



Alberta Strips Away Significant Mountain-Foothills Protection to Encourage Coal Mines



Coal Policy land zones, which have protected important mountain and foothills headwaters and wildlife habitat from open pit coal mining since 1976, were stripped away in a recent move by the Government of Alberta.

This policy change, made without any public consultation, has the potential to open up over 4.7 million hectares of environmentally sensitive lands to boom-and-bust coal developments, further jeopardizing headwaters integrity, wildlife security and the recovery of species at risk.

Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) is adamantly opposed to this policy change, and believes there is no assurance that critical wildlife habitat for endangered mountain caribou, threatened grizzly bears or endangered native trout that had marginal protection with the Coal Policy zones will have any real

protection now.

“To its credit, the 1976 Coal Policy identified the need to strike a fair balance between environmental protection, economic opportunities, and the social needs of all Albertans, by maintaining “the maximum benefits, now and in the future, to the people of Alberta who own this resource.” said Nissa Petterson, AWA Conservation Specialist.

Coal Policy Zones 2, 3, and 4 considered important features and trade-offs such as environmental sensitivity, alternate land-uses and the extent of existing infrastructure that could reasonably support coal mining operations. Category 2 lands (1.4 million hectares) were areas with moderate to high environmental sensitivity which ruled out open pit mines, and restricted coal to underground operations “where surface effects of the operation are deemed to be environmentally acceptable.” This zoning helped limit coal exploration in sensitive mountain and foothills areas. Removal of these categories actively dismantles a multi-tiered systematic approach to coal mining in Alberta, and eliminates opportunities to protect identified key biodiversity zones, and secure critically important wildlife ranges.

The lands that lose Coal Policy protection revert to Alberta’s inadequate project-based approval system. Alberta has no enforceable limits on public lands surface disturbance to meet its biodiversity and species at risk commitments. Alberta foothills are already highly fragmented, with declining populations of woodland caribou, grizzly bears, bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout struggling to live on the landscape. In order to maintain biodiversity and recover species at risk, Alberta needs enforceable, evidence-based limits on total industrial land disturbance, and an information system to help effectively foresee and manage cumulative effects across industrial operations and other land-uses.

Effective natural resource management also needs a systematic approach that is inclusive to the public, providing ample opportunity for public scrutiny of policy changes and land-use decisions. AWA is concerned with this government’s lack of transparency and public consultation on this policy change.

While the provincial government has justified rescinding the coal policy to improve investor certainty in Alberta coal developments, AWA believes Alberta’s contribution to coal exports on an international scale are marginal

compared to other predominant coking coal exporters such as British Columbia, Indonesia and Australia. “Rescinding the Coal Policy will result in the indiscriminate expansion of boom-and-bust coal operations across Alberta’s Eastern Slopes, ultimately producing irreparable harm across many ecologically sensitive landscapes for minimal economic gains in historically volatile coal markets,” said Petterson.

For more information:

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Maps:

- [Alberta Grizzly Bear Habitat and Coal Policy Categories \(1976\)](#)
- [Alberta Caribou Range and Coal Policy Categories \(1976\)](#)



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