



Just Before Triptych
30"x90" oil on canvas
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Bill 202 and Public Land Sales in Alberta

In late September the Province of Alberta sold 14,000 acres of public land in southern Alberta to municipalities without any public engagement process or public notice. The transferred land was part of 84,000 acres of “tax recovery” lands spread over southern Alberta that the government has put up for sale to municipalities. Tax recovery lands were once privately-owned but were forfeited to the province during the Depression of the 1930s by families who could not pay their taxes. The lands have since been part of the public trust and managed in the public interest. Since 2009 the province has been selling the land to municipalities at the cost of \$1.00/acre.

Currently, the sale of public land does not require any type of public engagement process; Albertans don’t know when or where public land is being sold or if the land being sold has high ecological or other social value. As a consequence, we do not have the ability to prevent the sale or restrict future use of that land to ensure that these values are being protected.

The grassland region, where the majority of the lands are being sold, is one of the most under-represented ecosystems in the world’s catalogue of protected areas. It contains many species at risk and other unique species. The fact these lands have been in the public trust and managed for the well-being of current and future Albertans is one of the only reasons they have remained natural and have not been cultivated or developed the way roughly 80 percent of Alberta’s grasslands ecosystem already has been.

Dr. Neil Brown, the MLA for Calgary – Nose Hill (PC), introduced Bill 202, *The Public Lands (Grasslands Preservation) Amendment Act, 2012*, introduced earlier this year. This private member’s bill passed the first reading in the legislature in May 2012 and debate on Bill 202 was adjourned in the November sitting. The purpose of Dr. Brown’s bill is to “ensure the continued protection of public grasslands and grazing leases containing significant and/or sensitive wildlife habitats.” The bill would require that ecological assessments be undertaken before the sale of public land and that the results of those assessments be made available to the public. The bill would also require public consultation at least 90 days prior to any proposed sale of public land in southern Alberta.

Currently, the government is not required to consult the public on these proposed sales. There are no safeguards to prevent the sale of land that has high ecological value. Nor is it possible to put future use restrictions on the transfer of such ecologically valuable lands. While Bill 202 would not necessarily prevent the transfer of ecologically sensitive land, at the very least it would ensure a transparent process, give the public an opportunity to voice their concerns, and make the government accountable for their decisions.

The sale of public land is part of a disturbing national trend of governments selling ecologically important lands to private interests and leaving the fate of the land to individuals or companies. Our neighbours in Saskatchewan started selling large tracts of their public grasslands last year. The federal

government’s spring announcement that it would be transferring the large native prairie pastures that make up the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration pastures (commonly known as PFRA pastures) to the provinces is worrying. Will the prairie provinces choose to sell them to individuals or companies?

Public lands represent an invaluable holding of native grasslands and parkland ecosystems, 80 percent of which have already been lost to cultivation and human development. Large public grazing lands are some of the last representatives of healthy, intact prairie ecosystems. They are vital areas providing critical wildlife habitat, numerous ecosystem functions, large pastures for individual or cooperative grazing, and opportunities for spiritual and recreational connection with these incredible landscapes

In September, AWA wrote a news release supporting Bill 202. While we oppose public land sales in Alberta, Dr. Brown’s bill is at least a step in the right direction towards ensuring a more democratic and transparent process and acknowledging the need to evaluate and protect the sensitive and valuable ecosystems represented by these public lands. The long-term interest of all Albertans is best served by retaining public lands as a trust held by government for conservation purposes. Short of that goal Bill 202 nonetheless deserves to be passed by the legislature when it meets in the spring of 2013. 🍀

- Katie Rasmussen