

# Cronin Road/Trail Planning Project Overview

December 2020

This document is intended to guide the development of a plan for addressing issues surrounding use and maintenance of the Cronin and Higgins Trails into Babine Mountains Provincial Park.

## Background

The Cronin Road/Trail leading into Babine Mountains Provincial Park is currently managed mainly by BC Parks. The first 7km of the Cronin Road is on Crown land outside the park boundary. From here, where the Higgins Trail originates, it becomes the Cronin Trail (an old mining road) and is managed by BC Parks as the Babine Mountains Trails Park up to the point that it enters Babine Mountains Park. Babine Mountains Trails Park was established as a result of direction in the Bulkley Valley Land and Resource Management Plan (BVL RMP) for BC Parks to restrict motorized access into alpine areas in and adjacent to the park.

The Road/Trail is in poor condition and continues to degrade as a result of poor construction and slope stability issues<sup>1</sup>. Due to the length of the road, erosion events blocking motorized access, continuous encroachment from surrounding vegetation (Alder), and the road's construction flaws, BC Parks staff have not been able to keep up with maintenance of the Cronin Road/Trail. BC Parks is interested in looking at options for providing alternate access to the alpine areas of the Cronin Trail that would result in a better recreational experience for park visitors with lower maintenance needs for BC Parks and potential volunteers. Any alternate access would be external to the park boundary and its consideration will therefore require consultation with First Nations, coordination with other provincial government agencies, and stakeholder consultation.

Management direction for this area of the Babine Mountains Park and the surrounding areas comes from the Babine Mountains Recreation Area Master Plan (1992) and the Bulkley Land and Resource Management Plan (1998). The Master Plan identifies the goal to "Maintain...Cronin Creek,.....Higgins Creek....access trails into the Recreation Area in a cleared, passable condition so that all visitors are assured of a high level of safety, convenience and satisfaction with their hiking experience in the Recreation Area." Winter snowmobile access to the Cronin Area is limited to use via Letter of Permission only, as identified in the Master Plan. Currently, 3 letters of permission are granted to the Smithers Snowmobile Association per winter. Specific direction for the relevant sub-units of the Babine Mountains Planning Unit in the BVL RMP includes assuring recreational users safe access to the alpine, maintaining hiking trail access by protecting trails and partially re-routing if necessary, prohibiting vehicle access (except access for mining vehicles), and discouraging new road construction<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix 1.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix 2

## Process Goals

The goal of the planning process for this area is to evaluate user satisfaction with the existing Cronin and Higgins Trails, to evaluate support for an alternate access route to the Cronin alpine area, and to develop a longer-term plan for recreational access in the area. If support exists, detailed planning for a more suitable multi-use trail to access the alpine will be completed. Planning for access outside the park will be a collective effort between BC Parks and Recreation Sites and Trails BC as it will likely be jointly managed.

## Process Outline

Given that we anticipate support from recreational users for an alternate trail to alpine, prior to soliciting information from these groups, the first step will be conducting interviews with those governments and agencies whose input would likely limit alternate access possibilities. BC Parks will lead consultation with these groups.

### *1. Consultation with First Nations, other government agencies and tenure holders.*

- a. The only First Nation whose asserted traditional territory overlaps with this area is Lake Babine Nation.
- b. The forest licensee in the area is Pacific Inland Resources (West Fraser).
- c. The Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development (FLNRORD) is responsible for the land outside the park and adjacent to the existing Cronin Access Road/Trail. Any alternate access development will require their approval and any liabilities from abandoning maintenance of the road/trail may be borne by them (i.e. road drainage issues resulting in slope failure and habitat damage (e.g. Cronin Creek)).
- d. The Ministry of Energy, Mines and Petroleum Resources (MEMPR) will be consulted to confirm that recreation objectives are not unduly impacted by future mining, mineral exploration, or reclamation activities. This may arise from future alternate access to the upper Cronin Mine or from upgrades completed to access the lower Cronin Mine for reclamation activities.
- e. The guide outfitter and the trapper in the area will be consulted to gauge their level of concern with existing trail conditions and any changes to access.
- f. The Bulkley Valley Community Resources Board monitors implementation of the BVLRMP and they will be informed of the proposed planning process and asked for input.

### *2. Consultation with users and user groups.*

If there are no concerns from the above groups with the potential for developing alternate access, or if the concerns are manageable, BC Parks will then hire a contractor to help consult with recreational users and user groups who currently use the area.

- Hikers
  - A limited amount of hiking activity takes place on the Cronin Road/Trail and the Higgins Trail. Given the wet, brushy condition and distance of the Cronin Road/Trail, it is not a popular route for hikers. The Bulkley Valley Backpackers will be solicited for feedback.

