

Roads: More than lines on a map

Place: Yukon Territory

Case study #5

Road: 32 proposed access corridors throughout the Yukon

Issues: Road planning pre-empting land-use planning; impact on caribou and other sensitive species; no ecological or economic assessment of viability of corridors or impacts.



The Yukon Government's 2003 *Roads to Resources* report identifies 32 potential new access corridors throughout the Yukon. These corridors are purely speculative and are seen as a way for the government to drive increased business-as-usual resource development in the territory.

This approach essentially pre-empts options for the designation of roadless wilderness and large and ecologically significant protected areas. The *Roads to Resources* report ignores ecological values and considers no type of economic development other than primary resource extraction. The report takes a technical engineering viewpoint with no regard for natural or ecological values.

The speculative approach embraced by the report does not appear to be based on any economic analysis of the viability of this approach or any consideration of the history of economic failures, particularly in the mineral resource sector in the Yukon. However, this plan would, if implemented, cause severe ecological impacts, preempt land use planning and expose the Yukon to significant economic risk.

It envisions a major access corridor constructed through:

- Virtually every major wilderness watershed in the Yukon as well as candidate protected areas, First Nations Special Management Areas and areas of high conservation value.

- Sheep, moose and caribou ranges, including those of caribou herds subject to recovery plans
- Habitat of COSEWIC-listed species, including peregrine falcon breeding areas
- Important wetland habitat
- Migratory bird habitat and waterfowl staging areas
- Sites of plants of limited distribution
- The Southeast Yukon Forest Ecosystem Network

The Yukon Government's own Woodland Caribou Management Decision Guidelines - July 1996 state that: "Management experience in North America has shown that virtually any type of development activity that increases access for hunters results in a herd decline. Hunter access must be very carefully controlled, particularly where roads bisect caribou winter range."

Because the *Roads to Resources* concept makes no effort to evaluate potential access corridors with regard to ecological or wildlife values, and given that access corridors are proposed for areas critical to woodland caribou populations, it is quite possible that implementation of the plan would contravene the recommendations outlined in the woodland caribou guidelines.

We must also consider the landscape-level effects of roads because roads do not stand alone once constructed. The zone of impact of a standard gravel road can extend from 200 to 1,500 metres beyond the road's edge. In some valleys, traffic on roads could

cause species to abandon the entire area.

Two of the Yukon Government's proposed roads bisect the biologically diverse and intact wilderness of the southeast Yukon from east to west and north to south. The southeast Yukon is well known to biologists for its important migratory bird habitat, waterfowl



Road impacts can extend deep into the forest

staging areas, wetlands and threatened species habitat. The area supports an array of pristine watersheds, intact wildlife populations and geographically significant plants. The Beaver/LaBiche area in the Southeast Yukon, for example, is thought to have one of the highest densities of black bears in the Yukon and supports at least 16 rare bird species. The unusually diverse vegetation of these watersheds includes 40% of all vascular plant species identified in the Yukon, including 60 rare species.

The Yukon Government has also identified a series of access corridors through the Peel watershed, which remains one of the largest unroaded mountain wilderness areas in North America. The watershed hosts a full suite of northern species, including the Yukon's largest woodland caribou herd and healthy wolf, grizzly bear and Dall sheep populations. Any one of the access corridors, if built, would degrade if not destroy the Peel watershed's wilderness character.

The *Roads to Resources* study is unilateral in approach. It was produced in isolation without consultation with First Nations governments and mandated local and regional boards and councils; nor was the public consulted. It pre-empts land use planning and the

deliberations of existing and future Land Use Planning Commissions.

Despite the plan, no new road building has actually commenced. However, at least one road route in the southeast Yukon has been assessed.

Of greater concern than any one road segment, however, is that the *Roads to Resources* concept will be considered an access plan

and the conceptual access corridors could be enshrined in regional land-use plans. This could provide a paper rationale for future construction and resource development. Companies have, and could continue to, promote their mining properties using the access corridor maps. As well, the access corridors could interfere with or impede the creation of large, ecologically significant protected areas in many areas of the Yukon.

CPAWS Yukon is calling for reconsideration of the *Roads to Resources* report and for a more integrative ecosystem-based approach in all land-use planning processes. This approach should first consider all values of a landscape, determine which areas should be set aside for protection, identify specific projects with actual, economically recoverable resources, and consider all socioeconomic criteria, before proposed access corridors are considered.

We urge residents to stay informed and follow this issue, especially in areas currently subject to land use planning. While it has not gained a lot of public notice, the report has been publicly released and may manifest itself in the near future.

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