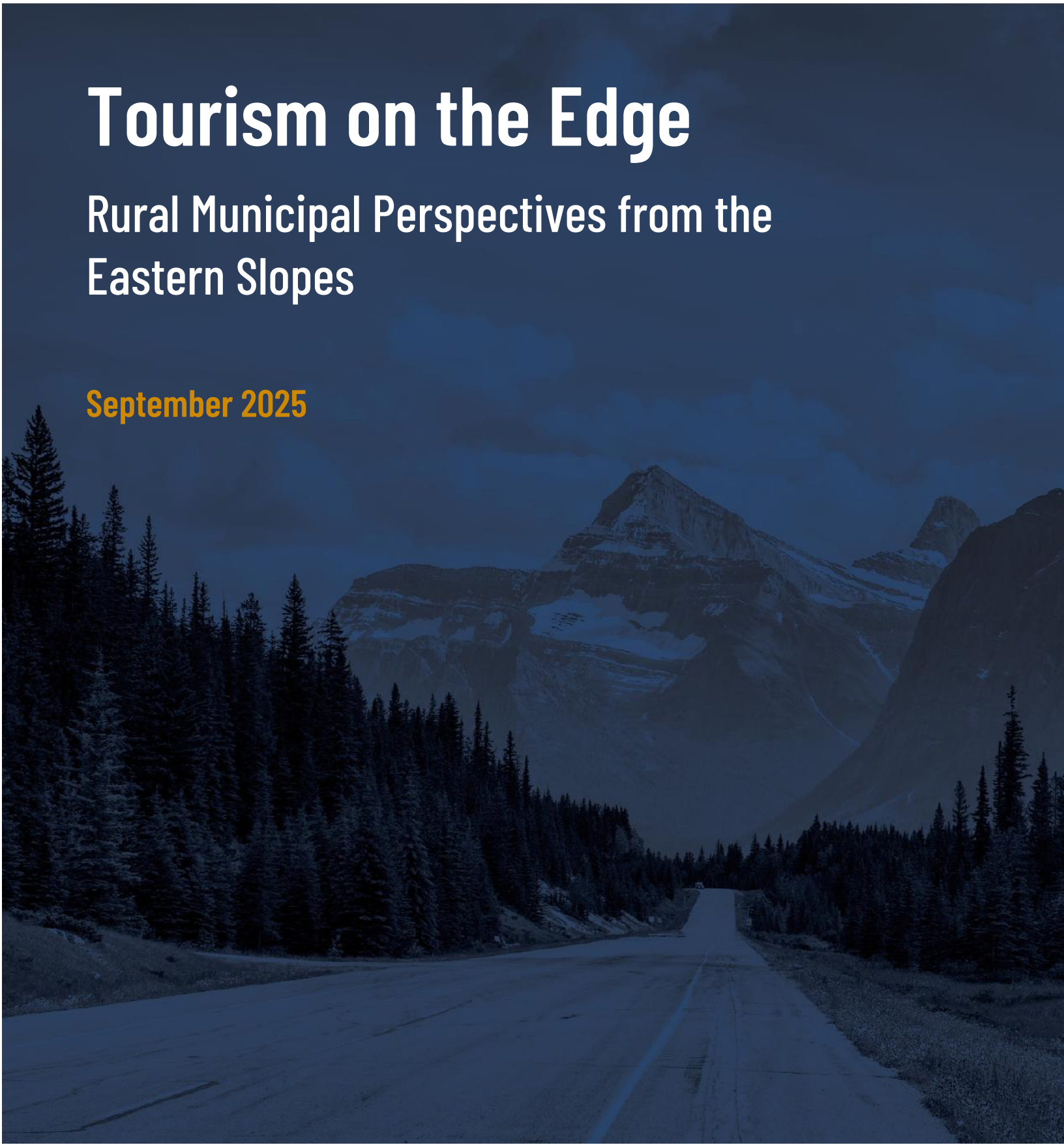


Tourism on the Edge

Rural Municipal Perspectives from the
Eastern Slopes

September 2025



Introduction

About RMA

The Rural Municipalities of Alberta (RMA) advocates on behalf of Alberta's rural municipalities. RMA members include sixty-three municipal districts and counties, five specialized municipalities, and the Special Areas Board. Collectively, RMA members provide municipal governance to approximately 85% of Alberta's land mass, including municipalities bordering the Eastern Slopes of the Rocky Mountains. Although every corner of the province offers beautiful scenery, these municipalities are the gateway and home to some of the most recognized areas of the country. Municipalities on the Eastern Slopes face unique challenges and opportunities regarding tourism in their communities.

