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New policy protects parks, B.C. says

VICTORIA — The provincial government says B.C.'s parks are off limits to industrial activity under a new policy, but an environmental group fears it makes way for pipelines and other development projects.

"Protecting our natural spaces is a priority," Environment Minister Mary Polak said in a written statement. "This policy provides more clarity around how research and information-gathering activities will be undertaken in B.C.'s parks and protected areas, which allows us to make informed decisions."

The statement said B.C. parks remain restricted to new industrial activity, but the permits could play a role in requests to adjust park boundaries.

Polak was not available to comment.

Last year, a campaign by environmental groups had more than 167,000 people sign a petition calling on the government to repeal the act, which became law in March 2014.

"Research can be purely for academic purposes, park and protected area management or as part of an environmental assessment or feasibility study," the ministry statement said.

However, Wilderness Committee policy director Gwen Barlee said the government now has more powers to clear the way for industrial activity in parks.

"To say we want to loosen those protections makes parks really vulnerable to industrial development. And that just defeats the very purpose of why they were created."

Barlee said the new policy is deceptive because it outlines the process for a developer to follow in order to successfully have a park's boundary adjusted to make room for a project.

"People don't want to have logging roads bisecting our parks and transmission lines and oil and gas lines bisecting our parks," she said. "I feel no relief or comfort in the policy that's being introduced."

Barlee said Polak told the legislature last year during debate over the Park Act that the government needed statutory approval to give the province more authority to grant or deny park permit applications.

The Environment Ministry statement said land can be removed from a B.C. park, but that requires an application for a boundary adjustment.

"Before any proposed park boundary adjustment is considered, a very rigorous exercise must be undertaken requiring public, First Nations and local community consultation, a review of alternatives to avoid the park and the completion of environmental assessments," the statement said.

It said that since 2004, 0.028 per cent of 14 million hectares in B.C.'s protected areas has been affected by boundary adjustments.



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Earlier this year, the Nisga'a Nation in northwestern B.C. reached a benefits- sharing agreement with the government that included removing more than 63 hectares of land from the Memorial Lava Bed Park to accommodate a proposed oil and gas pipeline.

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