

## PUBLIC PASTURES – PUBLIC INTEREST

# A Vision for the Future of Saskatchewan Heritage Rangelands

In the spring of 2012, the federal government announced it was transferring control of the PFRA pastures back to the provinces. In Saskatchewan the PFRA lands comprise 62 pastures totaling 1.8 million acres. The land for the pastures is almost all provincially owned. While the Manitoba government intends to keep the land under public ownership, the Saskatchewan government has announced it plans to sell or lease the land to farmers and ranchers who have been grazing livestock on the pastures. The Province has also said that it does not want to manage the pastures.

A forum on the pastures was held on November 23, 2012 in Regina. A second event, the “Forum on the Future of the PFRA Pastures,” was held on March 1, 2013, at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon. The Saskatoon forum was attended by over 100 rural and urban residents including, farmers, ranchers, conservationists, First Nations, scientists, and academics.

The following principles were developed by Public Pastures – Public Interest based on input from the forums, further discussions and research evidence.

### The Principles

#### **1. Keep ownership of the PFRA pastures in the public domain.**

*This is the best way to balance diverse interests, to preserve the integrity of the pastures, and to ensure that the legacy of the pastures is secured for future generations.*

#### **2. Maintain livestock grazing as a priority.**

*Livestock grazing is essential to the management of healthy prairie grasslands and to maintaining cattle and other livestock production now and in the future. This is a win-win arrangement that benefits producers and preserves the natural ecosystems in the pastures.*

#### **3. Utilize professional pasture managers.**

*It has taken decades to build up the expertise needed to manage the livestock and grazing, the ecosystems, and the habitats for indigenous species and species at risk. Pasture managers are part of a system-wide team that helps them to improve their individual practices and provides coordinated support. Pasture patrons have dubbed their PFRA pasture manager as ‘their best asset.’*

#### **4. Preserve the natural landscapes and ecological integrity of the pastures.**

*Preservation of the natural landscapes and ecology of the pastures is important at a World level. They contain the largest contiguous blocks of original prairie grasslands in the Northern Great Plains. They are home to many indigenous species, including 32 species at risk found in 55 of the pastures.*

## **5. Protect the cultural and historic significance of these heritage rangelands.**

*The pastures contain significant heritage and archaeological sites, and sacred and ceremonial sites that are still significant in contemporary First Nation and Métis cultures. They have played a key role in Canada's agricultural development and preserve the tradition of working cowboys. The pastures are part of the history, culture, and vitality of rural Saskatchewan.*

## **6. Recognize and sustain the investment in the public benefits provided by publicly-owned community pastures.**

*Through the visionary action taken by key agricultural leaders more than 75 years ago, public resources were applied to restore degraded land to a state that yielded economic production and environmental benefits year after year. The PFRA community pastures provide one of the best examples of a "triple-bottom-line" enterprise: they provide an environmental, social and economic dividend to all Canadians. This investment needs to be continued now and in the future.*

## **A Strategy Forward**

### **A. Work with stakeholders to establish an inclusive Transition Plan.**

*We need a clear and transparent transition plan to manage the changes to the PFRA community pastures. Participants in the planning should include: governments, pasture patrons, municipalities, First Nations, industries, conservation organizations, range managers and others. The goal should be to ensure that the best-management practices developed through the PFRA continue to serve pasture patrons, protect our natural and cultural heritage, and provide benefits for the people of Saskatchewan.*

### **B. Take the time to get it right.**

*The decisions from the federal government were made without consultation. The Saskatchewan government has bought a little time from the federal government to do some review of the situation, but forcing a decision to dispose of the first ten pastures by the Fall of 2013, as currently planned, is too rushed. Time is needed for the general public, who are the owners of the land, and the various stakeholders, to determine what the future of the community pastures will be and how they can be preserved for future generations.*