

# Living in Red Deer County: A Guide for New Residents



## INTRODUCTION

The quality of life in Red Deer County is among the best found anywhere in the world. However, life in the country is different in a number of ways from life in the city. Rural governments normally provide a different type of service than that provided in urban areas. The following information is provided to help you make an educated and informed decision when choosing to purchase or develop land outside the boundaries of incorporated cities, towns or villages.



## AGRICULTURE

Red Deer County is largely an agricultural area. Much of the rural land is actively used for growing crops, feeding livestock and providing lumber and mineral resources. Owning rural land means knowing how to care for it. Here are some points to consider:

1. Agriculture is an important business in Red Deer County. Choosing to live in the country means choosing to live among the farms and ranches of our rural countryside, and accepting the normal day-to-day operations of agri-business neighbors. The County will not intervene with these normal day-to-day operations unless there is a valid reason.
2. Farmers often work around the clock, especially during planting and harvest time. Dairy operators sometimes milk without stopping and hay is often swathed or baled at night. Low-flying planes and crop duster planes may fly overhead during irregular hours. On occasion, it is possible that adjoining agricultural uses may disturb your peace and quiet.
3. Land preparation and other operations can cause dust, especially during windy and dry weather.
4. Farmers occasionally burn their fields and ditches to keep them clean of debris, weeds and other obstructions; logging operations burn slash piles; grain growers burn stubble to help generate next year's crops. This burning creates smoke that some may find objectionable.
5. Chemicals (mainly fertilizers and herbicides) are often used in growing crops. Some may be sensitive to these substances and a few people actually have allergic reactions. Many of these chemicals are applied by airplanes that fly early in the morning.
6. Animals and their manure can cause objectionable odors.
7. Red Deer County has a closed range law except for specific roads. This means that a neighbor's cattle, sheep or other livestock should not leave their property. It is the responsibility of the rancher or farmer to keep his/her livestock off the property of others. Likewise, it is the responsibility of the owner that pets and/or livestock remain on his or her land.
8. Before buying land, consider that it may have noxious weeds that have requirements for control; this may end up being an expensive proposition. As well, some plants are poisonous to horses and other livestock. Red Deer County Agricultural Services Board (350-2158) will be able to provide some information with regard to weeds on properties located in the County.
9. Animals, including farm animals, can be dangerous. Bulls, stallions, pigs, rams, etc., can attack human beings. It is not safe to enter pens where animals are kept, and no one should access lands without the consent of the landowner.
10. There is a limit to the amount of grazing the land can handle. Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development can help with these issues.

## MOTHER NATURE

Country residents usually experience more problems when the elements turn unfriendly. Here are some thoughts to consider:

1. The physical characteristics of any property can be positive and negative. Trees are a wonderful environmental amenity, but can also impact a fire. Homes built in forested areas face the very real potential of being damaged or destroyed by wildland fires. Here are a few simple things a property owner can do to reduce the danger:
  - a) Clear land around the house of excess trees and ground vegetation; a minimum 10 metre clear or “defensible space” around structures, consisting of maintained and watered lawn, pruned shrubs and trees can help mitigate the spread of wildland fires to buildings.
  - b) Replace combustible roofs and other building materials with non-combustibles; store other combustible materials such as firewood away from your house.
  - c) Maintain adequate access roads and driveways and remove overgrowth and flammable vegetation immediately adjacent to the traveled roadway.
  - d) Have a civic address sign posted and visible at the intersection of your driveway and the County road.
  - e) Provide a reliable water supply.
  - f) Develop a fire safety plan for your home and your family.
  - g) Many fires start from what are supposed to be controlled fires in burning barrels, brush piles, etc. It is important that all fires be attended at all times.
  - h) Respect the danger of fire in wildland areas by learning more about wildland fires and BE PREPARED.
- Note:** If someone starts a wildland fire, they may be responsible for the cost of extinguishing that fire. For further information on fire safety, contact Red Deer County Fire Services at 343-6667.
2. Steep slopes can slide in unusually wet weather. Large rocks can also roll down steep slopes and present a great danger to people and property.
3. Expansive soils can buckle concrete foundations and twist steel I-beams. Soil conditions on a property can be determined through a soil test performed by a qualified professional. It is recommended that this test be completed before any development or construction on the property occurs.



