



## POTATOGATE: TURNING ENDANGERED SPECIES HABITAT INTO POTATO CHIPS

*By Nigel Douglas, AWA Conservation Specialist*

Connections, it would seem, are everything. If you have the right contacts within the Alberta government and its bureaucracy, it appears that Public Land in southern Alberta is available for sale – never mind if it is vital habitat for endangered species, or one of the few remaining large areas of native prairie in the province. And never mind that the land is owned already: by you and me. The Alberta government manages Public Lands on behalf of all Albertans: or at least that is what should be the case. Sadly, the distance between reality and rhetoric seems to be as far away as the prairie horizon on a clear, crisp October day.

In early September 2010, AWA learned that, through a secret government process, 25 sections – or 16,000 acres – of public land was about to be sold to SLM Spud Farms Ltd. The land, near Bow Island, is predominantly native prairie and is known to be home for several species listed under the federal *Species at Risk Act* (including burrowing owl, ferruginous hawk, Sprague's pipit, chestnut-collared longspur, McCown's longspur, short-eared owl, and long-billed curlew). But despite the importance of this habitat to these species, if the sale goes ahead, the land will be ploughed up and used to grow potatoes.

At the time of writing the proposed public land sale was before Cabinet for approval. If the details had not been leaked out by AWA, then none of us would have been any the wiser: it appears that we, the owners of this land, have no right to any information, let alone any consultation, when our public land is being disposed of.

According to Minister of Sustainable Resource Development Mel Knight, speaking in a radio interview on Let's Go Outdoors radio, broadcast on September 19, this counts as doing business "in an open and transparent manner." In that interview, Minister Knight commented: "There never is a requirement for public consultation with respect to the sale of public land for agricultural use. This has



*Habitat for numerous species at risk – such as this ferruginous hawk – stands to be destroyed if the proposed Bow Island land sale goes ahead.*

PHOTO: C. OLSON

been going on in Alberta since before it was a province and there never has been public consultation to my knowledge." How this equals doing business "in an open and transparent manner" was not explained.

The timing of the proposed land deal is particularly ironic, given that a few short days earlier, Albertans were being

asked by the government for input on the new sample regulations for the provincial *Public Lands Act*. AWA's comments in a September 3 letter to Minister Knight, are particularly prophetic: "There is an obvious deficiency in the Sample Regulations in regard to defining a meaningful public process for notification of plans for sale, trade and disposition of

public lands” (see side bar).

The lack of any sort of transparent, public process for the disposal of our land could not have been any better illustrated than by the secretive process which has led us to the verge of losing another 16,000 acres of precious native grassland. There seems little reason to believe that the new regulations will fix the current, noxiously secretive, system of land sales.

### *History Repeating Itself*

For readers of the *Wild Lands Advocate* this is a familiar story. In an article in the December 2007 *WLA* (“Storm Brewing on the Prairies – Public Lands up for Grabs”) Joyce Hildebrand detailed previous sales of public land to Louis Ypma, owner of SLM Spud Farms Ltd. “In 2004 Ypma acquired a similar piece of native prairie for potato production – this was also public land, in the same area as the land he is now looking to acquire. He took title of the land in January 2004, but ploughed the land during peak nesting season in spring 2003 – while it still belonged to Albertans.” According to documents acquired at the time through the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* (FOIPP), this deal went ahead despite a wildlife survey that found evidence of four at-risk wildlife species on the land that was sold and cultivated, and despite the fact that Fish and Wildlife biologists were opposed to the sale of these public lands.

More than anything, the current land sale debacle illustrates what AWA has

been saying for more than four decades: Alberta desperately needs a publicly developed public lands policy to deal with all aspects of public land, including access, sales, management, and conservation. No such policy currently exists. AWA opposes any further destruction of native prairie grassland and sales of public land until a public lands policy is developed through a transparent and democratic public process. Recent developments would suggest that Alberta may be further away from open and public management of public land than at any time in the province’s recent history.

The Government of Alberta’s 2010 Business Plan for Sustainable Resource

Development (SRD) defines the ministry’s mission as “Stewardship of Alberta’s lands, forests, fish and wildlife that benefits both present and future generations of Albertans.” One of SRD’s stated goals is “leading Government of Alberta efforts to conserve biological diversity and enable sound management of Alberta’s natural resources on a sustainable basis.” It is high time that the ministry started to live up to these lofty, admirable goals, rather than bowing to the special interests who seek to make a killing out of the destruction of our native public lands. 🌱



*Franco Lo Pinto's work often depicts bison and this particular bowl was highly sought after at the 2010 Wild West gala.*

PHOTO: N. DOUGLAS

On September 3 2010, before knowledge of the upcoming land sale leaked out, AWA wrote to Minister of Sustainable Resource Development Mel Knight, offering recommendations to improve the Sample Regulations for the *Public Lands Act*. AWA’s comments included:

- There is an obvious deficiency in the Sample Regulations in regard to defining a meaningful public process for notification of plans for sale, trade and disposition of public lands.
- The Sample Regulations need to specify a public consultation process if public lands are to be sold or traded. Once again we will emphasize that AWA is adamantly opposed to the sale of any public lands. The Sample Regulations propose enabling the Minister to “exchange public land for other land if, *in the*

*opinion of the Minister*, adequate compensation is obtained for the public land” (emphasis added). This provision has not been well applied in the past when the advice of Fish and Wildlife staff about the conservation value of a piece of land has been ignored. AWA believes that deferring to the “opinion of the Minister” is not adequate; there must be a defined public process.

- A public process for the disposition of public land should be graded according to the environmental significance of the land: more environmentally significant land should go through a more stringent process.