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“Potatogate” Deal is Dead: Now it is Time to Fix the Real Problem

“Potatogate”, the shady Alberta government deal to sell off 16,000 acres of public land – scarce native grassland and endangered species habitat – has finally been shelved, following an unprecedented public outcry. But while this particular piece of land has received a temporary reprieve, the system which allows for secretive backroom deals to sell off public land, and with no public input, is still very much in place.

Now Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) is calling on the provincial government to listen to the overwhelming demands of Albertans and bring in a new and open system to oversee any future sales of public land.

“It is great news that this irreplaceable piece of native grassland isn’t going to be sold just yet,” said Nigel Douglas, AWA conservation specialist. “But we aren’t under any illusions: the shameful system that encourages these sorts of deals to go on behind closed doors hasn’t changed. The secrecy problem that so many Albertans have spoken out about is still there.”

Details of the proposal to sell off 16,000 acres (or 25 sections) of native grassland near Bow Island were first leaked out in early September. Despite the fact that only 30% of Alberta’s native grassland remains (and less than 1% of the Grassland region is protected), and that the area was known to be habitat for a number of endangered species (including burrowing owl, ferruginous hawk, Sprague’s pipit, long-billed curlew, short-horned lizard and prairie rattlesnake), the land was proposed to be sold off, to be ploughed up to grow potatoes.

As the facts of the proposed deal became known, the level of popular outcry increased. “People were staggered to find out that such a huge and important piece of land could be sold off on a political whim, and with no public input,” says Douglas. “What was our government doing selling off our public land in the first place?”

Now that the immediate threat to the land has been removed, the root of the problem remains. Proposed changes to the regulations for the Public Land Act are already in the pipeline, but still do not address the fact that a minister can decide to sell off public land, with no requirement to consult or even to inform the public. “Our priceless public lands deserve so much better than this,” says Douglas.

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