



ALBERTA WILDERNESS ASSOCIATION

"Defending Wild Alberta through Awareness and Action"

October 7, 2011

Dear Premier Redford

Re: Proposed "Potatogate" Public Land Sale

Congratulations on becoming Alberta's fourteenth premier. Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) was encouraged by some of the commitments that you made during the leadership selection process. Specifically, you made your feelings very clear concerning the proposed sale of 16,000 acres of native prairie public land near Bow Island in southern Alberta; the "Potatogate" lands.

In a September 29 email, your campaign advisor Jeff Henwood wrote:

"As Premier, Alison will:

- 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 looks forward to hearing the announcement of the suspension of the Potatogate land sale. As you are no doubt aware, the current Minister for Resource Development announced, September 30, that an evaluation committee had been created to review proposals to buy the public land. Presumably, if the sale is to be suspended, the committee will also be suspended.

There are many reasons why the proposed land sale should not go ahead, including:

- The lands in question are high quality habitat for species listed as *Endangered* and *Threatened* in Alberta's *Wildlife Act* and Canada's *Species at Risk Act*. Fish and Wildlife reports list thirteen such species confirmed as using the area "for critical life stages," including burrowing owl, ferruginous hawk and Sprague's pipit.
- Native prairie is a scarce resource in Alberta, one which should be cherished, not destroyed. Only 30 per cent of Alberta's grasslands remain, yet they support 70 per cent of the mammal, bird, reptile and amphibian species listed as *sensitive* and *endangered* in Alberta.
- The land in question is *Public Land*. No reason has been given as to why there is a need to sell off public land when it is crucial habitat for endangered species, and is already leased as important grazing land. The land should remain as public land.
- The Alberta public has expressed widespread opposition to the proposed land sale, not just to the secretive nature of the sale, but to the sale itself.

- The government's own staff are opposed to the land sale. The internal government review process for the proposed land sale received extensive opposition from knowledgeable government staff. This was ignored. An AWA request for information under the provincial *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy* regulations found:
 - o Senior Fish and Wildlife staff recommended: ""against the sale of this land due to its high value for species at risk and wildlife, and high ecological value as a large contiguous block of native grassland, a relatively limited resource." They also noted that "Land sale and subsequent cultivation could lead to the possibility of legal challenges from third parties under the federal Species at Risk Act."
 - o Senior government staff in the Rangeland division of SRD emphasized: "the land requested is not surplus to our needs as it is currently being used for grazing and recreation. The landscape has high wildlife values and contributes to ecological goods and services of the community... The land is environmentally sensitive and best left in its native state. Taking such a large acreage out of the public land base would have a profound effect on the people who rely on this resource and all the values it provides."
- The wildlife survey carried out by the potential purchaser of the area is entirely inadequate.
- Removing water from the South Saskatchewan basin to irrigate a potato crop is an inappropriate use of both the land and the water. The Bow, Oldman and South Saskatchewan Rivers have all been closed to new water allocations since 2006 because the rivers were already over-allocated.

We look forward to working with you and your Cabinet on a renewed commitment to ensuring that public land in Alberta remains public, and that native wildlife and their habitat remain here for generations to come.

Tours truly,

ALBERTA WILDERNESS ASSOCIATION



Nigel Douglas,
Conservation Specialist