- Bikers
  - Most of the use on the Cronin Road is likely from mountain bikers completing the Cronin-Silver King Trail loop. The Smithers Mountain Bike Association will be consulted.
- Horseback Riders
  - There is occasional use of the Cronin Road/Trail and the Higgins Trail by horseback riders. The Backcountry Horseman Society of BC, Northwest Chapter has previously expressed interest in upgrading the old mining cabin in Higgins Basin to serve as a horseback riding destination and has shown interest in exploring an alternate route for the Cronin Trail.
- Snowmobilers
  - Snowmobilers access the Cronin alpine area in winter via the Cronin Road/Trail under letter of permission from BC Parks. Three letters are granted per winter but only a couple are used each season. The Smithers Snowmobile Association represents this user group.
- Quad Riders
  - ATV use of the Cronin Road is only permitted up to the Higgins Trailhead. Management direction in both the LRMP and the Master Plan discourages summer motorized access beyond this point. This management direction would also apply to the area where new access would be developed, but a portion of the new access may be available for summer motorized access. The need to consult with this user group will need to be further evaluated. The Bulkley Valley Quad Riders represents this user group.
- Naturalists
  - The Bulkley Valley Naturalists will be contacted to provide input.

Beyond consulting with representatives from groups and clubs listed above, consultation with the general public will also be undertaken through online surveys distributed more widely.

### *3. Public feedback report.*

The contractor will summarize all public feedback received through meetings with user groups and through online surveys in a summary report. This feedback will be shared with everyone who participated.

### *4. Development of project plan.*

BC Parks and Recreation Sites & Trails BC will use the feedback received to make decisions on how to manage the Cronin Road/Trail into the future, including a decision on a potential new route. If status-quo management is deemed to be the most desired future management scenario, BC Parks will continue to lead maintenance of the existing Road/Trail as staffing, funding, and volunteer assistance allow. If status-quo management is not deemed to be the most desired future management scenario, the contractor will draft a project plan for any maintenance of the existing route and development of a new route.

### *5. Public feedback on project plan.*

BC Parks may conduct further consultation on the draft plan if it is warranted.

## *6. Finalize project plan and distribute.*

BC Parks and Recreation Sites and Trails BC, potentially with the assistance of a contractor, will complete an impact assessment of the new route, complete trail layout and design, develop a facility plan, develop a plan for deactivation or reclamation of existing facilities or mitigation of existing liabilities, develop cost estimates for all work, and work on legal establishment of the new trail. The final project plan will be shared with anyone who provided input and requested a copy of the final plan.

## *7. Trail construction and facility installation.*

It is anticipated that the construction of a new trail and installation of supporting facilities will not take place until the fall of 2021 or the summer of 2022.

## Process Timelines & Resources

### *1. Consultation with Lake Babine Nation, other government agencies and tenure holders.*

- December 2020 to January 2021.
- One month to solicit and summarize feedback.
- Explore responsibility for existing and future liabilities (e.g. the collapsed Cronin Creek bridge that has redirected the creek, road failure into fish-bearing creek).
- This step will be completed by BC Parks staff.
- If there are no roadblocks at this point, further consultation will continue.

### *2. Consultation with users and user groups.*

- January 2021 to February 2021.
- 4 to 6 weeks to solicit feedback.
- To be completed by contractor with BC Parks assistance.

### *3. Public feedback report.*

- February 2021.
- 2 weeks to complete feedback report.
- To be completed by contractor.

### *4. Development of project plan.*

- Further work only completed if feedback suggests support for a new route.
- February to March 2021.
- 3 weeks to develop.
- To be completed by contractor with BC Parks assistance.

### *5. Public feedback on project plan.*

- Only completed if BC Parks feels it is warranted.
- April 2021.
- 3 weeks to solicit input and collate feedback.

### *6. Finalize project plan and distribute.*

- April 2021 to Fall 2021.
- To be completed either by BC Parks and Recreation Sites and Trails BC or a contractor.

### *7. Trail construction and facility installation.*

- Fall 2021 or summer 2022
- 1 month
- To be completed by a contractor.

## Anticipated Project Plan Content

The content of the final project plan will cover the following topics.

1. Project introduction and background
2. Summary of the consultation process
3. Proposed options
4. Summary of feedback from First Nations, government agencies and tenure holders on potential new access
5. Summary of public feedback on existing access and potential new access
6. Discussion of benefits and drawbacks of proposed options
7. BC Parks and Recreation Sites and Trails BC decisions on proposed options
8. Facility requirements, process needs and cost estimates for chosen option

## Anticipated Management Options and Considerations

A couple options are anticipated regarding whether we construct a new trail and where it is located, what we do with the existing trail network (Cronin and Higgins), and who completes the maintenance of the existing and/or new trail. See Figure 1.

If new trail construction is not supported, we will be forced to maintain the existing trail network of Cronin and Higgins. This is essentially the status quo option and BC Parks will need to invest the time, and potentially funding, to complete maintenance. Volunteers could also be sourced to help complete maintenance. This is not an unreasonable option as we have been able to complete brushing maintenance in the past, but it is the road construction problems (failing culverts, slope stability, poor drainage) that will either have to be accepted or significant funds applied to remedy the problems. Given the multiple slope stability issues along the Cronin Road/Trail, large financial investment in this trail system is not fiscally responsible.

