



February 15, 2021

**Attn:** YESAB Dawson Designated Office

**Re:** Project Number: 2020-0195 Project Title: Quartz Exploration – Coal Creek (Monster)

To Whom It May Concern:

The Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) is Canada's only nationwide environmental charity dedicated solely to the protection of our public land and water and to ensuring our parks are managed to protect the nature within them. Based in Whitehorse, CPAWS Yukon advocates for the territory's most valuable and priceless resource: our abundant wilderness. We work with First Nations and all levels of government, local organizations, businesses and citizens to ensure the natural wealth we enjoy today is available for our children tomorrow. We represent the views of many Yukoners who want the Yukon to be an example for the world of how people can live in balance with the natural resources we depend upon. CPAWS Yukon has the following comments to make on the referenced project:

CPAWS Yukon has some concerns relating to the proposed Coal Creek Quartz Exploration Project. Given that the project is situated in an undeveloped wilderness area within the Dawson Regional Land Use Planning region, we feel the proponent must make further considerations and provide additional information before the project advances. As proposed, this 10-year exploration project may result in:

- Undermining the Dawson Regional Land Use Plan;
- Increasing access into an intact wilderness area, and;
- Negative effects to the conservation values in the area, including the habitats and population health of a number of species, such as thimblehorn sheep, moose, grizzly bear, and alpine raptors.

CPAWS Yukon recommends the project not proceed until each of these components are addressed in full. Our specific concerns are described in more detail below.

## Dawson Regional Land Use Plan

In the mining land use permit application, the proponent indicated that there is no land use plan in effect for the proposed project. It is important to note, however, that the project is located within the boundaries of the Dawson Regional Land Use Plan, development of which is underway. The Draft Dawson Regional Land Use Plan is to be released to the planning parties in the spring of 2021. The proposed project is in an area with high conservation value for several reasons, including being within moose, sheep, and caribou range, and as a large area of intact wilderness<sup>1,2</sup>. At the time of the release of the draft Land Use Plan, this general area may be identified as part of a land withdrawal to protect conservation priority areas until finalization of the plan. CPAWS Yukon recommends the project assessment is put on hold until it is clear whether the area will be put under a land withdrawal or recommended for protection. Continuing with the assessment at this point in time, and potentially approving the project before the release of the draft land use plan, could undermine the spirit and intent of the Dawson Land Use Planning process. CPAWS Yukon recommends the project is rejected or the assessment is paused until the Dawson Regional Land Use Plan is complete.

### Access

The proponent is planning to support project activities with fixed-wing and helicopter air traffic and to construct trails for ATVs. The development of an access road is briefly mentioned as a possible future activity if a large discovery is found, which would require approximately 15 km of new road and 15 km of upgraded road. This is treated as a minor consideration in the application, but CPAWS Yukon believes the possibility of a road requires greater attention by the proponent and the YESAB Designated Office assessors.

The project is located within a large intact wilderness area with very little existing access. Cutting a road through this wilderness area would begin the process of habitat fragmentation, increase the feasibility of other mineral exploration or extraction programs, and facilitate increased hunter access into the area. Multiple ecological issues are caused by roads, including (but not limited to) easing travel for predators, contributing to habitat fragmentation, creating a source of dust and noise, and disrupting groundwater flow through compaction.

CPAWS Yukon presumes the existing road the proponent refers to is one that spurs off the Dempster Highway, as per the Friends of Dempster Country Society's comment<sup>3</sup>. However, the proponent hasn't provided any details regarding the location of this existing off-claim road, which likely ends outside of the Monster claims. This means that if exploration detects a large deposit and road access is required, a new off-claim road and approximately 15 km of new on-claim road would need to be constructed.

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<sup>1</sup> Pages 265-267 of: Dawson Regional Planning Commission. 2020. Dawson Planning Region Resource Assessment Report. City of Dawson, Yukon, Canada. Available at: <https://dawson.planyukon.ca/index.php/publications/resource-assessment-report-final-2/1551-dr-rar2020/file>

<sup>2</sup> Dawson Regional Planning Commission. 2020. Dawson Planning Region Resource Assessment Report - Map Series. City of Dawson, Yukon, Canada. Available at: <https://dawson.planyukon.ca/index.php/publications/resource-assessment-report-final-2/rarmaps2020/1521-resource-assessment-report-map-series/file>

<sup>3</sup> Friends of Dempster Country Society. 2021. Re: Project #2020 0195 Quartz Exploration – Coal Creek (Monster). YESAB # 2020-0195-0033. Available at: <https://yesabregistry.ca/projects/6b73480e-8441-43f8-a96c-b94de3dade24/comments>

If this project assessment continues, CPAWS Yukon asks that the proponent provide a detailed map and design specifications of all roads potentially associated with the project, including existing off-claim roads and future off and on-claim roads. CPAWS Yukon recommends that the proponent consider important wildlife habitat, sensitive wildlife species and habitats, and the consequences of increased road access into the area.

