

New northern park will protect caribou, grizzlies, watershed

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OTTAWA - The federal government has announced plans to create a new national park reserve in the Northwest Territories.

The announcement marks the second major expansion of protected areas since last summer, when Prime Minister Stephen Harper pledged to extend the boundaries of the Nahanni National Park Reserve.

"It is truly one of the most remarkable places in the world," said Environment Minister John Baird, standing alongside aboriginal leaders and environmentalists at a ceremony at Ottawa's Museum of Nature. "Today's announcement is another concrete example of the government of Canada's commitment to the country's north."

The region is home to several animals listed under endangered species legislation, including the northern mountain woodland caribou and grizzly bears. The park, also home to Dall sheep, is known for spectacular landscapes and waterways. The government announced it would contribute \$500,000 over two years to help local aboriginal communities finalize an impact and benefit plan.

Baird said that over the next four or five years, several thousand kilometres of land would be protected from new economic activities such as mining, but he added there were other steps to take to officially expand the park.

"One of the things that frustrates me is that there's all these rules in place to stop bad things from happening, but when you want something good to happen, it still requires the process to push it through," Baird told reporters. "But it just demonstrates our commitment to get the job done."

Aboriginal leaders and conservation groups hailed the announcement as a step in the right direction to protect the region's watershed.

"Water is what we're living off today, and we have to protect that," said Sahtu Grand Chief Frank Andrew.

Several conservation groups also praised Baird for demonstrating leadership and personal commitment to take action, urging him to put the same effort into his plan to address climate change.

"It's nice to see leadership and personal commitment from the government on this (land conservation issue), and John Baird has been really, really great on taking a leadership role and working to see results," said Jennifer Morin, a senior conservation co-ordinator for the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society.

"It might be a lot harder and maybe not as rewarding to come out in front on climate change, but we anticipate once the land withdrawals for these particularly areas wind down, we want to see the same emphasis and effort (placed) behind climate change."