If new trail construction is supported, there are multiple options, including where the new trail originates<sup>3</sup> and what is done with the existing trail network. Given management objectives for mountain goats in the park<sup>4</sup> and staff capacity to complete facility maintenance, BC Parks is not interested in seeing an increased recreational impact in the area from maintaining both a new trail system and the existing one. One option is to maintain the Cronin Road to the Higgins Trailhead, and maintain the Higgins Trail while abandoning the upper end of the Cronin Road. Another option would be to cease maintaining the Cronin Road/Trail and the Higgins Trail. Hiking access to Higgins Basin is still available via the Little Joe trail but horse and bike access would be precluded. For the new trail, there are currently two options. One is to start a new trail from near the Higgins Trailhead up to the Cronin Fire Lookout. The other is to start the new trail from the 312 Road on the Upper Fulton Forest Service Road. There are advantages and challenges with each option that will have to be evaluated.

If the decision is made to abandon the existing Higgins and Cronin Trail network, another option for consideration is BC Parks' ability to reopen the Victoria Basin Trail as a means of connecting the upper ends of Higgins and Cronin to maintain a loop trail that currently exists with these two trails. This would

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<sup>3</sup> See Figure 2.

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix 2.

need a substantial financial commitment (i.e. a capital project) and Impact Assessment completion, but the concept is supported in the Babine Mountains Park Master Plan.

A new trail could be managed as a BC Recreation Site or as a Park under Section 6 of the *Park Act*, as the Babine Mountains Park Trails currently is. BC Parks will lead the impact assessment process for the establishment of a new trail and the decommissioning of the existing one.

We also expect a future or concurrent desire from a user group to upgrade the existing fire lookout adjacent to the upper Cronin Mine into some form of overnight accommodation that would allow for a hut-to-hut trip between there and the Joe L'Orsa Cabin. One of the main challenges with this is the lack of water source adjacent to the fire lookout. We will address this potential desire for a cabin as part of the trail development consultations and plan.

Regardless of whether we continue to maintain (i.e. brush) the Cronin Road/Trail, there are environmental liabilities associated with this road that should be evaluated. An old bridge over Cronin Creek has already failed and collapsed into the creek (approximately 2005) causing a significant diversion in streamflows into the surrounding forest. A lack of adequate drainage on the road may also be contributing to slope stability issues, as there are four separate locations of mass wasting events along the road. Dealing with such issues may become more difficult if road maintenance is neglected for several years.

