

Valhalla Wilderness Society

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June 29, 2010

Information Bulletin for
Hikers, Mountain Bikers and Nature Lovers in the Slocan Valley

Commercial Mountain Biking Application Raises Serious Concerns among Slocan Valley Recreationists

The Integrated Land Management Bureau (ILMB) is now considering an application by Rilor Wilderness Mountain Biking (RW) for a commercial mountain biking tenure in the Slocan Valley, around Mt. Idaho and near Nelson. Rilor's proposal can be found on the government's website at www.arfd.gov.bc.ca/ApplicationPosting/viewpost.jsp?PostID=17049.

THE DEADLINE FOR LETTERS IS JULY 9.

The Valhalla Wilderness Society (VWS) directors believe that low-impact commercial mountain biking on backroads (not in parks) is the kind of tourism business our valley needs. However, every kind of recreation, even hiking, can be very destructive if it isn't carefully limited.

The Slocan communities have built up and maintained a precious resource of trails in this area over many years. The Rilor application could, under some conditions, impact the user experience, the trails themselves, alpine terrain and wildlife very negatively.

One of the problems is with the application process itself. The file was opened on May 19. The Notice of Intent did not appear in the local Valley Voice until June 16. Yet the deadline for public review and comment is July 9, after which a decision could be made forthwith. This treats our recreational resources as if they were on a factory conveyor belt. One would scarcely think that what is involved is trails that numerous community people over the years have tended, with sometimes a hundred or more people on them in a single day, with sensitive alpine terrain and grizzly bears.

Currently VWS is reviewing the application. The plan reviewers are director Craig Pettitt and wildlife biologist Wayne McCrory. Craig is a mountain biker who has participated in many work parties for the upkeep of mountain bike trails in this

area, including building bridges. As a consulting biologist, Wayne has done many studies of bear-human conflicts in parks, both for government agencies and for private resorts. He has seen the impacts of soaring mountain bike use, including “extreme” mountain biking, around Whistler where four bikers have collided with black bears. Both Wayne and Craig have worked on building and maintaining many of the trails used locally by people. Between them they have close to 100 years of trail building and maintenance experience. Their final review of the Rilor application will be posted on this website before the July 9 deadline.

This preliminary information bulletin is to alert the public to some aspects of the proposal. Here are some key points:

There are numerous indications that the type of mountain biking RW intends to do will involve steep, fast descents of mountain trails, perhaps with various structures in the forest such as ramps to get bikers airborne. This is called “extreme” mountain biking. This form has been shown to have the highest risk of collisions with people or wildlife, and erosion of trails.

RW proposes to use the Galena, Alamo Wagon Road, Wakefield, and Choices trails, and to also build six new trails over time.

Rilor says it wants to “offer high end mountain bike trails that are not being shared with hundreds of other riders each day.” The Galena and the Wakefield trails see over a hundred users a day on peak seasons.

The management plan states: “RW views trail as it’s primary product.” The RW application requests tenure to maintain existing trails and build new ones. On one hand, local mountain bikers who have been maintaining trails for many years should not have to deal with damage such as erosion that might be caused by high numbers of people travelling at high speeds.

On the other hand, forest trails built for hiking, such as the Wakefield Trail, should not be turned over to the maintenance of a commercial mountain biking operation, which can then modify them to suit the goal of catering to “high-end” extreme mountain bikers.

Rilor’s development plan states: “For the most part the trails used by RW are exclusively used by mountain bikers.” But 45 to 50% of the users on the Galena Trail are pedestrian. The trail is not steep, but mountain bikers can travel extremely fast going downhill. Hikers also use the Old Sandon Road, the Alamo Wagon road, and the Wakefield, which was originally opened as a hiking trail and has never been upgraded to IMBA standards.

VWS is particularly concerned about the Wakefield Trail, which is in the alpine of Mt. Idaho and is currently being used by local mountain bikers and hikers, as well as being prime grizzly bear habitat. The trail is very steep. If mountain bike use significantly increases, the risk of collisions with bears and hikers, and erosion of the trail, will greatly increase.

Rilor's application highlights the failure of the government over many years to conduct a recreational management planning process for this area. VWS is deeply concerned about allowing a mountain biking business to build numerous new bike trails in the surrounding area without any sort of planning. These mountains are already fragmented with old mining and logging roads, some of which would provide good places for Rilor to take its clients.

It is virtually certain that commercial ATV use is already putting much pressure on grizzly bears in the alpine and impacting alpine terrain. There are no designated places on the settled side of the lake that are off-limits to provide places where wildlife can have seclusion, just the steady growth of people, machines and the potential for unplanned development in the backcountry.

Rilor Wilderness Mountain Biking (RW) is based at the Kokanee Falls development near Enterprise Creek. RW proposes to build a steep 7.6 km extreme bike trail down from Mt. Alwyn, using helicopter access. This would cause a high level of disturbance to mountain goats and grizzly bears. Helicopter tourism of any kind is characterized by explosive growth and expansion of operating area that can gain access to parks and ruin areas for hikers with high numbers of tourists and intolerable noise.

The RW application has a number of inaccuracies in it. For instance, it is untrue that RW has been maintaining the trails it proposes to use for 8 years. The trails have been maintained by local noncommercial users, and we could find none who recalled seeing RW doing so. The proponent has already been ticketed for building a trail on Crown Land without a permit, which does not inspire trust in Rilor to abide by whatever rules the Integrated Land Management Bureau might set.

The Valhalla Wilderness Society opposes the granting of tenure to Rilor for all these reasons and more. We have serious doubts that this particular style of mountain biking business can be kept within the limits needed to protect our wildlife and backcountry recreational experience. Should a tenure be granted, our preliminary recommendations are:

- The Choices, Alamo Wagon Road and Old Sandon Road Trails are suitable for use by Rilor.
- The Galena and Wakefield are not suitable.
- There should be no new mountain bike trails built without an overall plan to limit ecological damage and user conflicts, as well as sight inspections by appropriate government authorities.
- VWS is opposed to helicopter tourism of all kinds, and believes it would be a dangerous precedent for the valley.

VWS will release its submission to the Integrated Land Management Bureau as soon as it is available. In the meantime, if you are concerned about these issues, please write a letter right away to:

Natural Resource Officer
FrontCounter BC
1902 Theatre Rd
Cranbrook BC V1C 7G1

For full details of the VWS analysis, see our Home Page at www.vws.org.

You can download the management plan and send the government a message about it at:

www.arfd.gov.bc.ca/ApplicationPosting/viewpost.jsp?PostID=17049