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How to Prevent More “Potatogates”:

New Report Makes Recommendations on Future Public Land Sales

The “Potatogate” land deal, which generated a huge outpouring of public opposition in Alberta in fall 2010, could easily happen again if substantial changes are not made to the way the provincial government handles sales of our public land. This is one of the findings of a new report, *Sale of Public Land in Alberta: Recommendations for Improving Regulation, Policy and Procedures*, produced by Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA), Alberta Native Plant Council and Nature Alberta.

“The report emphasizes that the long-term interest of all Albertans is best served by retaining public lands as a trust held by government on our behalf,” says Nigel Douglas, conservation specialist with Alberta Wilderness Association. “The presumption should be that land is not for sale unless there is a clearly demonstrated reason to do so.” Since the mid-1990s, public lands have been sold at an average rate of approximately 30 km² (12 sections) per year but public involvement has been minimal.

The “Potatogate” story hit the news in Alberta in fall 2010, when news leaked out about a secretive Alberta government plan to sell off 16,000 acres of public land near Bow Island. The proposed deal would have seen scarce native grasslands, known to be habitat for numerous endangered species, sold to a private company to be ploughed up to grow potatoes. The proposed deal was finally called off, largely because of the sheer volume of public outrage generated by the behind-closed-doors deal.

“Although the ‘Potatogate’ deal was suspended, the fundamentally flawed system which allows the discreet selling off of public land remains in place,” says Douglas. “These deals will continue to take place until changes are made.”

The report was sent out this week to MLAs, the Special Areas Board, and reeves and mayors of municipalities which have been involved in recent land transfers. Recommendations in the report include:

- The long-term interest of all Albertans is best served by retaining public lands as a trust held by government for conservation purposes.
- Protective notations should be applied to public lands in large blocks of prairie, Environmentally Significant Areas, and other important habitat areas for at risk species.
- Regulations are needed that clearly lay out procedures to be used for public land sale or trade and that require public notice and consultation.

“Public land is administered on behalf of all Albertans and there is no doubt we all have a say in how it is managed,” says Douglas. “Clearly the public are being cut out of this process and that needs to change.”

The full report can be seen online at www.AlbertaWilderness.ca

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