

Alberta's film industry at a standstill on production, filmmakers say

Zahra Premji | October 1, 2019



Report pegs total labour-income impact to Alberta at about \$250M per year.

A shift in how screen-based production companies will be able to access government funding in Alberta has some members in the industry bracing for the worst.

While the province's United Conservative government prepares to release its first budget on Oct. 24, filmmakers say a proposed transfer from a grant process to a tax credit in Alberta has left a temporary funding void.

That funding gap — and how long it will last — is causing uncertainty in the industry, which could make other provinces more appealing for film companies.

"It's really important that we have some stability because a company like Netflix or Disney, they need to know months out," said Ava Karvonen, chair of Women in Film and Television Alberta.

"Sometimes it takes years to put financing together for production."

Karvonen's frustrations are echoed by Kelly Wolfert, an Edmonton-based producer, director and cinematographer who said he understands a new government needs some time to create new policies but there needs to be a backup plan.

"Shutting down the program and not having something available for transition really causes an emergency and a backlog," Wolfert said.

"In some cases, broadcasters expect that you have support from your provincial government to be able to provide a solid financial structure for your project."

A Canadian Media Producers Association (CMPA) report in 2018 pegged the total labour-income impact of film and television production in Canada at \$9.23 billion in 2017/18, with Alberta's share estimated at about \$250 million per year.

The report put Alberta in fourth place among the provinces and territories in its share of production work. But the top three provinces — British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec, respectively — accounted for 92 per cent of all Canadian film and TV production.

While all sorts of films and television programs are produced and created in Edmonton, many producers say it's a hub for documentaries.

SpiderMable The Film, a feature-length documentary about a six-year-old battling cancer, is one example of those stories told in Edmonton, edited in Edmonton and worked on in Edmonton.

Grants vs. tax credits

The original grant program for the film industry surfaced in 2017 with the previous NDP government, which boosted funding available for film and TV production from \$30 million to \$45 million.

Under the NDP program, applicants could apply for a grant of up to 30 per cent of eligible Alberta production expenditures.

The NDP government described it as an incentive program to keep productions and crews in Alberta. Producers said it was often the pillar for securing additional funding or necessities to bring their films to the big screens.

A spokesperson for the Minister of Culture, Leela Aheer, said the incoming government discovered \$92 million had been committed to the industry, even though the program had been capped at \$45 million.



Minister of Culture Leela Aheer defends the government's decision to move to a film tax credit system. (Fuat Seker/CBC)

The new government said all grant agreements previously approved are being fulfilled, and the government remains committed to transitioning to a film tax credit.

While the tax credit program hasn't come to Alberta yet, it was part of the United Conservative Party's election-winning platform, which promised such a system would allow the province to compete for major media projects with B.C. and Ontario.

It allows production companies to file for a credit based on the type of work being done and Alberta based locations and crews.

Grant program 'mismanaged' by NDP, Aheer says

In defending the decision to move to a tax credit system, Aheer said last week the previous government's program had been "severely mismanaged by the NDP."

"The government remains committed to transitioning to a film tax credit and working with industry through the process of revitalization," Aheer said in an emailed statement.

Aheer's office did not respond to questions about why there's been no funding support in the interim.

Rosvita Dransfeld, owner of Edmonton-based ID Productions, was nominated for an Emmy this year. She said the province doesn't realize just how thriving the film industry is in the province.

The CMPA report estimated there were about 5,350 people in Alberta who are either employed directly or as a spin-off from film and television production.

Dransfeld said if no grant or tax credit is coming while the government works on compiling a new budget, productions could be delayed and crews will start leaving the province.

"Most of the creative work and the stories as well will be told from somewhere else by someone else," she said. ■