## MOTHER NATURE (continued)

4. North facing slopes or canyons rarely see direct sunlight in the winter. There is a possibility that snow will accumulate and not melt throughout the winter.
5. The topography of the land will indicate where water flows in the case of heavy precipitation. Pay close attention to these areas in order to determine how water will flow on a piece of land and develop the land accordingly.
6. A flash flood may occur, especially during summer months, and turn a dry gully into a river. It is wise to take this possibility into consideration when building. Prior to building, determine if property is in a flood zone. Development (construction) in the 1:100 year flood plain, as determined by Alberta Environment, is prohibited in Red Deer County.
7. Winter and spring run-off can cause a very small creek to become a major river. Many residents use sand bags to protect their homes. The County does not provide sand, sandbags, equipment, or people to protect private property from flooding.
8. Nature can provide some wonderful neighbors, such as deer and eagles that are positive additions to the environment. However, even “harmless” animals like deer can cross the road unexpectedly and cause traffic accidents. Rural development often encroaches on the traditional habitat of animals/wildlife that can be dangerous or become a nuisance. Know how to deal with them safely and effectively. In general, it is best to enjoy wildlife from a distance. Let the animals be themselves, watch them, but avoid chasing them or allowing your pets to do so. Also know that if you do not handle your pet refuse and trash properly, it could cause problems for neighbors and the wildlife. Many areas in the County are open for hunting. Hunting, while providing recreational opportunities, is a tool for managing wildlife populations. It also involves individuals who may trespass, litter and fire guns. Property owners need to verify if their property is in a shooting or no shooting zone.



## THE PROPERTY

There are many issues that can affect a property. It is important to research these items before purchasing land.

1. **Permits and Approvals:** Construction of residences and most buildings in Red Deer County require County-issued development permits. The permitting process helps assure you that your proposed project is in conformance with applicable County bylaws and statutory plans and is consistent with requirements regulating property divisions and uses such as setbacks, minimum frontage, potable water supply and sewage disposal systems. As well, permits are often required from other agencies such as Alberta Transportation or Alberta Environment. Although the County has no jurisdiction in these areas, it can usually assist through the process. Before commencing construction, be sure to obtain the appropriate permits through the Planning & Development Department (350 2170).
2. There are parcels of land in Red Deer County that are separate for purposes of taxation but are not considered legal lots that a development permit can be issued for normally due to size and setback restrictions. What a property may be used for is also dependent on its zoning. When considering purchasing property located in the County, contact the Planning & Development Department (350-2170). They will enable the proposed purchaser to determine the correct zoning of the property and any development restrictions that may apply to it.
3. Easements may require a purchaser to allow construction of roads, power lines, water lines, sewer lines, etc., across their land. Check these issues carefully by obtaining an up-to-date title for the property.
4. Many property owners do not own the mineral rights under their property. Owners of mineral rights have the ability to change the surface characteristics in order to extract their minerals. It is very important to know what minerals may be located under the land and who owns them. Much of the rural land in Red Deer County can be used for resource extraction, subject to current land use zoning standards.
5. You may be provided with a plan of your property, but unless the land has been surveyed and pins placed by a licensed surveyor, do not assume that the plan is accurate.
6. Fences that separate properties can be misaligned with the property lines. A survey of the land is the only way to confirm the location of property lines. Red Deer County does not verify the location of property lines or become involved in property line disputes.
7. Many subdivision and planned unit developments have covenants that limit the use of the property. It is important to obtain a copy of the covenants (or confirm that there are none) and make sure that you can live with those rules. Also, a lack of covenants can cause problems between neighbors. Red Deer County becomes involved in the enforcement of only those covenants that are registered in the name of the County.
8. Homeowners' associations are sometimes formed to take care of common elements such as roads, open spaces, etc. Dues are almost always a requirement of homeowners or condominium associations. The bylaws of the association will tell you how the organization operates and how the dues are set.