Rural municipalities located on the Eastern Slopes provide significant services to provincial parks without any compensation for doing so. This has made it difficult to maintain essential services for residents, as many resources go into providing emergency services to provincial parks, adapting and enhancing infrastructure to support growing tourism in the area, and reacting to environmental and land use challenges.

In this report, RMA has identified many of the challenges faced by municipalities on the Eastern Slopes and has provided recommendations for how these challenges could be mitigated moving forward.

Land in the Eastern Slopes

There are different types of land and parks within the Eastern Slopes, which all serve different purposes and follow different regulations.

A [Public Land Use Zone](#) is an area of land to which provincial legislative controls are applied to achieve particular land management objectives identified in a guiding land and resource plan. They can be used to protect areas containing sensitive resources such as wildlife and their habitats, vegetation, soils and watersheds as well as to separate or manage conflicting recreational activities.

There are also three main types of parks categorized within Alberta's [Provincial Parks Act](#):

- ◆ Provincial Parks, which conserve provincially or globally significant natural and cultural heritage, while supporting recreation, education and tourism experiences.
- ◆ Provincial Recreation Areas, which support recreation and tourism, often near lakes, rivers, reservoirs, or adjacent crown land.
- ◆ Wildland Provincial Parks, which conserve large, remote wilderness and support backcountry recreation.



Public Lands Camping Pass

Demands for the use of public land have grown rapidly in recent years, which has caused concerns regarding the conservation and servicing of these areas. As of June 1, 2021, the Government of Alberta requires individuals to purchase a [Public Lands Camping Pass](#) (PLCP) for random camping on public land along the Eastern Slopes of the Rocky Mountains. Random camping refers to no-service camping outside of established campgrounds. Random camping occurs on a variety of designations of public land, including land both inside and outside of provincial parks and recreation areas. PLCP fees are meant to be reinvested to improve recreation experiences and help conserve and protect Alberta's beautiful landscapes so that they can be enjoyed today and for generations to come.

All campers, backpackers, and horse packers 18 years and older are required to buy a pass, which costs:

- ◆ \$20 per person for a three-day pass
- ◆ \$30 per person for an annual pass

According to the Government of Alberta, the PLCP has generated over \$3.6 million, which has supported:

- ◆ Upgrades to public land trails and recreation infrastructure
- ◆ Improved experiences for public land users
- ◆ Improved access to information and education of public land users
- ◆ Enhanced enforcement efforts and promoting public safety through regular informed patrols
- ◆ Conservation initiatives and sustainable use of public land

However, none of this funding has been shared with the municipalities that fund essential infrastructure, services, and support to neighbouring public land.

RMA Resolution

In Fall 2022, RMA members passed [Resolution 19-22F](#): Portion of Funding from Public Lands Camping Pass Directed to Municipalities, which calls for:

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Rural Municipalities of Alberta (RMA) requests that the Government of Alberta provide a portion of the revenue generated from the Public Lands Camping Pass to municipalities with adjacent public lands for the purpose of offsetting additional costs of municipal fire services, peace officers and solid waste services, along with municipal facilities and washrooms associated with recreational use of public lands;

FURTHER BE IT RESOLVED that the RMA requests the Government of Alberta establish a program, funded by a portion of the Public Lands Camping Pass funds, for municipalities to be a coordinating agency for local stewardship and community groups impacted by public lands use.

