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CHANGES TO THE PUBLIC LANDS ACT – DEALING WITH OFFENDERS AND LETTING GAME-FARMED BISON LOOSE ON PUBLIC LANDS

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Bill 49, Public Lands Amendment Act, 2003 was introduced November 18, 2003 by Denis Ducharme, MLA for Bonnyville-Cold Lake on behalf of Mike Cardinal, Minister of Sustainable Resource Development. A government announcement says that “these changes will strengthen and clarify the government’s role as the land manager for public lands.” These amendments will allow Alberta to “deal swiftly and effectively with instances of non-compliance on public lands, and allow some bison grazing on public land.”

Non-Compliance

The amendments dealing with non-compliance “are intended to further discourage people from travelling on closed roads, destroying gates or preventing access to those who need to lawfully access public lands.” They will “clarify existing offences on public land, outline a police officer’s authority to remove people from public land and enable the Minister to take enforcement action if people travel on a road that has been closed to the public.”

AWA has long lobbied for a legislative mechanism for closing roads on public lands in order to protect wildlife habitat, reduce poaching and allow regeneration of some roads. However, we also see a danger in such legislation, if it is applied to unfairly exclude the public, including First Nations peoples, from lawful access to public lands. We would like to see clarification as to when and where this legislation is to apply.

Bison Grazing

The government is considering legislative amendments to the Public Lands Act to let bison producers raise bison on some public lands.

According to the announcement, “in 2001, a multi-stakeholder Bison Review Committee was formed in response to ongoing requests about bison grazing. The committee, which reported to the Ministers of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development and Sustainable Resource Development, reviewed stakeholders’ concerns and proposed that bison grazing be allowed on agricultural dispositions, with certain provisions.

“As a result of the committee’s review and scientific input, the program will have strict requirements for containing animals, disease testing, tagging and monitoring of the program. The program will also prohibit bison grazing on certain public lands. Once the legislative amendments have been made, government will review applications for bison grazing using criteria developed from the Committee’s recommendations.”

Bison was the first wildlife species to be game-farmed. Attempts were made to interbreed bison with cattle to produce beefalo. Being in close proximity to cattle gave bison the diseases bovine brucellosis and bovine tuberculosis. The cattle industry subsequently tried to get all the bison destroyed to protect their interests.

There are serious problems with all game-farmed wildlife species. AWA has never supported the domestication of wildlife and has continually called for an end to this anti-wildlife industry. One of our concerns with this announcement is that if the government opens the door to grazing of bison on public lands, it could set a precedent for opening public lands to elk and deer farmers too. Such a move would





increase the exposure of wild wildlife to the significant diseases of game-farmed animals, to more escapes into the wild and to hybridization with native wildlife.

Grazing bison (and other game-farmed animals) on public lands is not the same as grazing cattle. Bison in particular, can be aggressive, dangerous animals, so the public would be excluded from accessing these lands. Wildlife would also be excluded from using these lands since the high-security fencing needed for game farmed animals would exclude wildlife.