## THE PROPERTY (continued)

9. Storm water flows through most low areas at some time or another. By building in these low areas one may be flooded. By filling in the low areas one may be unintentionally relocating the flood waters, which could cause problems for others. This type of action requires special approvals from Alberta Environment. Proceeding without approvals could lead to private civil actions in court.

10. Surrounding properties may not remain as they are today. Check with Planning and Development (350-2170) to find out if there is an area structure plan for the area, how neighboring properties are currently zoned, and what future developments may be in the planning stages.

11. Purchase of property may not grant the right to use the water from any streams or other sources crossing your land. Other users may have senior rights to the water that may limit use, or you may be required to obtain an approval to access the water.

12. (Items 12-14 should be verified with the Province.) It is important to make sure that there is sufficient water access to reflect operations to maintain fruit trees, pastures, gardens, livestock, etc.

13. The water flowing in creeks or streams may be licensed to someone else. Do not assume that because the water flows across your property, you can use it.

14. Many creeks, streams, rivers, and wetlands are regulated by either the Provincial or Federal Governments. These regulations establish setbacks and buffer zones adjacent to these various bodies of water. Natural vegetation cannot be disturbed in these areas. If you are contemplating development on property near water, marsh or other wet areas, be sure to check with Public Lands Division, Alberta Environment, before commencing any work.

15. Flowing and standing water can be a hazard, especially to young children. Before deciding to locate your home near an active creek or stream, consider the possible dangers. Many roadside ditches are also constructed to retain storm water flows that can be hazardous.



## ACCESS

The fact that you can drive to your property today does not necessarily guarantee that you, your guests, or emergency service vehicles can achieve that same level of access at all times. Please consider:

1. Emergency response times for police, fire suppression, medical care, etc., cannot be guaranteed. Under some conditions, emergency response takes longer than in an urban area.
2. There can be problems with the legal aspects of access, especially if access is gained across property belonging to others via privately owned easements or access roads. It is wise to obtain legal advice and understand the easements that may be necessary when these types of questions arise.
3. Problems may be encountered with the maintenance and costs of maintaining your road. Red Deer County maintains over 3000 kilometers of roads, but many rural properties are served by privately-owned access roads that are maintained by homeowners' associations, private parties, or other landowners. There are some County roads not maintained by the County year round – no grading or snow plowing – called fair weather roads. There are some public roads and rights of way that are not maintained by anyone. Make sure you know what type of road maintenance to expect and the service provider. The road quality needs to be appropriate for use by emergency response vehicles and is usually the responsibility of the landowner to construct and/or upgrade the road to County standards as a condition of a development permit.
4. Extreme weather conditions can destroy roads. Some public and private roads may not be built to current standards and may not be sufficient to withstand the test of time.
5. Many large construction vehicles cannot navigate small, narrow roads. It is prudent to check out construction access prior to building.
6. School buses travel only on maintained County roads designated as school bus routes by the school district. If you live on a private road, children may need to be driven to the nearest County road or bus stop so they can get to school. Even so, buses travel on so many miles of roads that it is impossible to assign a higher priority to one school bus route than another. Be sure to check with your local school district.
7. In extreme weather, even County maintained roads could become impassable. In this case, a four-wheel drive vehicle may be needed to travel during these episodes, which could last for several days. School buses and other types of vehicles may not be able to travel during these times.
8. Natural disasters, especially floods, can destroy roads. Red Deer County repairs and maintains County roads. Private roads and accesses, including private subdivision roads, are the responsibility of the landowners who use those roads. It is important that roads be constructed to a set standard insuring that culverts are installed where appropriate, as seemingly slow-flowing “small” waterways can become raging torrents that wash out roads, bridges, and culverts. Residents served by private roads and/or bridges have had large bills for repairs and/or reconstruction after floods.

## ACCESS (continued)

9. Unpaved roads generate dust. Red Deer County does not usually treat roads to suppress dust. If you reside near an unpaved road, you may want to have the road treated for dust suppression by one of the contractors authorized to do dust control by the County. For information on dust control, contact Red Deer County Operations department at 350-2150.