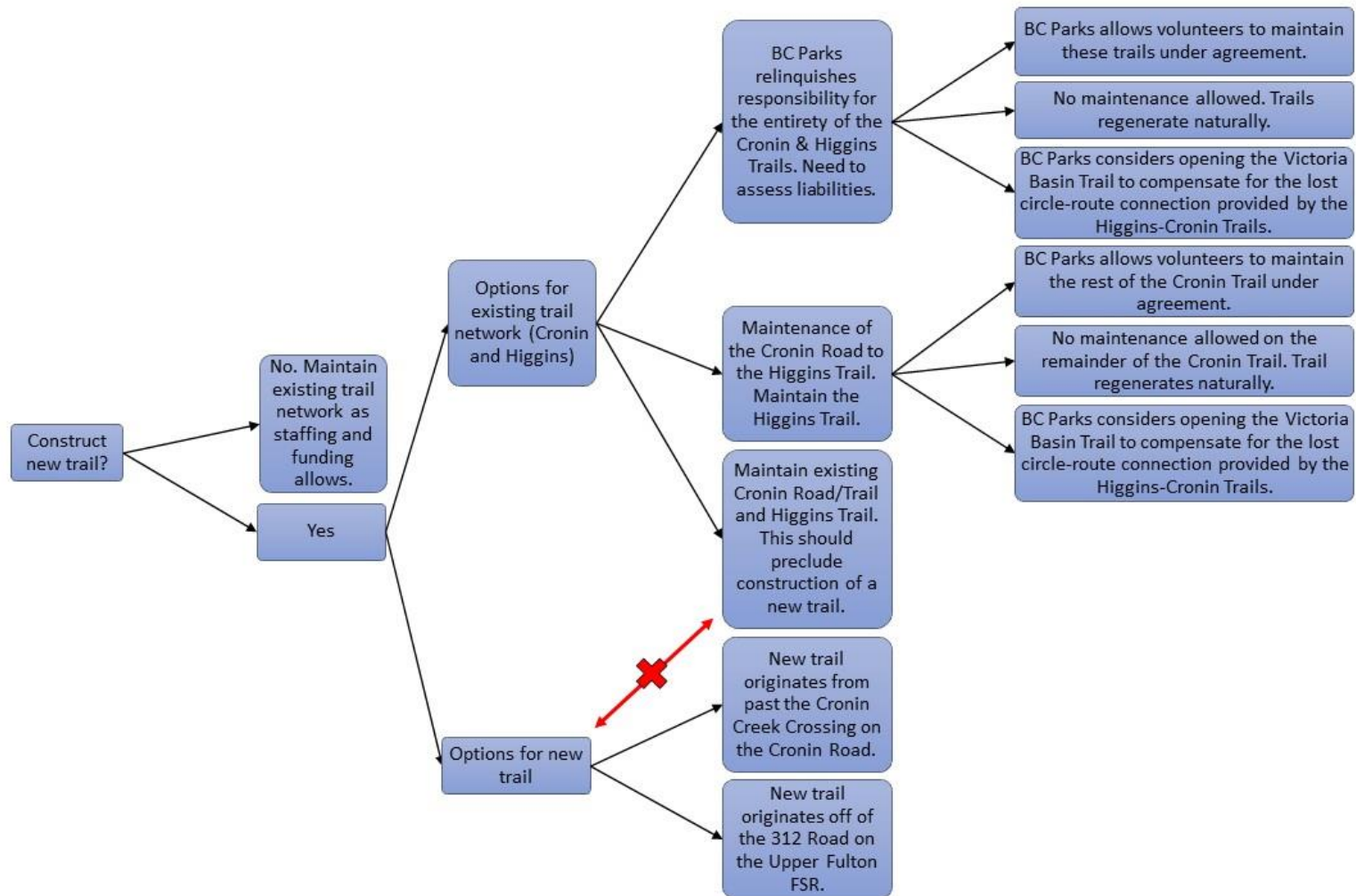


Figure 1. Summary of options and considerations for new trail development and maintenance of the existing Cronin Road/Trail and the Higgins Trail.

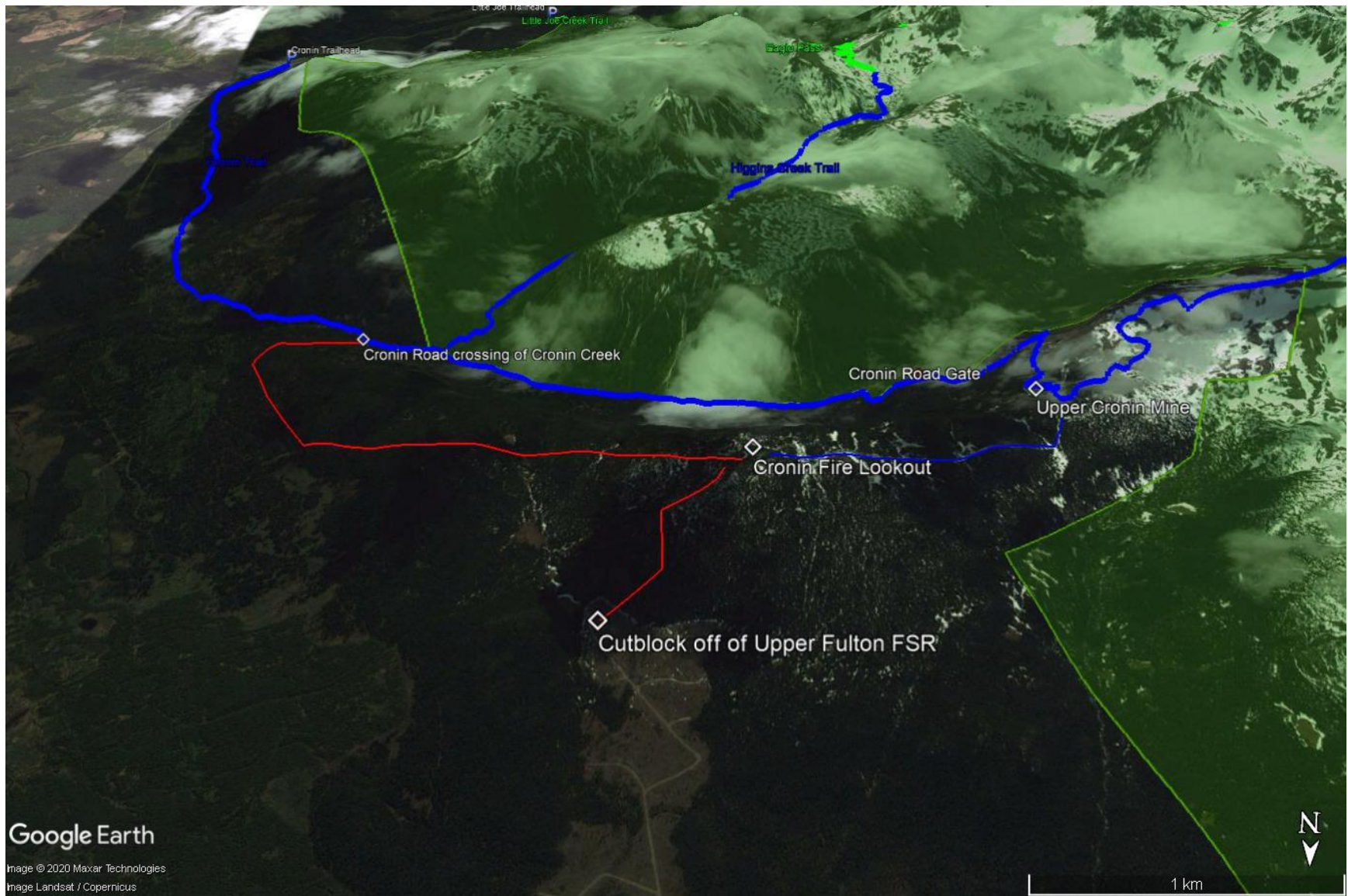


Figure 2. Two potential new route options (red lines) to connect to the Cronin Fire Lookout.



