



Municipal District of **GREENVIEW**

WHAT WE HEARD – UPPER SMOKY SUB REGIONAL PLAN

On June 4, 2025, representatives from the MD of Greenview, City of Grande Prairie, and County of Grande Prairie participated in a tri-municipal meeting with representatives from the Government of Alberta (GOA) to discuss the draft Upper Smoky Sub-Regional Plan (USSRP). This session took place as part of the 90-day public consultation period (March 28–June 25, 2025). GOA confirmed that the current draft is not final and remains subject to change before Cabinet approval.

The USSRP aims to balance economic development with environmental and habitat protection, particularly for woodland caribou. However, several concerns were raised regarding the impact on industry, municipal operations, and public land use, along with data accuracy, communications gaps, and the need for local input.

Key Themes & Concerns

1. Economic Certainty and Industry Consultation

- Investor uncertainty has potentially already led to paused forestry capital projects in the Grande Cache area.
- Importantly, GOA representatives reiterated that the intent of the USSRP is *not to limit development*, but rather to guide it in a way that is *mindful of footprint size and environmental impact*. However, councils expressed that some elements of the draft plan, particularly reclamation fees and unclear boundaries, do create the perception of new limitations, which must be clarified to avoid investor uncertainty.
- Councils stressed the importance of continued, direct engagement with industry, especially in forestry and coal.
- GOA confirmed that it is meeting with industry stakeholders and is open to amendments, particularly around coal boundary lines, noting that their current data is outdated and may not reflect leases under exploration or planned future developments.
- Councils requested that any existing leases or actively explored lands be reflected accurately in future drafts.
- It was not clear that coal needs to be included in this sub-regional plan, as the mines here are established and already have a compact footprint which aligns with the minimization strategies being adopted in the forestry sector. Coal development in the area was noted as having minimal impact on caribou habitat.

- There was discussion about removing or adapting the coal policy to minimize unnecessary restrictions, however, the GOA did confirm that the existing coal leases in the Grande Cache area are not being phased out and will continue to operate.
- The presentation from Environment and Protected Areas highlighted new forestry practices intended to support caribou habitat recovery, including:
 - A shift from dispersed to aggregated harvesting, which consolidates forestry operations to reduce fragmentation.
 - Implementation of harvest timing sequences to minimize disruption during sensitive periods for caribou movement and regeneration.
 - Coordinated restoration through the Habitat Recovery Program, with targets for restoring 50% of legacy disturbance in the Slow Go Zone within 25 years.
- While municipalities and industry acknowledge the importance of habitat conservation, it was noted that the plan must balance ecological goals with economic realities, and that smaller operators may face disproportionate impacts if implementation is rigid or poorly supported.

2. Restoration, Reclamation & Financial Burden

- A key concern was the proposal that new developments may be required to pay into the reclamation of legacy seismic lines.
- All three municipal councils strongly opposed this, calling it an unfair downloading of historical reclamation costs onto new proponents.
- When paired with existing environmental fees and regulatory hurdles, this creates a cumulative impact that threatens regional competitiveness and future investment.
- Industry requires clarity on restoration obligations, including costs, timelines, and standards.

3. Crown Land Access, Trails & Recreation Management

- GOA representatives stated that general Crown land access would not be restricted by the USSRP. However, they acknowledged that many existing trails may no longer be maintained, and that resource constraints may result in some areas becoming walk-in only.
- GOA confirmed that they do not have the resources to maintain all current trails or develop new ones, and that they may be required to explore secondary implementation for future trail management, possibly managed by nonprofit groups through 10-year stewardship agreements.

- A question was raised regarding the compatibility of existing grazing leases with recreation and trail use—specifically how conflicts would be managed where recreation overlaps with grazing allotments. Unfortunately, the response from the GOA representative was dismissive, with no clarity provided.
- Councils stressed that conflicts between grazing, trail users, and habitat conservation must be proactively addressed, and that management strategies need to be transparent, enforceable, and respectful of existing land uses.

4. Wildfire Risk and Emergency Access

- Concerns were raised about the increased wildfire risk associated with aging forests and restricted land access.
- A related concern was raised about the full restoration of existing seismic lines, cutlines, and pipeline corridors. Municipal officials noted that these routes often serve as critical emergency access points. Eliminating these established paths could significantly hinder wildfire response, industrial incidents, or rescue operations. In many cases, the lack of pre-existing access could result in larger environmental impacts as new routes would need to be cleared to reach affected areas.
- Participants also questioned why selective harvesting by large operators was still allowed in old growth stands that pose a fire risk, while smaller local operators face growing constraints.

5. Planning Alignment, Data Gaps & Local Involvement

- GOA acknowledged that local municipal representatives were not included in the initial task force for the plan and made a note for improved process going forward.
- Councils stressed that municipal participation—both political and administrative—is essential at all stages of planning, particularly as these plans affect local zoning, development, and infrastructure.
- The USSRP is being implemented under the South Saskatchewan Regional Plan, which has no application outcome for the Upper Smoky region. No clear answer was provided on why it isn't linked to the Lower Athabasca Plan
- GOA acknowledged that they were unclear as to how some of the data used to create boundaries and disturbance thresholds was collected.

6. Communication, Public Confidence & Plan Flexibility

- Community unrest has grown due to misunderstanding of the plan’s intent and implications. Stakeholders noted a lack of accessible public communications and mixed messages during roll-out.
- GOA apologized for miscommunication at the Grande Cache open house on how the plan, specifically in regard to coal, was communicated and did confirm a follow up meeting with a community task force in Grande Cache on June 16, 2025.
- It was emphasized by all municipalities that the USSRP must remain adaptable, with flexible mechanisms for amendment, particularly as more data and local input become available.
- The plan must clearly reaffirm that approvals for new development will not be withheld pending legacy reclamation, but that obligations to restore land will be placed on new approvals moving forward.

Conclusion

The MD of Greenview, City of Grande Prairie, and County of Grande Prairie remain united in their commitment to ongoing dialogue with the Government of Alberta. All three Councils are dedicated to advocating for a sub-regional plan that reflects a balanced approach—one that supports economic development, acknowledges the unique needs of our region, and responsibly manages environmental impacts. Continued collaboration will be key to shaping a workable and effective plan for the Upper Smoky.