

Potatogate: Round Two

The “For Sale” sign went up again. On August 30, 2011 the provincial government placed 16,000 acres of Cypress County native grassland up for sale. This is the same swath of land that was at the centre of last year’s “potatogate” controversy. It is the same swath of land, as AWA members know well, that provides crucial wildlife habitat to a long list of Alberta’s most sensitive species. If sold, this swath of precious native prairie grassland will be destroyed by intensive-irrigation agricultural use. These lands were pulled from an impending secretive land sale last November in response to widespread opposition. Louis Ypma of SLM Spud Farms had approached the government for a private, direct sale of the land without public hearings or an open bidding process. The buyer withdrew after tremendous public outcry, but, since this time, the government has apparently re-evaluated the “economic viability” of the land. According to then Minister of Sustainable Resource Development Mel Knight, “tremendous opportunity for agricultural projects” lies in this area.

Currently these lands are free from intensive agriculture or industrial development, and are managed well through grazing leases. AWA, along with members of the ranching, hunting, fishing and conservation communities, continues to insist these lands should remain public native grasslands where well-managed ranching and grassland-dependent

species can coexist. Currently less than two percent of Alberta’s Grassland natural region is protected and only 30 percent of Alberta’s grasslands remain. Yet, as noted in the sage-grouse summit update, they support 70 percent of the mammal, bird, reptile and amphibian species at risk in Alberta. There are two main threats to survival for most of these species: loss and fragmentation of natural habitat, and human-caused mortality. An initial wildlife inventory conducted in association with this land sale documented many sensitive and endangered species on these grasslands. They contain active burrowing owl nest sites, a breeding pair of ferruginous hawks, Sprague’s pipit, many long-billed curlew pairs, and a prairie rattlesnake, to name a few. The area is also known pronghorn antelope fawning grounds as the native vegetation allows antelope calves to be safely concealed from predators.

According to the proposed land sale documents, the government sees that the primary use of these lands is served by converting them to cultivated irrigated land. In sharp contrast, this relatively intact piece of native grassland was identified for conservation by the South Saskatchewan Regional Advisory Council in a report submitted to government earlier this year as part of the Land-Use Framework regional planning process. The public has made it clear on numerous occasions that they do not want their public land sold. In putting this piece of land up for sale again, the Alberta government closed its ears and eyes to the recommendations of government-appointed committees, scientific data, and public opinion.

- Madeline Wilson

Editor’s note: On September 29 a campaign advisor to Alberta’s new Premier Alison Redford emailed AWA and said that, if she won the Progressive Conservative leadership race, Premier Redford would “suspend the sale of 16,000 acres of ecologically sensitive crown land near Bow Island and wait for the South Saskatchewan Basin Regional Advisory Council to present its final report on the best use of that parcel.” AWA is very pleased that the Premier fulfilled this promise on October 19.