Appendix 1: 2010 Cronin Road/Trail  
Assessment

**Cronin Road**  
**Discussion of Condition and Recommendations**  
**October, 2010**

This document identifies some of the current issues with the condition of the Cronin Road/Trail.

**Current Condition**

The Cronin Road/Trail continues to deteriorate in multiple ways. Old wooden culverts continue to fail creating holes in the road surface. Cronin Creek continues to erode the road crossing making it more and more difficult every year. Instability along the road continues to manifest itself in slumps and washouts, severely degrading some sections of the trail. Poor or non-existent ditching and a lack of culverts allows water to run down the road/trail for long stretches, eroding the trail surface and making for awkward walking and biking. Over much of the trail, poor drainage results in numerous, large, deep puddles, some of which regularly damage vehicles. Finally, there is the ever-encroaching alder that requires extensive annual brushing to keep at a manageable level.

Start of Cronin Road to the Higgins Creek Trailhead:

- Many large puddles with many of them covering the entire width of the road for several metres. Some are quite deep.
- Multiple failing wooden culverts.
- One creek crossing about 3km from the trailhead where the original bridge has long-ago failed and all that remains are some adjacent logs.
- The original bridge over Cronin Creek failed in the early 2000's. When the bridge collapsed a significant amount of wood and gravel was deposited against it and the creek created an entire new channel through the forest. Vehicle access to the Higgins Trailhead involves driving upstream through the creek for approximately 20m.
- There was one significant land slump in the mid 2000's that blocked half of the road.

Higgins Creek Trailhead to the Lower Cronin Mine:

- A significant road slump adjacent to Cronin Creek has made the road impassable by motor vehicles. The entire slope (approximately 20m) above the slump is showing signs of instability.
- Many sections of the road are lacking drainage, so the road surface is perennially wet.
- Many sections of old wooden corduroy form the roadbed.

Lower Cronin Mine to Upper Cronin Mine:

- One 30m stretch of road where a creek flows right down it before veering off down slope.
- A 10m section of road has slumped creating a 2' step in the roadbed.
- A creek crossing the road has initiated a gully that starts in the road bed and extends a couple hundred metres downslope.

From the upper Cronin Mine to Hyland Pass, the road and trail are in decent condition, although rocky.

The following pages provide a visual summary of the state of the trail.

