tremendous effect on the land, dozens or hundreds of the same decision have the potential to negatively affect a watershed, air quality, or the biodiversity of an area.



use policy in any jurisdiction is the understanding that you simply cannot do everything all of the time in one area. In essence, land use policy must answer three pivotal questions with respect to development: what are we going to develop?; where are we (and where are we not) going to develop it? and how is that development going to take place? Furthermore, the answer to these questions must keep in mind the value that we receive from natural capital in terms of resources and ecological goods and services.

This is, of course, no easy task. The reason that land use is an issue in the first place is that conflicting users exist. To have a land use policy that effectively balances different access to different parts of land means that there will have to be trade-offs; you cannot please all of the people all of the time.

This document was authored by Canada West Foundation Intern Chris Fay and Senior Fellow Barry Worbets and is part of the Canada West Foundation's *Natural Capital Project*. The *Natural Capital Project* is a multi-year research and consultation endeavour that promotes the importance of the environment to western Canada's economic prosperity and quality of life. The project promotes the need to find a public policy balance between short-term economic growth and long-term investment in natural capital. Funding for *the Natural Capital Project* was provided by Alberta-Pacific Forest Industries Inc., Ducks Unlimited Canada, EnCana Corporation, Shell Canada Limited, and Suncor Energy Inc. The Canada West Foundation expresses its sincere thanks for this generous support. The opinions expressed in this document are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Canada West Foundation's board members, advisors, or funders. Permission to use or reproduce this report is granted for personal or classroom use without fee and without formal request provided that it is properly cited. Copies may not be made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage. This document is available for free from the CWF website [www.cwf.ca].

cover photo: Jason Azmier

The effects of urban growth are one example of conflicting land use that can be seen just about anywhere in the world. As mentioned above, this is not the first time the Canada West Foundation has commented on this topic, and the importance of urban growth with respect to natural capital in the Alberta context has been discussed by the Foundation at length elsewhere. Take, for example, this point made in a Canada West Foundation newsletter on land use policy last year:

“The Calgary-Edmonton corridor has benefited from sustained population growth and increased economic activity over the past decade. While this is extremely positive, it places a significant burden on the available land and water resources. The urban expansion that has taken place in the corridor, for example, has come at the expense of valuable and irreplaceable agricultural land. The agriculture land in the corridor is some of the most productive in the province and is a potential source of wealth for generations to come. When this land is transformed into residential and commercial areas, this value is permanently lost. This begs a key question: how do we take advantage of growth in the Calgary-Edmonton corridor without unduly compromising the region’s natural capital and the economic and quality of life benefits it generates?”

– *Running up against limits: Developing an integrated land-use policy* by Barry Worbets and Laura Ryan

Countless other land use challenges exist in Alberta besides the Calgary-Edmonton corridor. For example, the oil sands in the northeastern part of the province and increasing pressures on the eastern slopes of the Rockies. The result of not having a comprehensive policy to guide decisions in these areas is mounting uncertainty in the resource, agriculture and tourism sectors alongside growing frustration for all Albertans. The solution must be the development of a comprehensive land use policy framework that integrates all these concerns and finds a way for us to use the land while ensuring the long-term sustainability of our natural assets.

### Work Under Way

There will be a land use policy in Alberta in a matter of years. The question is whether the work done on developing this policy will be proactive and attempt to design a comprehensive framework appropriate for the areas it affects, or whether a policy will evolve from a series of individual decisions, each determined independently of one another. It is obvious that the former solution provides a better result for everyone involved.

In its 2005 Budget, the Government of Alberta explicitly recognizes this reality. The Budget document states, “the government, in consultation with Albertans, will develop a comprehensive land use policy for the province.” As part of this work, the Canada West Foundation has been engaged by the Government of Alberta to provide strategic advice on the actions that must be taken to accomplish this goal. As work on the development of a land use policy gets under way, two things are strikingly clear: it is a complex issue with a host of different interests involved; and it is viewed as integral to the future prosperity and vitality of the province by all of these various interests.

As discussed in the introduction, the *Yard Work* series is another means by which the Canada West Foundation is highlighting land use issues in the province. *Yard Work* will discuss easy policy wins around the issue of land use. These policies can be thought of as “low-hanging fruit” on the tree of land use policy: changes that will have a positive effect on Alberta’s lands and are easy for the government to get to.

### Conclusion

It should be obvious to any observer of growth in Alberta that the need for a policy to manage land use exists. We are now, more than ever, bumping up against each other as we work, live and play. And this conflict is having a negative effect on our natural capital by eliminating the places that provide us with our resources, our ecological goods and services and our quality of life. There must be a way to manage this conflict, and the development of a comprehensive land use framework, sufficiently flexible so as to handle different demands for different lands at different times, is essential to this management.

The *Yard Work* series is one of the first steps in confronting the land use challenge. Importantly, though much of the work being undertaken by the Canada West Foundation on the topic of land use revolves around the unique challenges facing Alberta, many of the recommendations found within *Yard Work* can be applied to western Canada as a whole. The result for all jurisdictions will be a policy framework that better recognizes the value of urban, working and wild landscapes. In short, policy that better protects our natural capital. 