This resolution indicates that rural municipalities are struggling to provide support for neighboring parks and other public lands without adequate compensation. Providing services such as emergency response, waste management, and other forms of infrastructure is a financial burden on municipalities that must be accounted for. There is a call for greater provincial responsibility in managing public lands and supporting local governments that are being asked to deal with the pressures of increasing tourism.

Eastern Slopes Task Force

In response to Resolution 19-22F and concerns heard from rural municipalities on the Eastern Slopes, RMA created a member committee to better understand park-related pressures and develop recommendations for mitigation. The Eastern Slopes Task Force (ESTF) was chaired by RMA President Kara Westerlund, and was comprised of representatives from the following RMA member municipalities, chosen based on their proximity to public lands on the Eastern Slopes:

- ◆ Clearwater County
- ◆ Mountain View County
- ◆ Municipal District of Bighorn
- ◆ Municipal District of Willow Creek
- ◆ Municipal District of Pincher Creek
- ◆ Municipal District of Ranchland
- ◆ Municipality of Crowsnest Pass
- ◆ Yellowhead County

The ESTF met in Spring 2025 to discuss issues faced in their communities resulting from the rise of tourism in the area and the effects this is having on their municipalities. The offsetting of costs associated with municipal fire services, peace officers, solid waste services, and municipal facilities/washrooms associated with the recreational use of public lands was the main focus of these conversations.

This report was created on behalf of the ESTF to promote equity for municipalities on the Eastern Slopes. The themes presented reflect the overall experiences of rural municipalities on the Eastern Slopes. However, the data, evidence, and stories are reflective of the municipality from which they were received and may not reflect the unique experiences of all municipalities involved in the ESTF.

Under Pressure

Municipalities that border or contain public lands on the Eastern Slopes are under pressure. Visitors to these public lands are relying on neighbouring municipal emergency services, infrastructure, and resources that enhance their experience in these areas.

Providing these services comes at a substantial cost to municipalities. As noted by members of the ESTF, it would be nearly impossible to differentiate the services provided to public lands or as a result of tourists from core service delivery benefiting property owners. Tourists and locals alike benefit from public land, but they also both benefit from municipal services. Although this overlap makes it hard to attribute costs specifically to public land use, it is clear that busier seasons for parks equate to an increased need for municipal services.

The COVID-19 pandemic increased tourism on Alberta's public lands. A corresponding increase in the number of emergency services calls has also been observed since 2020, and does not show signs of declining. Therefore, as more people are using Alberta's public lands for recreation in 2025 and 2020, there are increasing demands for municipal emergency services to respond to incidents on public lands.

The following issues explain the challenges faced by municipalities and why it is essential for the Government of Alberta to properly support rural municipalities that are crucial to the safe and enjoyable use of public lands in the Eastern Slopes.

Emergency Services Challenges

The Government of Alberta is not required to provide emergency services to public lands. Municipalities are left to dispatch services into these parks on request without compensation for these services.

Municipal emergency services are increasingly strained as outdoor recreation and tourism surge across adjacent public lands. First responders are frequently called to manage a wide range of incidents, including search and rescue operations, motor vehicle collisions, wildfires, and complex policing needs. The rise in illegal activities, such as theft, unauthorized shooting, and other unregulated activities, further exacerbate safety risks and demands on local resources.

As noted by a senior administrator in Clearwater County, it would be nearly impossible to extract data specific to PLCP users. First responders simply respond to calls that they are dispatched to, regardless of whether the call came from a PLCP user. Clearwater County sees an estimated 20,000 to 50,000 visitors on any given weekend of the spring, summer, and leading into autumn. Increased visitors lead to increased emergency service needs, often provided by County resources. Further, emergency services personnel are often dispatched beyond their jurisdictional boundaries, leading to inefficiencies and resource depletion within the municipality that they are assigned to serve. With recruitment and retention of first responders already being a prominent issue in rural Alberta, municipalities are struggling to maintain adequate emergency coverage, leaving both visitors and residents vulnerable during critical incidents.