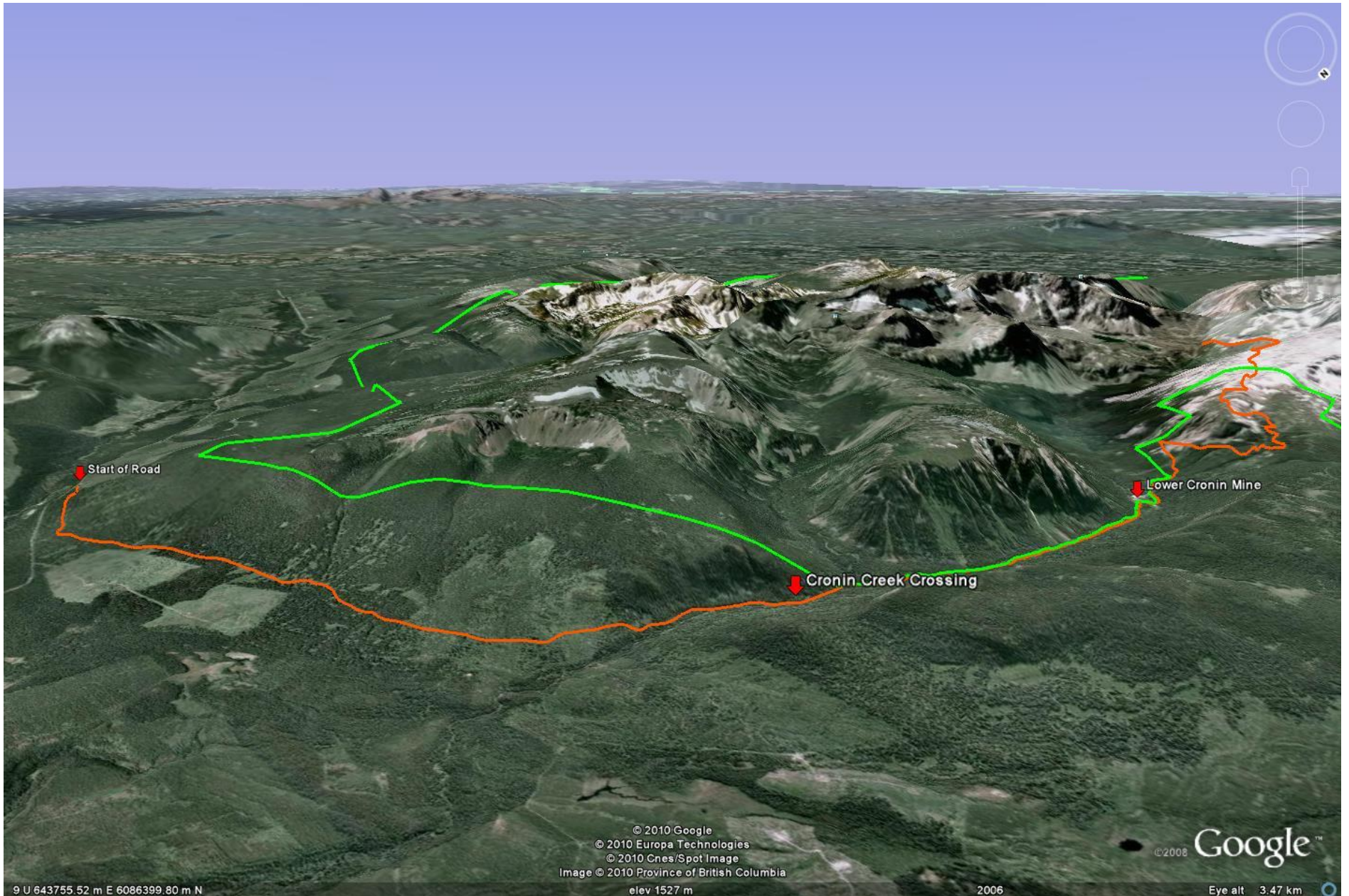


Figure 1. The entire Cronin Road/Trail (orange) and the park boundary (green).

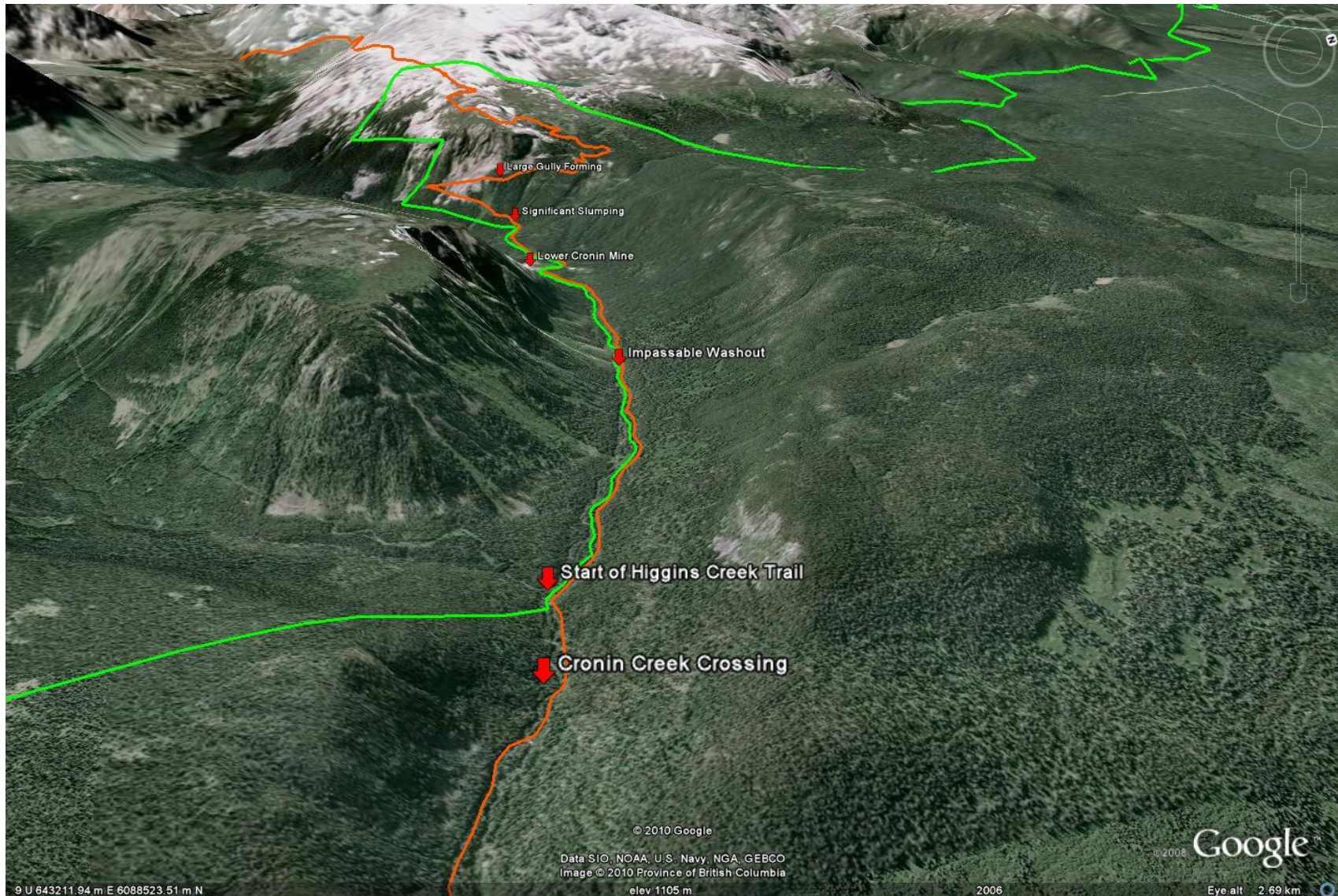


Figure 2. The upper portion of the Cronin Creek Trail/Road. The last two labels are “Significant Slumping” and “Large Gully Forming.”



Figures 3 & 4. Holes forming in the road where wooden culverts are collapsing, and lack of cross ditching allowing creeks to flow down the road. Both taken above the lower mine site.



