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## Forest Practices Board calls for stronger protections for cultural heritage sites

FORT ST. JOHN – The Forest Practices Board has released its findings following a complaint from the Halfway River First Nation regarding grazing impacts on culturally significant sites and concerns about government enforcement to protect the Nation’s drinking water.

In 2023, the Nation raised concerns about livestock damaging mineral licks and displacing wildlife within its territory in the Halfway River watershed. The board investigated two range agreement holders and the Ministry of Forests to assess compliance with legal requirements.

Investigators examined records from 2013 to 2023 and found that government did not follow the law when it approved two range use plans. The agreement holders did meet requirements to protect riparian areas, but there were no enforceable requirements for safeguarding cultural heritage sites, such as mineral licks.

“The Halfway River First Nation considers these identified sites culturally significant and it was evident that livestock use had been negatively impacting them,” said Keith Atkinson, chair, Forest Practices Board. “However, government felt it was unable to compel range agreement holders to protect these sites. To help protect natural habitat and cultural heritage resources, the Province could take action to make the protections outlined in range use plans enforceable.”

Similar recommendations were made in a 2009 board report on range planning and practices.

“Government should also consider how the review and approval of range use plans include engagement with First Nations, and require that plans identify and outline how cultural heritage resources will be protected,” Atkinson said. “This will help range planning and practices on public land be more consistent with the provincial Declaration Act Action Plan.”

The board also found problems with how government investigated the Nation’s complaint about drinking water.

“Protecting source drinking water is a critical component of ensuring public safety – one of the most important roles of government. We encourage the Natural Resource Officer Service to review its investigation into livestock congregating in the Halfway River and identify where improvements can be made,” Atkinson said.

After the investigation, the ministry and the Halfway River First Nation reached an agreement to address the Nation’s concerns. As part of this agreement, the ministry set out expectations for range agreement holders to protect and monitor cultural and ecological values.

The ministry has also increased monitoring of priority range agreement areas and has launched a pilot project to co-develop a range use plan in collaboration with the Nation. This pilot project will serve as a model for future collaborative range-planning across Treaty 8 Territory.

The Halfway River First Nation is one of 39 First Nations that are signatories to the Treaty 8 Agreement. Members of these First Nations have the right to use the entire Treaty 8 area for hunting, fishing and cultural activities.

### **Learn more:**

To read the full Halfway River report, visit: <https://www.bcfpb.ca/release-publications/releases/>

To read the board’s 2009 report on range planning and practices, visit: <https://www.bcfpb.ca/release-publications/releases/range-planning-under-the-forest-and-range-practices-act/>

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