

The Coal Consultation Update: Some Good News... But the Cart is Still Before the Horse

April 23, 2021

Energy Minister Sonya Savage delivered some good news in her April 23, 2021 coal consultation update: all coal exploration projects in Category 2 lands in Alberta's Eastern Slopes must halt immediately. AWA welcomes the Minister's decision to eliminate the immediate threat to landscapes and wildlife that could have resulted from the activities of Cabin Ridge and Valory Resources on Category 2 lands.

"But, the scope of the impact of Minister's announcement shouldn't be exaggerated" said Ian Urquhart, AWA's Conservation Director. "Atrum Coal, the owner of the Elan hard coking coal project (Isolation South/Elan South), already had announced that 'it will halt all major site-based activities, including any planned drilling in 2021'."

It also was encouraging to hear Ron Wallace, the Chair of the Coal Committee, say that it is certain that "the Government of Alberta in reaching decisions relating to coal development must assess issues related to potential pollution of air, land, and water and headwater landscapes." It also was important to hear him say that it would be false to conclude that the Committee will not hear environmental concerns from Albertans concerned about air, land, or water.

But, later in the news conference, Minister Savage used words that, to a reasonable person, call into question the impact those concerns from Albertans will have on her modern coal policy. "Albertans will certainly have their say on environmental and other questions," said the Minister, "and of course we want to hear those concerns, but these consultations are about coal policy... it's not about the broader land use planning initiatives, it's not about broader water allocations downstream between agriculture and municipal users. It's about coal. So notably let's get the coal policy and vision done first. And then from there it's going to determine if, what, and when other processes might or might not be necessary."

"With this statement, the Minister clearly puts the proverbial cart before the horse," said Urquhart. "Coal policy is land use planning and so too is water allocation when changes to the land uses will require changes to the allocation of water." As a land use planning exercise, this coal policy consultation must give serious consideration to the range of issues the Minister seems to believe should be put off until later.

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