Firearm Use in the Ghost Public Land Use Zone

The Ghost Public Land Use Zone (PLUZ), located west of Cochrane and east of Banff National Park, is a popular recreational area used for activities such as camping, hiking, fishing, and target shooting. However, recent concerns have emerged regarding unsafe firearm practices. Many residents in the Municipal District of Bighorn have voiced concerns about community safety in light of the shooting occurring in the Ghost PLUZ:

- ◆ “I’m feeling very frustrated with all the shooting. I don’t feel safe on my property anymore. I flinch every time I hear a shot because I’m expecting it to land on my property and there’s hundreds, if not thousands, of shots going off every weekend.”
- ◆ “There needs to be a stop put to the gun usage on Township Road 265A. It is completely unacceptable and unsafe. There is a business open on this road for public use and there are customers leaving because it is unsafe. The employees, guests, and owners all feel unsafe.”
- ◆ “We have received numerous complaints from our campers and staff about stray bullets entering our property. As a result, we have experienced cancellations, and our reputation as a safe and family-friendly campground is being jeopardized.”
- ◆ “Our business relies on providing a safe and enjoyable experience for our visitors, and this current situation is untenable. We fear that if this issue is not addressed promptly, we will continue to lose business, which will have long-term financial repercussions or even worse, someone will be seriously hurt or killed.”
- ◆ “Not only was the sound of constant shooting, at all hours of the day and night, disturbing to wildlife and residents, it was a real threat...someone was going to be hurt or shot! Families wanting to camp or hike, fish, enjoy the area have been basically ‘chased out’ and no longer felt safe.”

The Ghost PLUZ is a valuable recreational and agricultural area that requires better management to address safety and tourism concerns. Additional work is needed by the Government of Alberta to ensure that firearms laws are being followed. This should be accompanied by the exploration of other solutions to ensure that all public lands remain accessible to various users.

Infrastructure Challenges

Municipalities are grappling with increased infrastructure pressures as recreational use of adjacent public lands continues to grow. Many rural roads, originally constructed to support resource extraction, are now heavily used by tourists, resulting in accelerated wear and escalating maintenance costs. The absence of basic amenities in public lands, such as garbage bins, public bathrooms, and proper waste disposal facilities, has led to significant environmental degradation, public health concerns, and unsustainable use of municipal infrastructure. Limited campground availability further exacerbates the issue, contributing to overcrowding and the proliferation of unmanaged camping in sensitive areas. With these growing demands, municipalities often lack the financial and logistical support needed to upgrade and maintain essential infrastructure, leaving them struggling to keep pace with the needs of both residents and visitors.

Environmental and Land Use Challenges

Municipalities are increasingly on the front lines of managing the environmental consequences of unregulated outdoor activities on adjacent public lands. Practices such as random camping, off-highway vehicle use, and informal target shooting often occur without oversight, leading to soil erosion, habitat disruption, litter accumulation, and heightened wildfire risk. These impacts not only degrade the natural landscape, but also strain local governments tasked with mitigation and cleanup. Despite the province benefiting financially from the PLCP,

municipalities receive no reinvestment to support environmental stewardship. This imbalance places a disproportionate burden on local governments, which are often left to manage the fallout with limited resources and authority. Addressing these challenges requires stronger intergovernmental coordination, clear jurisdictional responsibilities, and sustainable funding mechanisms to ensure that public lands remain safe, accessible, and ecologically resilient for future generations.

Recommendations

The recommendations below are a combination of the requests from Resolution 19-22F: Portion of Funding from Public Lands Camping Pass Directed to Municipalities and discussions by the ESTF. These recommendations support the need for further collaboration between the Government of Alberta and the communities on the Eastern Slopes in a variety of different contexts.

- ▶ ***Recommendation 1: A portion of revenue generated from the Public Lands Camping Pass must be provided to municipalities with adjacent public lands for the purpose of offsetting additional costs of municipal services associated with recreational use of public lands***

Allocating a portion of revenue from the PLCP to municipalities with adjacent public lands is a necessary and equitable measure to address the growing costs associated with recreational use. Municipalities are often the first to respond to the impacts of increased visitation, providing emergency services, maintaining infrastructure, managing environmental degradation, and ensuring public safety. These responsibilities come with significant financial burdens, yet municipalities currently receive no direct support from the revenue generated by provincial land use programs. This disconnect undermines the sustainability of local services and places undue strain on municipal budgets.

