

# Updates

## October 2019 Provincial Budget

At the end of October, the United Conservative Party introduced its first budget. Labelled “A Plan for Jobs and the Economy,” the government said its budget “honours the promise of a credible balanced budget plan over four years.” Furthermore, its content ostensibly represented “a measured approach to address overspending.” What are the budget’s implications for the government’s environmental protection responsibilities?

First, there will be fewer personnel in the Environment and Parks department in 2019-20 than in 2018-19. The budget plans to reduce overall full time equivalent positions in government departments by three percent. This cut is not distributed equally over all departments. Three departments bear the brunt of cuts to the public service: Community and Social Services, Justice and Solicitor General, and Environment and Parks. Together these three departments account for 64 percent of the overall full-time staff reduction. The government’s fiscal plan calls for Community and Social Services to lose 27 percent of its full-time workforce from the staff complement outlined in the previous year’s budget. Justice and Solicitor General will lose 24 percent of its full-time staff. Environment and Parks will lose 13 percent of its full-time positions.

Second, spending on some of the core functions in Environment and Parks will be cut significantly this year and over the next four years. Overall, the Ministry of Environment and Parks’ operating expenses in 2022-23 are targeted to be \$550 million. This is an overall cut of four percent from 2018-19. While this might not sound draconian, if we look more closely we see how severely affected some individual functions/programs will be. Integrated planning - crucial to rational, evidence-based land-use decision-mak-

ing - will be cut by 39 percent in the current budget year. None of those cuts are planned to be reversed over the following three years. Fish and Wildlife operating expenses will be cut by 12 percent this year. Expenses on protecting the air we breathe will be trimmed by nine percent. Over the course of the next four years, Parks’ operating expenses will be slashed by 26 percent, a staggering percentage in my view.

Together with the Ministry’s business plan, these cuts to parks deliver a troubling message about the government’s diminished commitment to see parks as an important, if not key, tool to realize protected areas objectives. The last NDP Environment and Parks business plan committed to enhancing the Alberta parks system. An enhanced system was linked firmly to Alberta’s commitment to conserve 17 percent of Alberta’s lands and waters. This commitment to use parks as a protected areas tool is missing from Minister Nixon’s business plan. Instead, his plan seems to privilege private sector tools, such as Land Trusts, as a means to conserve ecologically significant landscapes.

Parks’ fall from grace also was suggested by the Minister’s remarks when the Main Estimates of his department were presented to the Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship. With respect to reaching the UCP government’s commitment to meeting provincial protected areas targets, the NDP’s Marlin Schmidt asked the Minister where he intended to establish protected parks in order to meet the province’s 17 percent target. While Minister Nixon said that parks could be one tool he began his answer by distancing his preferences from those of the New Democrats. With respect to reaching protected areas targets, the Minister said: “one of the fundamental differences between our government and the former government around this issue comes out in exactly how the hon. mem-

ber framed the question, which is that parks are not needed to meet all of our objectives of protecting landscapes.”

In its first budget, the UCP government tried to reconcile “a measured approach to overspending” with double digit cuts to key environmental programs and functions. AWA hopes the public will join the association in working to convince the government to rethink those cuts in the final three years of its mandate.

- Ian Urquhart