Importance of Pastures & Pasture Management System: Factsheet

ISSUE: In Saskatchewan, management of 1.8 million acres of land in 62 former PFRA community pastures is being transferred from the Federal Government to the Province. This is a land area larger than Prince Edward Island. The Province intends to sell or lease the land to private users, putting public benefits at risk.

WHY DO THESE PASTURES AND THEIR MANAGEMENT MATTER?

Background
- The PFRA Community Pasture Program managed 2.2 million acres of fragile land across the three prairie provinces, organized as follows: 62 pastures in Saskatchewan, 22 in Manitoba, and one in Alberta.
- The pastures provided public land management for fragile lands, with two objectives: conservation - focused on the quality of the rangeland resource; and sustainable use - focused on livestock grazing. PFRA managed the pastures to ensure that the two objectives were in balance.
- They were formed after the droughts of the 1930s to rehabilitate and protect the land, and contribute to economic security. They continue to provide a protection against desertification - “the process of fertile land transforming into desert typically as a result of deforestation, drought or improper/inappropriate agriculture” - in the drought prone areas.

Supporting smaller farmers and cattle producers
- On average in Saskatchewan, some 2500 pasture patrons depend on these pastures for summer grazing. Most patrons graze cow-calf pairs; generally some 73,000 cows mostly with calves at foot.
- The allocation per patron is limited to 60 adult animals to help ensure that smaller farmers receive the most benefit from the service. Patron committees can reduce this allocation and some in southwest Saskatchewan set it at 30 head.
- Many pastures also provide high quality bulls to help improve herd genetics. The majority of patrons choose to place their cows in a “breeding field” with bulls.
- Fees are set to recover the costs of grazing and breeding services. In 2011, for example, patrons paid grazing fees of 45 cents per cow per day, plus $25 per season for the calves. An additional fee of $40 per season was paid for cows placed in the breeding field.
- Pasture management ensures that the patrons' livestock are well looked after, enabling patrons to concentrate on the other parts of their agricultural operations during the grazing season.

Supporting Saskatchewan’s ecology
- The 62 PFRA community pastures in Saskatchewan have approximately 1.8 million acres of land, which is larger than the area of Prince Edward Island.
- These pastures preserve landscapes that represent Saskatchewan’s natural (pre-cultivation) ecosystems, from the aspen parkland to the endangered short grass prairie. Pastures are found across the agricultural region, from Maple Creek to North Battleford in the west and from Estevan to Kelvington in the east.
- Sound management of these lands contributes to sound ecology, while supporting cattle producers. At a quality of “good” or better, rangeland contributes to public objectives such as:
  - a 'sink' for carbon, sequestrating carbon from the atmosphere;
  - a habitat for many wild species.
- a natural filter for runoff from surrounding agricultural land, contributing to improved water quality.

- According to a report by some Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada scientists, on average, over half of the rangeland in Canada is reported to be in “poor” condition, largely due to overgrazing. By contrast, three-quarters of the land in the PFRA Community Pastures is in good (or better) condition.

- The Saskatchewan Conservation Data Centre (2012) lists 58 species, excluding fish, that are considered “endangered”, “threatened”, or of “Special Concern” under Canada’s Species at Risk Act (SARA). Thirty-one are found on the PFRA Community Pastures, and some have only been found on those lands.

Balancing agriculture and the environment though professional management

Responsible pasture management respects the needs of the patrons – and their cattle – and the needs of the other species that depend on the pasture land. The Province says it will not manage the pastures like the Manitoba Government has decided to do. So what’s at risk?

- Under the PFRA system, pasture managers are responsible for daily operations of the pastures, ensuring that cattle are healthy and well cared for, and that they are moved throughout the pasture as necessary to conserve the grass and respect the needs of other species that depend on the pasture landscapes. They demonstrate sound management techniques to others in the rural community, of which they are a part. In addition, pasture managers are responsible for the pasture infrastructure – fences, dugouts, etc. - ensuring the security of the land and the safety of the cattle.

- A small team of biologists with range and biodiversity expertise supports pasture operations. They conduct range condition assessments which determine the mix of plant species and overall rangeland condition. In cooperation with the pasture managers, they also develop range management plans ensuring that cattle are moved from field to field to prevent overgrazing of some areas of land or some species of grass, and that the land is available to other species at critical breeding or nesting periods.

- In the event of a drought, or if the range condition assessment reveals a problem, the number of animals and the length of time on pasture can be reduced to reflect what the land and the grass can bear in a year. While this might not be a popular decision with patrons who might have to find other feed sources for their livestock, it is recognized as the responsibility of the public land manager.

Economic and scientific activity

- Access to pasture lands for other uses is also granted, with conditions that respect the security of the cattle and the conservation of the land. For example, provincially licenced oil, gas and other mineral extraction is managed to minimize negative impacts and to ensure effective reclamation of disturbed areas, with native plant species where possible.

- As well managed public lands, the pastures are also rich resources for scientists working on rangeland health, interactions between livestock and wild species, carbon sequestration by grasses, water filtration, and many other topics. Before the recent change, PFRA pastures hosted some 60 different research projects/parties yearly. Future access for scientific research will be at risk if the pastures pass into private ownership.

Managed access supports broader uses of the PFRA pastures

- PFRA pastures can be used for harvesting medicinal plants, native fruits and native plant seeds.

- After livestock are taken home in the fall, the pastures can be used for hunting.

- Educational tours, recreational activities like bird watching, and scientific studies occur on PFRA pastures.

- Heritage resources include First Nations and Métis historic and ceremonial sites, and homesteads and graves of early Europeans.

- Public management will help preserve heritage and ecological resources and enable the broader uses of these lands.

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