## Wildlife

CPAWS Yukon is glad to see the proponent has provided a wildlife management plan for the proposed exploration work, but requests additional details and considerations. The proponent identified several species that are likely to occur in the area and has outlined general wildlife mitigations, or best practices, but hasn't undertaken any wildlife survey efforts that would allow for the development of appropriate, site-specific mitigations. The proponent has proposed to undertake wildlife monitoring work while conducting exploration work, but this approach could result in negative effects to wildlife occurring during data collection, which would influence survey results and the subsequent conclusions. Adequate information is needed prior to conducting exploration work to put appropriate mitigations in place. The information gathering and biological study the proponent proposes to do are positive steps; however, these studies should be completed before mineral exploration work commences.

Negative effects to wildlife from disturbance by the high number of proposed helicopter (up to 700 per year) and fixed-wing flights are of primary concern to CPAWS Yukon. Any wildlife species can be disturbed by aircrafts, but of greatest concern are alpine ungulates – thornhorn sheep and caribou – and alpine nesting raptors<sup>4</sup>. It is important to note that several different species have Wildlife Key Areas<sup>5</sup> (WKAs) in the vicinity of the proposed project, including moose, thornhorn sheep and raptors, and several known mineral licks are also nearby. Some of these WKAs are specific to important life stages or seasons when certain species are more sensitive to disturbance, and that temporally or physically overlap with project activities. Further, the proponent has not adequately addressed effects to thornhorn sheep. Asking pilots to follow the *Flying in Sheep Country* and *Flying in Caribou Country* guidelines is good practice, and highly recommended, but this alone is not sufficient in ensuring negative effects to sheep and other wildlife do not occur. A set of project-specific mitigations must be put forward. Spatial buffers and timing windows<sup>4</sup> are key mitigations the proponent should describe in detail, informed by project-specific wildlife survey data.

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<sup>4</sup> [Correspondence] Reid, D., and Hayes, R. 2014. Avoiding Disturbance to Yukon's Alpine Ungulates and Raptors: A Summary of Scientific Knowledge on Spatial Buffers and Timing Windows. Wildlife Conservation Society Canada – Whitehorse. Available at: <https://library.wcs.org/doi/ct/view/mid/33065/pubid/DMX3271000000.aspx>

<sup>5</sup> Government of Yukon. 2021. Find Wildlife Key Area GIS Datasets. Available at: <https://yukon.ca/en/science-and-natural-resources/fish-and-wildlife-species/find-wildlife-key-area-gis-datasets>

CPAWS Yukon recommends that:

- the proponent undertakes a baseline wildlife monitoring program prior to beginning the proposed exploration work so that appropriate mitigation measures can be developed;
- The proponent use data from the baseline wildlife monitoring program to identify areas where disturbance sensitive wildlife species, such as thinhorn sheep and raptors, are likely to occur and subsequently identify flight paths that will avoid such habitat. This should include flights to and from Dawson City, the off-claim staging area, and flights within the claim blocks/project area, and should consider habitat within a 3 km radius<sup>4</sup> of all activities, and;
- Develop spatial buffers and timing window mitigations for applicable activities.

### **Cumulative Effects**

Part of the Dawson Regional Land Use Planning process is to undertake a cumulative effects assessment, which will inform development thresholds and allow for the coordinated assessment of projects. The ongoing cumulative effects assessment for the region can be used to inform the assessment of development projects such as the one in question. CPAWS Yukon recommends the project assessment is paused until the ongoing cumulative effects assessment and Dawson Regional Land Use Plan are complete.

If the YESAB Designated Office continues with the project assessment, CPAWS Yukon asks that YESAB complete a cumulative effects assessment for the Coal Creek project, which includes the context of the Dawson Regional Land Use Plan and the ongoing work of the Dawson Regional Land Use Planning Commission.

Under YESAA, YESAB is required to consider:

*the significance of any adverse cumulative environmental or socio-economic effects that have occurred or might occur in connection with the project or existing project in combination with the effects of other projects for which proposals have been submitted under subsection 50(1) or any activities that have been carried out, are being carried out or are likely to be carried out in or outside Yukon;*<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Yukon Environmental and Socio-economic Assessment Board. 2019. Considering Cumulative Effects in YESAB Assessments: Proposed Criteria for Determining Activities Likely to be Carried Out. <https://yesab.ca/wp/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Proposed-Criteria-for-Determining-Activities-Likely-to-be-Carried-Out-09-16-2019.pdf>

In terms of the Coal Creek project, YESAB has the responsibility to assess the cumulative effects of past, present, and likely future activities in the area. Since the proposed project is for quartz exploration work, it has the potential to lead to a hard rock mining application depending on the results of the exploration program. This falls under the following criteria for determining an activity likely to be carried out:

*“The completion of the project could facilitate or enable future development”<sup>6</sup>*

Therefore, a cumulative effects analysis should also consider the future possibility of a hard rock mine, with associated infrastructure (including roads), being developed.

Sincerely,

Maegan McCaw

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