Figures 5 & 6. Many standing puddles of water along the entire stretch of road from the trailhead to the lower mine site, and a slope above the road slumping down onto the road about 1km before Cronin Creek (2006).



Figures 7 & 8. More examples of poor creek crossings. Figure 7 is about 500m before Cronin Creek. Figure 8 is the main crossing of Cronin Creek. Here, the original bridge collapsed and blocked the main flow, causing an entire new channel to form, making the crossing much more difficult and, for most of the year, dangerous.



Figures 9 & 10. Failing wooden culverts between the trailhead and the Cronin Creek Crossing.



Figures 11 & 12. Failed bridge at a creek crossing about 3km from the trailhead. Figure 12 shows the cause of the "Large Gully Forming" as indicated in Figure 2. A 300m long gully has formed and grows annually as the water erodes it, taking the road surface with it.



Figures 13 & 14. Two pictures of a major slump above the lower mine site.

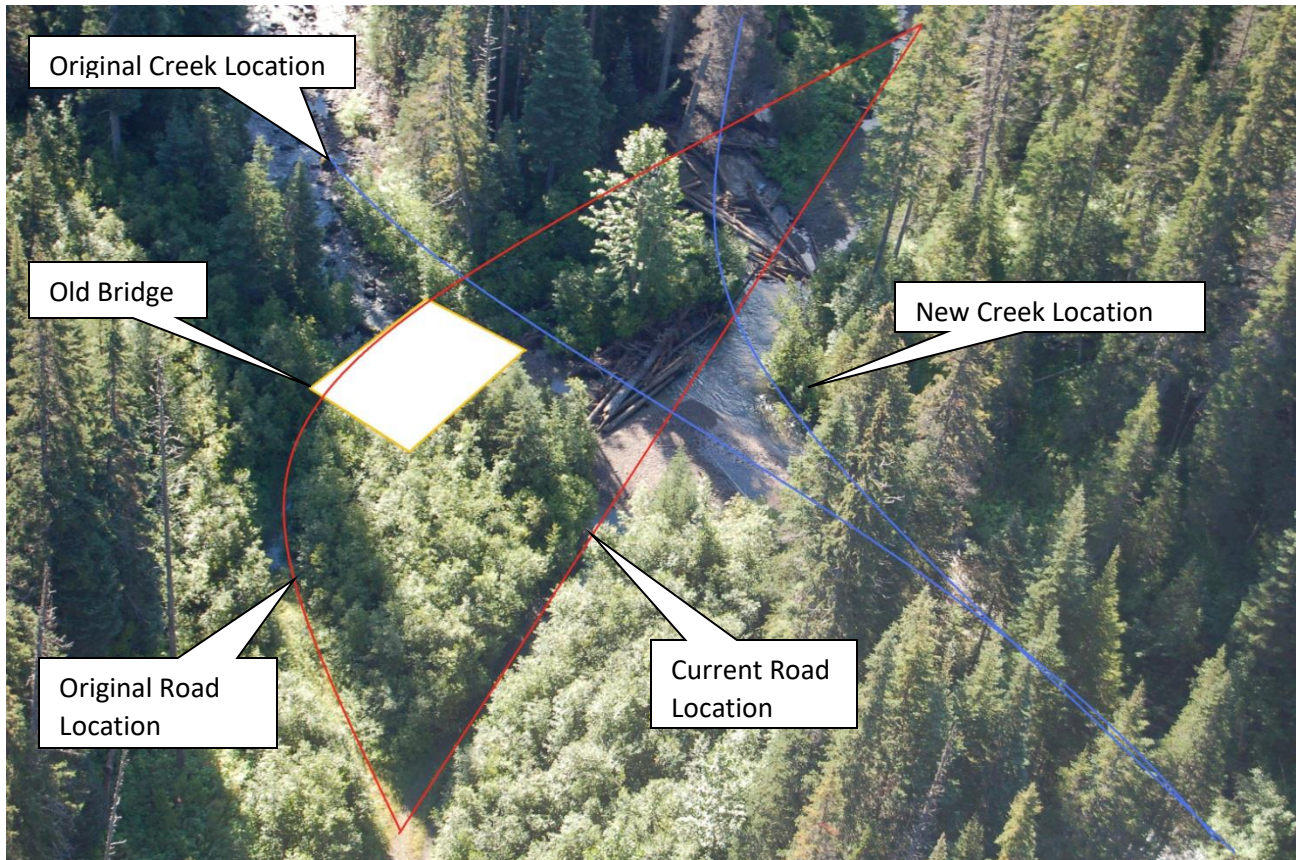


Figures 15 & 16. This is the site of the “Impassable Washout” as indicated in Figure 2. A large avalanche in 2007 caused the creek to change course, severely eroding the bank below the road to the point that there is no longer a road surface, just a slope directly down to the creek. Figure 16 was taken in 2008, there is now a 10m stretch of road that is just a slope.



Figure 17. The entire slope above the “Impassable Washout” is also slumping.





Figures 18 & 19. An aerial view of the Cronin Creek crossing.