By reinvesting a portion of PLCP revenues into the communities that bear the operational impacts, the province can foster a more balanced and collaborative approach to land management. This funding would help offset costs related to road maintenance, waste management, law enforcement, and emergency response, ultimately ensuring that public lands remain safe, accessible, and well-managed for all users.

This approach would also demonstrate a commitment to intergovernmental cooperation and recognize the essential role municipalities play in supporting provincial tourism and recreation goals. RMA welcomes the opportunity to help in the development of a formula to determine an equitable municipal share of PLCP revenue.

- ▶ ***Recommendation 2: The Public Lands Camping Pass funds must go towards the creation of a program for municipalities to be a coordinating agency for local stewardship and community groups impacted by public lands use***

Municipalities are uniquely positioned to understand the local context, build relationships with community stakeholders, and respond quickly to emerging issues on adjacent public lands. However, without a formal structure or dedicated resources, their ability to support and mobilize stewardship efforts is limited. A funded coordination program would empower municipalities to serve as a central hub, facilitating collaboration among volunteer groups, Indigenous communities, recreational users, and conservation organizations. This would enhance the effectiveness of education, enforcement, and restoration initiatives, while also promoting shared responsibility for land stewardship.

This program would also help bridge the gap between provincial land management policies, ensuring that local voices are integrated into decision-making. By investing in municipal capacity to lead stewardship efforts, the province can foster healthier ecosystems, safer recreation experiences, and stronger community engagement while maximizing the impact of PLCP revenues.

► ***Recommendation 3: A clear line of communication and collaboration must be established between the Government of Alberta and municipalities on the Eastern Slopes to coordinate services.***

Establishing a clear line of communication and collaboration between the Government of Alberta and municipalities along the Eastern Slopes is essential for effective service coordination and land management. These municipalities are directly impacted by the growing recreational use of adjacent public lands, yet they often operate without consistent access to provincial planning, enforcement strategies, or funding mechanisms. This disconnect leads to fragmented responses to emergencies, infrastructure strain, and environmental degradation. A formalized communication framework would enable timely information sharing, joint planning, and coordinated service delivery, ensuring that both provincial and municipal efforts are aligned and mutually reinforcing. It would also empower municipalities to contribute local knowledge and community perspectives to provincial decision-making, resulting in more responsive and sustainable land use policies. In a region as ecologically sensitive and heavily visited as the Eastern Slopes, intergovernmental collaboration is not just beneficial, it is critical to protecting public safety, environmental integrity, and long-term recreational access.

► ***Recommendation 4: The Plan for Parks must include a strategy for monitoring and addressing the effects of tourism on neighbouring municipalities***

RMA recognizes that Alberta Forestry and Parks is undergoing a review of the provincial Plan for Parks. It is essential that the Plan for Parks recognizes that municipalities in rural Alberta provide many of the amenities that make public enjoyment of parks possible. Municipalities are often the first responders to emergencies, the providers of critical infrastructure, and the stewards of surrounding lands. The plan should include a dedicated section that outlines how municipal impacts will be assessed and addressed in all future park planning and management decisions. This includes recognizing the cumulative effects of increased visitation, unmanaged recreation, and tourism on local services and infrastructure. A municipal lens must be applied to the Plan for Parks to ensure the collective sustainability of parks and municipalities, so that everyone can enjoy these spaces for years to come.

Conclusion

The current system for recreational use of public lands cannot sustain itself. The prosperity of the Eastern Slopes and tourism in the province relies on the Government of Alberta to act urgently on the recommendations in this report. It is essential that the Government of Alberta acknowledges the importance of adequate funding, proactive planning, sustainable development, and cooperative governance to ensure the long-term viability of public lands and the municipalities that support them.