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New Bill to Address Public Engagement in Public Land Sales

The transfer of yet another 14,000 acres of public land in southern Alberta last week with no public discussion underscores the need for a new, transparent process in the decision to sell public lands. Bill 202: Public Lands (Grasslands Preservation) Amendment Act, which will have its second reading in legislature this fall, would require ecological assessments and a transparent public consultation before the sale of public land. While the Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) is fundamentally opposed to the sale of public land, in particular land that has significant ecological value, we support Bill 202 as a step in the right direction.

“In southern Alberta the majority of remaining intact natural areas are public lands,” says Katie Rasmussen, Conservation Specialist with AWA. “It is in the best interest of Albertans to retain public lands to ensure the long-term maintenance of healthy ecosystems and the many services they provide including a healthy ranching industry, tourism and recreational opportunities, and critical wildlife habitat, just to name a few. Albertans, who are the stewards of this land, at the very least deserve a voice in any decision to sell them.”

The land being transferred, mostly in the counties of Vulcan and Taber, is tax recovery land that has been managed by the public since the early 1900s. The grassland region, where the majority of the lands are being sold, is one of the most under-represented ecosystems in our protected areas network and contains a high number of species at risk and unique species. Bill 202, proposed by Dr. Neil Brown (MLA for Calgary-Nose Hill), went through its first reading this spring and will go through a second reading this fall. The purpose of Bill 202 is to “ensure the continued protection of public grasslands and grazing leases containing significant and/or sensitive wildlife habitats.” The bill would require that ecological assessments be undertaken before the sale and that there is public consultation at least 90 days prior to the sale. Ultimately, we believe that the long-term interest of all Albertans is best served by retaining public lands as a trust held by government for conservation purposes. Including the public in the discussion about selling public land and making informed decisions about the fate of natural lands based on ecological assessments is a step in the right direction.

For more information:

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