

Presentation to Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services

October 3, 2016

Presented by Steven Jones on behalf of the FMCBC

Hello honourable members of the committee. Thank you for taking the time to hear my presentation today.

My name is Steven Jones and I am here representing the Federation of Mountain Clubs of BC. We have over 5000 members from 35 clubs across the province. Our membership is comprised of a diverse group of non-motorized backcountry recreationalists. As an organization, we believe that the enjoyment of these pursuits in an unspoiled environment is a vital component to the quality of life for British Columbians.

BC Parks are a permanent institution and they must be managed as such. Short term financial savings generated by underfunding of the park system today will result in much greater costs to the taxpayers over the medium to long term.

BC Parks deliver great economic value to our province. BC Government statistics show that tourism contributed \$7.1 billion in GDP in 2014. BC Parks research shows that *"every one dollar invested in the protected areas system generates \$8.42 in visitor spending on food, entertainment, transportation and other goods and services."*

It is our position that we will dig ourselves into a hole at the current levels of funding in six unique ways and that we will end up paying a much larger price in the medium to long term to get out of that hole.

First, we are turning away visitors.

Destination BC receives significant government funding to promote BC to BC residents and the rest of the world. They are doing a great job but we are now hitting a capacity wall. When local and foreign visitors try to plan a trip in BC, they are finding that there is no room in the campsites or even in the parking lots. If tourists can't visit the park system as a part of their trip, they are more likely to visit Alberta or Washington instead. In July of 2016, the Honourable Mary Polak stated that *"There are simply too many people chasing too few campsites. There are fewer than 6,000 reservable campsites in B.C."* Once we lose our reputation as a place that is welcoming to tourists, we will have to spend much more money in the future to regain the positive momentum.

Second, there is deferred maintenance.

At current funding levels, large amounts of maintenance in BC Parks is being deferred. Facilities and trails that could be fixed with small repairs today will soon be in need of comprehensive rebuilding efforts at a much greater cost. The Federation of Mountain Clubs of BC has been collecting a library of pictures from our membership of examples of maintenance issues across the province that are turning into major repair and rehabilitation projects.

Third, there is environmental damage.

Current levels of funding are not adequate for ensuring that the environmental values of the park system are protected. As visitor numbers increase, new facilities such as outhouses and alpine meadow boardwalks must be added. As parks reach capacity, thought must also be given to providing provincial park status and/or funding to environmentally sensitive areas that are receiving the overflow crowds

that can't get into existing provincial parks. Semaphore Lakes and Watersprite Lake are prime examples of this. Increased ranger presence is also required to monitor the environment, reduce human-wildlife interactions and enforce rules. All forms of environmental damage are more affordable to prevent than to repair.

Fourth, volunteers are being discouraged.

Volunteer work in a provincial park must occur with approval and coordination with BC Parks staff and a new volunteer strategy was introduced in recent years. BC Parks staff are currently stretched so thin that volunteer groups are having to postpone or cancel their projects. Obviously there is massive leverage in utilizing volunteers and so it's important to not let this initiative lose momentum.

Fifth, there are transferred costs that are not being considered.

Some of the costs that are being "saved" by underfunding of BC Parks are actually just being absorbed by other departments in a very inefficient and unsustainable way. Missing and broken signage and a lack of trail maintenance are the cause of a number of Search and Rescue operations each year. Although SAR is performed by volunteers, there are many expensive costs that are covered by the provincial government including helicopter time and the following hospital stays.

Sixth, there is the opportunity cost of delays to the planning process.

Each provincial park is operated according to a management plan document. If that document does not exist or is out-of-date, the park is essentially put on hold. Due to extreme staffing constraints, there were over 300 protected areas that did not have a valid management plan as of 2015. As an example, Pinecone Burke was founded over 20 years ago and it does not yet have a management plan. The result is that it is a vastly underutilized park that is not delivering economic benefits to the province.

There is no debate: Increased visitation to the BC Parks system is a good thing for the BC economy. Funding to BC Parks must increase with increased visitor numbers or the economic benefits that we are experiencing will be short lived and future expenses will be much larger than they need to be.

This is not news to this committee. The recommendation of this committee last year was to: *"Increase funding for BC Parks and protected areas management, maintenance and provide more park rangers."*

The 2015 budget did not address that request. The apportionment remained essentially identical. We urge the committee to make the same recommendation this year with much stronger wording and to explicitly comment on some of the evolving challenges that BC Parks has faced in the previous 12 months.

Thank you for your time.