10. If the road is unpaved, it is highly unlikely that Red Deer County will pave it without financing by the adjoining property owners. Check carefully with the County when the seller of any property indicates an unpaved road will be paved.

11. Unpaved roads are not always smooth, are often slippery when they are wet, and muddy during the spring thaw. There may be an increase in vehicle maintenance costs when you regularly travel on rural, unpaved county roads. Potholes and washboards are usually created by traffic traveling too fast on unpaved roads.

12. Check with Canada Post to determine the mail delivery system for your area. Contact the newspaper of your choice to determine methods of delivery in the rural area. Standard parcel and overnight package delivery may not be available for rural addresses. Confirm with the service providers as to the status of service in your area.



## UTILITY SERVICES

Water, sewer electrical, telephone and other services may be unavailable or may not operate at urban standards. Repairs can often take much longer than in towns and cities. Please review your options from the non-exhaustive list below.

1. Telephone and internet communications may not work to urban standards. As well, cellular phones may not get reception in all areas.
2. If sewer service is available to your property, it may be expensive to hook into the system.
3. If sewer service is not available, as is generally the case in rural areas, you will need to use an approved on-site septic system or other treatment process. It may be expensive to maintain the on-site system currently in use. The type of soil available for a leach-field will be very important in determining the cost and function of your system. Have the system checked by a reliable sanitation firm.
4. If there is access to a supply of treated domestic water, the tap fees can be expensive. Also, monthly cost of service can be high when compared to urban municipal systems.
5. If there is not access to a supply of treated domestic water, homeowners will have to locate an alternative supply. The most common sources of water in rural areas are private wells. Private wells are regulated by Alberta Environment. The cost for drilling and pumping can be considerable. The quality and quantity of well water can vary considerably from location to location and from season to season. It is strongly advised that you research this issue very carefully.
6. Not all wells can be used for watering landscaping and/or livestock. If there are other needs, make certain that the proper approvals are in place (contact Alberta Environment) before you invest. It may also be difficult to find enough water in some cases.
7. Electric service may not be readily available in every area of Red Deer County. It is important to determine the proximity of electrical power, as it can be very expensive to extend power lines to remote areas.
8. It may be necessary to cross property owned by others in order to extend electric service to your property in the most cost-efficient manner. It is important to make sure that the proper easements are in place to allow lines to access your property.
9. Electric power may not be available in two-phase and three-phase service configurations. If there are special power requirements, it is important to know what level of service can be provided to your property.

## UTILITY SERVICES (continued)

10. If you are purchasing land with the plan to build at a future date, there is a possibility that electric lines (and other utilities) may not be large enough to accommodate you if others connect during the time you wait to build.
11. The cost of electric service is usually divided into a fee to hook up to the system and a monthly charge for energy consumed. It is important to know both costs before making a decision to purchase a specific piece of property.
12. Power outages can occur in outlying areas with more frequency than in more developed areas, particularly if power lines are difficult to access. A loss of electric power can interrupt the supply of water from a well and the ability to utilize grey water or black water sewer systems. Interruptions in power may cause the loss of food in your freezer or refrigerator, flooding from loss of use of a sump pump and may cause problems with computers as well. If you live in the country, it is important to be able to survive several days in severe cold with no utilities.
13. Trash removal is available everywhere in Red Deer County, but some removal can be more expensive in rural areas than in metropolitan areas. Contact Operations Services at 350-2158 to determine if residential waste pick up is available. In some cases, a trash dumpster may be several miles from your home. The only option may be to haul trash to the disposal site yourself. Recycling is more difficult because pick-up is not available in most rural areas. Check with Red Deer County Fire Services (343-6667) to see if you can burn trash in your area.



## CONCLUSION

Life in Red Deer County is excellent. However, there are unique challenges that County residents may confront. Although rural property owners pay property taxes to the County, the amount of tax collected does not cover the cost of the services provided to rural residents. Working together can make the difference.

These comments are offered in the sincere hope that they can help you enjoy your country residential experience. Red Deer County staff is available to answer any additional questions you may have.

### **Please contact us for more information at:**

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T4S 2L9

403.350.2150

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