# Appendix 2: Relevant Higher-Level Management Direction

## Relevant Babine Mountains Recreation Area Master Plan Direction

### **Wildlife**

#### **Actions:**

\*Protect wildlife populations and habitats by minimizing impacts from Recreation Area developments, mineral exploration and recreational use, while allowing for wildlife viewing opportunities.

### **Outdoor Recreation Opportunities**

#### **Backcountry Hiking**

The Recreation Area's current trail system allows for a diversity of hiking experiences ranging from short day trips to weekend overnight trips to extended wilderness backpacking trips of several days. Its many interconnected trails provide extra variety by allowing interesting loops and circuits to be completed without having to hike along the same trail twice.

#### **Objective:**

To provide a range of hiking and backpacking opportunities that give access to the Recreation Area's scenic features, and that have minimal impact on the environment.

#### **Actions:**

\* Maintain Silver King, Cronin Creek, Lyon Creek, McCabe, Harvey Mountain, Higgins Creek, Little Joe and Reiserer Creek access trails into the Recreation Area in a cleared, passable condition so that all visitors are assured of a high level of safety, convenience and satisfaction with their hiking experience in the Recreation Area. Locate and re-open the historic Victoria Basin trail to complete a loop between the Cronin Creek and Higgins Creek trails. Ensure accurate informational signs are established and maintained at all major trailheads.

#### **Horse Use**

#### **Objective:**

To provide for both private and commercial horseback riding opportunities that have a minimal impact on the environment and other recreational users.

#### **Actions:**

\* Designate as "open" for all horse use those better-constructed trails and old roads that are less susceptible to environmental damage through increased use. These trails are: Silver King, Cronin Creek, Higgins Creek, Harvey Mountain Road, and the Astlais Mountain (Big Onion) Road.

## **Winter Recreation**

Limited access to two adjacent areas will be allowed only under Letter of Authority from the District Manager.

### **Objective:**

To allow for a variety of winter recreation opportunities to occur in the Recreation Area with minimal conflict among the various user groups. The emphasis for use will focus on low-impact, non-motorized recreation opportunities, outside of the designated snowmobile area.

### **Actions:**

- Undertake monitoring of wildlife and snowmobile interactions to determine whether there is any disruption of wildlife, primarily mountain goats. Any indication of disruption will result in review and possible adjustment of snowmobiling boundaries.
- Allow continued snowmobiling centred on the existing designated area of Ganokwa Basin (see Figure 4). Minor boundary amendments will be made in the area of Copper Lakes and Harvey Mountain. Limited access to specified areas (Four Lakes and Cronin) will be allowed only by Letter of Authority issued by the District Manager of BC Parks. Snowmobile use will be curtailed if non-compliance with boundaries or permits is observed.

## **Mountain Biking**

### **Objective:**

To provide opportunities for mountain biking that reduces the possibility of conflicts with other users and that does not negatively impact on the environment.

### **Actions:**

- Designate the following trails as "open" for use by mountain bikes: Silver King -Cronin Creek trails, Harvey Mountain road, Big Onion road, Higgins Creek road. Mountain bike use is not allowed in open alpine areas or meadows. This will allow access to higher elevations for foot travel while minimizing impacts on other trails, reducing potential conflicts with hikers and horses, and eliminating damage to sensitive natural areas such as alpine meadows.

## **Resource Appreciation**

### **Actions:**

- Manage mountain goats as the primary viewing species within the Recreation Area, develop appropriate viewing opportunities, and inform the public of the need to limit disturbance to the wildlife.

## Relevant Bulkley LRMP Direction

### **Planning Unit 5: Babine Mountains**

Sub-unit 5-1: Babine Mountains Recreation Area (P)

**Objective:** To protect the old growth, representative ecosystems, and other resources in this area as part of the Protected Areas system. To protect the alpine flora and fauna from unrestricted motor vehicle use, while allowing for backcountry recreation opportunities to continue. To ensure that natural processes will predominate, and the essential qualities of wilderness experience are protected. (NOTE: This comes directly from the Babine Recreation Area Master Plan)

#### ***Management Category Specific Direction***

**Future Planning Processes**  Management for the area will follow the Babine Recreation Area Master Plan.

Sub-Unit 5-3: Old Cronin Mine Area (SM1)

**Objective:** To maintain the recreational quality of this alpine area while accommodating mineral exploration and mine development.

#### ***Management Category Specific Direction***

##### **Access**

- Assure recreational users safe access to the alpine area.
- Hiking trail access to Babine Mountains will be maintained by protecting trails or partially re-routing them if necessary.
- No vehicular access will be permitted, with the exception of controlled access for mining vehicles.

**Outdoor Recreation**  Maintain recreational quality of alpine area.

Sub-unit 5-4: Cronin Alpine Area (SM1)

**Objective:** To accommodate recreation as well as mineral exploration and mine development.

#### ***Management Category Specific Direction***

##### **Access**

- Hiking trail access to Babine Mountains will be maintained by protecting trails or partially re-routing them if necessary.
- Maximize use of existing roads and discourage new road construction.
- Allow surface access for mineral exploration/development.
- Reclaim new roads immediately when no longer needed.

##### **Outdoor Recreation and Tourism**

- Maintain recreational quality of the alpine area.