

The 2021 Budget and Alberta Environment & Parks

February 27, 2021

On Thursday, just prior to the Budget Speech, Deputy Minister of Environment and Parks Bev Yee called AWA's Executive Director Christyann Olson. The Deputy Minister gave Christyann a very brief synopsis of what the 2021/22 budget means for Alberta Environment and Parks. Deputy Minister Yee said her department was able to maintain its overall budget in 2021/22. She said that: existing programs and services would be maintained, more staff would be hired, there would be no closures of parks, and more funding would be devoted to provincial parks.

I think an initial review of budget data confirms much of what the Deputy Minister said. But, in analyzing the data I was reminded that statistical data may be categorized and used to tell just about any story you want them to.

For example, focus on the Ministry's total operating expenses and compare those expenses in 2018/19 to estimated expenses in 2021/22. That comparison reveals that the Kenney government plans to spend \$110,335,000 or 14% less in the Ministry of Environment and Parks now than the Notley government did in its last year in office. These facts can be used to try to tell a story that the UCP has seriously cut the Ministry's funding. If this is the only story you want to hear then you might not want to read any further.

While the \$110 million cut is undeniably true...other stories may emerge from the data if you instead look at specific functions such as Fish & Wildlife or Parks. Comparing those data may tell you quite a different story. The money Alberta Environment and Parks proposes to spend in 2021/22 on Land, Water, Fish & Wildlife, and Parks is actually more than the Notley government spent in 2018/19. On the other hand, the Ministry intends to spend less than the NDP did then on seven other functions. Those areas are: Ministry Support Services, Air, Integrated Planning, Land Use Secretariat, Science & Monitoring, Emissions Management, and Quasi-Judicial Bodies.

The Kenney government suffered politically over Minister Nixon's "Optimizing Parks" plan. What then does this budget have in store for the parks system? To

my mind, that fallout and COVID-19 likely are responsible for a substantial increase in the Parks budget this year. The Ministry's Business Plan estimates that just over \$125 million will be spent on parks in the upcoming 2021/22 fiscal year. This is nearly \$17.5 million more than what the government proposed to spend on parks in last year's budget (a 16% increase). It's nearly \$15 million more than was spent on parks in 2018/19.

Deputy Minister Yee told AWA her department would have more people on the ground this year. The budget seems to bear that message out. Overall, there will be 311 fewer full-time equivalent (FTE) positions in Alberta's 20 departments. Environment and Parks is one of only five departments that will see an increase in its FTE complement. Sixty-eight new FTEs will be added to Environment and Parks this year. This will take the departmental complement to 2,100 FTEs. While this should be good news when it comes to having more people on the ground in the 2021/22 fiscal year the department is still 113 FTEs below the staffing level of 2018/19. Unless you believe mistakenly that the department was bloated and over-resourced (this has never been the case), the Ministry could use even more personnel to fulfill its stewardship mandate.

Some better news in this year's budget also is accompanied by some important red flags. One is fees. Premiums, fees, and licences are on the rise. Users must pay more. Premier Kenney's first budget set a 2021/22 target of just under \$112 million for this source of revenue. The new budget expects to collect \$142,477,000 in fees this year. That's \$30.5 million or 27% more than the earlier target. If Alberta had a public debate or consultation about the balance that should be struck between tax dollars and user fees, I missed it. AWA shares Deputy Minister Yee's view that accessibility to parks is a key value; we don't think more user fees supports that value.

AWA also is concerned about Minister Nixon's ongoing efforts to privatize stewardship responsibilities. The budget announced that some wetland replacement program activity and implementation will be transferred to "third parties." The same was said about caribou restoration activities. The only certainty about this shift in responsibilities is that it will save the government \$10 million this year and \$18 million annually after that. No evidence is offered to support the budget's accompanying claim that this transfer will be done "without impacting the overall programs or services." AWA would welcome the opportunity to see the data justifying the government's hope.

To summarize, the budget data offers some encouragement to believe the

Minister and government recognize they made fundamental mistakes with respect to how key functions of Alberta Environment and Parks were managed. But, it also affirms and recommits to some of those earlier errors. And, replenishing staff to yesteryear levels isn't much comfort given the accelerating challenges we face on fronts such as species-at-risk and biodiversity. A future of healthier landscapes likely demands more resources to functions such as integrated planning, science & monitoring, and the land use secretariat than the Kenney government has delivered so far.

Click [here](#) if you would like to see the spreadsheet I used to offer this initial analysis.

- Ian Urquhart
Conservation Director



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