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No Public Voice in Latest Tax Recovery Land Sales

The Government of Alberta's latest announcement that it will transfer 84,000 acres of tax recovery land to local municipalities follows a recent pattern: a failure to consult the Alberta public and a failure to recognize the importance of nationally significant native grasslands. The 2010 "Potatogate" saga made it clear that Albertans wanted to see less secrecy and more transparency in the disposal of public land. That message does not seem to have been heard.

A February 3 2011 Government of Alberta news release states that 84,000 acres of tax recovery land will be sold to a total of 12 different municipalities for the princely sum of \$1 per acre.

"The large areas up for transfer in the Counties of Vulcan and Taber raise big red caution flags since provincially and nationally environmentally significant lands occur there," says Cliff Wallis, AWA president. "Yet there is no commitment to protect these areas: just a vague suggestion to 'retain' environmentally significant land near rivers, water bodies and coulees. Once again important native grasslands are being short-changed."

"In the absence of any sort of openness or accountability, we have every reason to believe that valuable native grasslands will be destroyed once again," says Nigel Douglas, AWA conservation specialist. Though the government's news release comments that 'More than 35,000 acres... will be retained because of their importance for soil and watershed protection and for the maintenance of biodiversity,' there is no indication that protection of native grasslands has been considered."

"It is clear from our reading of internal memos on the Potatogate affair that legitimate environmental concerns of SRD Fish and Wildlife and Public Lands staff have not been listened to by decision makers," says Wallis. "We fear that the same is happening with these transfers."

"At the very least any native grasslands transferred to the municipalities should come with a conservation easement attached, to ensure that they will not be ploughed up or developed," says Douglas. "It's time for the Alberta government to get serious about its obligations to protect threatened native ecosystems."

- The World Conservation Union (IUCN) recognizes grasslands as the "most endangered ecosystem in most continents, especially in the prairie or plains of North America."
- Less than two percent of Alberta's Grassland natural region is protected.
- Although native grasslands are only about five percent of Alberta's land base, they support approximately 70 percent of mammal, bird, reptile and amphibian species considered at risk or may be at risk in Alberta.

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