

# Changes to Alberta's Provincial Parks Under the "Optimizing Alberta Parks" Plan

## A timeline

The *Optimizing Alberta Parks* plan, released in February of 2020, outlines changes to Alberta's provincial parks system that would see 164 sites removed from the system and another 20 sites fully or partially closed. The plan has been widely opposed by Albertans and a number of changes in government messaging have occurred since the initial announcement; however, there is currently no indication that the plan will be changed or reversed.

Read on to get up to date on all of the developments on this issue since February 2020!

### February 28: reduced provincial parks budget announced

Provincial budget release states reduction in the parks budget will come from a decrease in spending on parks management, with plans to move some of the operations and management of parks to private partners, and the removal of public funds to support these areas.

### February 29: list of 175 sites to be removed from system and/or closed is released

Announcement indicates 164 sites are planned to be eliminated or privatized through sale or transfer, and a further 20 sites will be completely or partially closed immediately. Other impacts include closing visitor centres, discontinuing popular groomed cross-country ski trails, shortening the operating season for many campgrounds and increasing camping and service fees at all sites.

### March 4: the wording "sale" is removed from the Alberta government's Optimizing Alberta Parks website

### March 19: a statistically valid public opinion survey conducted March 12-16, 2020 shows that almost 7 in 10 Albertans are opposed to the removal and closure of parks sites

### March 23: CPAWS releases "13 Truths and a Lie" blog summarizing the issue

### April 8: CPAWS hosts an online town hall and Q&A on the government's *Optimizing Alberta Parks* plan

### April 17: CPAWS hosts a "Rally from Home" virtual protest event, encouraging Albertans to call their MLA or the Minister of Environment and Parks from home while wearing gear for their favourite outdoor activity or setting up camp!

### April 28: due to high demand, CPAWS hosts a second online town hall and Q&A on the government's *Optimizing Alberta Parks* plan

### May 4: release of details on parks partnerships is delayed; list of sites to be delisted/closed removed from government website

Details of proposed parks partnerships was scheduled to be announced on May 4, but Government of Alberta delays release of details stating they will "have more to say about the release of our parks and public lands plans closer to the end of the month." List of parks slated for delisting is removed from the government website.

### June 23: quiet update to government website states that 17 of 20 sites set to be closed will remain temporarily open this summer in response to increased demand for outdoor recreation during the COVID-19 pandemic

### July 23: an access-to-information request submitted by CPAWS reveals that:

- Before release, the government's plan to delist Alberta Parks included removing their protected area status, selling lands to private operators or transferring them to vacant public land;
- The Minister of Environment and Parks was advised that this plan does not align with the overall intent of the parks system;
- There is insufficient data to understand the impacts these decisions will have on the budget;
- The Minister of Environment and Parks ignored advice to conduct broad public consultation and engagement on this plan.

### August 18: CPAWS and the Alberta Environmental Network launch the Defend Alberta Parks lawn sign campaign

### September 15: government announces increased infrastructure investment for parks, but reaffirms commitment to delisting/closing 175 sites; touts importance of existing partnerships

The investment in Fish Creek Provincial Park and Glenbow Ranch Provincial Park show that the government can successfully partner with organizations without needing to remove their protected area status.

### November 2: United Conservative Party (UCP) Caucus launches My Parks Will Go On campaign

The campaign materials state that "Alberta's parks remain protected under the jurisdiction of Alberta Environment and Parks"; however, they do not explain how sites will remain legally protected (e.g., under the *Parks Act* or other protected areas legislation). Public lands do not have the same protections as parks.

### November 5: CPAWS and Arc'teryx co-host an information and action night to update public and answer questions

### November 17: the UCP Caucus hosts a virtual town hall with the Minister of Environment and Parks, reiterating a commitment to keep parks protected under Alberta Environment and Parks; however, delisting and transfer to public lands is still mentioned, and mechanism for legally protecting sites remains unclear

The Minister highlights upcoming legislative and policy changes that will affect management of parks and public lands, including a new Trails Act, and refers to UCP election platform promise to "review Alberta Environment and Parks legislation to modernize it for the 21st century."

### November 25: CPAWS and the Alberta Environmental Network host a Q&A to answer questions from the public, with over 800 people registering to attend

Today: Defend Alberta Parks organizers and all Albertans engaged in this discussion remain committed and motivated to seek clarity on how parks will remain protected!