

Environmental groups urge further protection for Castle wilderness region

Tourism worth more than logging, proponents say

By Meghan Potkins, October 25, 2011

CALGARY — Environmental groups are hoping that the recent cancellation of a sale of ecologically sensitive Crown land is a signal that Premier Alison Redford will consider limiting controversial logging in the Castle wilderness region.

A coalition of environmentalists, businesses and land owners released a report Tuesday calling on Alberta to increase public oversight of commercial logging in the narrow stretch of forest between the Continental Divide and the grasslands of southwestern Alberta.

The group welcomed the announcement last week by the province that it was axing the sale of 6,500 hectares of grassland in southeastern Alberta for a potato farm. Citing a lack of public input and concerns over the potential impact on water and the ranching community, the end of the proposed sale has environmentalists hopeful that there could be a sea change in the Progressive Conservative government's approach to Castle Special Place.

"Cancelling the potato deal was an indication that the premier is listening and willing to change current thinking," said Nigel Douglas of the Alberta Wilderness Association, and co-author of the sustainable forests report. "Hopefully that can continue with the Castle issue, where the public has spoken out strongly that they don't agree with clear-cut logging."

At a news conference Tuesday the coalition released a series recommendations for the province, including designating the Castle wilderness as a wildland park, which would limit development.

Logging in the region has long been controversial, with residents of nearby communities arguing that clear-cutting degrades wildlife habitat and water quality while dampening interest in the burgeoning local tourism industry.

Sustainable Resource Development spokesperson Dave Ealey said the government will look at the group's report, but added that the province's forest management plan is "balanced."

"We're not just looking at forestry, but oil and gas and recreation," said Ealey, who added that two-thirds of Castle Special Place is already off limits to timber harvesting. "Our (plan) still meets a lot of people's needs without being overly restrictive on the opportunities."

But conservationists said Albertans are more likely to benefit economically from the wilderness region without the logging.

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Southwestern communities like Bragg Creek, Crowsnest Pass and Pincher Creek “are gateway communities for recreationalists,” said Peter Sherrington, from Stop Castle Logging, “and the economic benefits that will flow there from recreation are several orders of magnitude greater than any benefit that will accrue to them from logging.”

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