

Coal Exploration and Mining on the Eastern Slopes - Is there an end in sight?

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The Government of Alberta announced March 4th that it will halt exploration and development for new coal mine projects on the Eastern slopes until land-use plans are completed. However, existing projects and advanced project applications will continue. The government also released its appointed Coal Policy Committee's engagement report and recommendations report. AWA welcomes the deferral of new projects, but remains concerned about the impacts of existing coal activities and advanced project applications for coal projects on the Eastern slopes.

"The halt of entirely new coal mining exploration and development on the Eastern slopes for the time being is positive news for Albertans," says Devon

Earl, conservation specialist at Alberta Wilderness Association. “However, it seems clear that proper assessments of cumulative effects should find that coal mining no longer has a place on Alberta’s Eastern slopes.”

Friday’s Government of Alberta news release on coal marks the completion of a coal policy engagement process. The process kicked-off following the rescission of the 1976 Coal Policy, which sparked justifiable outrage in Albertans and demands to end coal exploration and mining on the Eastern Slopes. The decision to rescind the policy led to the opening up of lands to coal mining that had previously been protected, and Albertans made their voices heard in opposition to the destruction of our valued Eastern Slopes. By Feb 8th, 2021 the 1976 Coal Policy was reinstated and a Coal Policy Committee was formed the following month to lead a comprehensive public engagement and submit recommendations for an updated Coal Policy to the government. The Coal Policy Committee’s engagement report and recommendations report were finally released to the public on Friday March 4th, 2022. As expected, the committee found that the majority of Albertans are concerned about coal mining on the Eastern slopes, with environmental concerns being an important issue.

As recommended in the Coal Policy Committee’s report, the Government of Alberta announced a new ministerial order that expands the halting of coal exploration in Category 2 lands to also include exploration and development in Category 3 and 4 lands, as defined by the 1976 Coal Policy (Coal activity has never been allowed on Category 1 lands). This freeze will remain in effect until land-use plans are completed, which will determine if and where it may be possible for coal activity to continue. Regional and sub-regional land-use plans under the *Alberta Land Stewardship Act* are intended to consider and regulate the impacts of multiple activities on the landscape.

While new coal activities on the Eastern Slopes have been halted, existing projects are allowed to continue operating. Additionally, “advanced” projects – those that have formally applied for authorization to mine – are permitted to continue through the regulatory process. There continues to be concerns about the environmental impacts of these projects. The Tent Mountain Redevelopment Project, which has been designated for federal impact assessment, is among these advanced projects.

Coal mining on the Eastern slopes threatens water quality of our important headwaters by pollution from selenium and other contaminants. A vast amount of water is required to “wash” a mine’s coal, and that could impact the amount

of clean water available to downstream municipalities, First Nations, ranchers and irrigators, as well as vital aquatic and river corridor ecosystems. Coal exploration and mining threatens Alberta species-at-risk such as westslope cutthroat trout, bull trout, woodland caribou and grizzly bear through habitat loss and degradation.

Additionally, legacy Eastern slopes coal mines that have been poorly reclaimed or remain unreclaimed have significantly affected Alberta headwaters and habitat. The 2013 failure of the Obed coal mine tailings dam released contaminated waters into tributaries of the Athabasca River that were Athabasca rainbow trout habitat, sending a detectable plume of contaminants down the River's main stem. Bighorn sheep on the Smoky River, Gregg River and Luscar coal mines have been assessed as having the lowest reproductive levels in Canada, believed to be because of ongoing selenium releases from the old mine sites.

The Coal Policy Committee's report also points out issues with Alberta's Mine Financial Security Program. AWA shares these concerns. "The current policy lacks firm deadlines for reclamation, and lacks transparency about the elements of companies' self-reported liabilities and what provision they've made for long-term monitoring and contingency plans" says Devon Earl. The report points out that "remediation and reclamation liabilities for some coal mining projects have been independently assessed as exceeding current financial security". Alberta Environment and Parks has launched a review of the Mine Financial Security Program, and it remains to be seen how these issues will be meaningfully addressed.

"We also hope to see changes that address the Coal Policy Committee's recommendations about strengthening Indigenous involvement in land-use planning" says Earl. The 1976 Coal Policy was formed entirely without consultation or involvement of Indigenous peoples. The inherent and Treaty rights of Indigenous peoples must be respected in land-use planning and decisions on the future of coal in the province.

AWA is pleased the Coal Policy Committee listened to the voices of Albertans, the majority of whom are concerned about coal exploration and development. "The reports bring to light that environmental concerns are a top-of-mind issue for Albertans when considering coal, and that Albertans have lost trust in the regulatory process regarding coal" says Earl. Meaningfully implementing the Coal Policy Committee's recommendations will help build trust by showing

Albertans that their views are respected. While deferring most new coal activity on the Eastern Slopes is a positive step towards a sustainable future, there is much more work to be done. Existing projects continue to cause environmental damage, and advanced projects, if approved, will also do so.

For more information:

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