



# Public Pastures - Public Interest

## Facts About the Importance of Community Pastures and Grasslands

### What's been happening?

- In 2012, the Conservative Government in Ottawa decided, without any consultation, to abandon the Community Pasture Program managed by the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA). This included 1.8 million acres of grassland in 62 community pastures in Saskatchewan, among the largest and best managed prairie grasslands remaining in Canada.
- Twenty of the pastures have been transferred to the province with another 10 slated for transfer this spring. The Saskatchewan government has said they did not want to take over the management of the pastures and would sell the pastures with two caveats:
  1. Only the patrons could purchase the pastures.
  2. A Conservation Easement would be placed on a pasture prior to it being sold.

Selling the land would take this precious resource out of public oversight and most likely eliminate access entitled to Indigenous people on Crown lands. The Manitoba government has kept their Community Pastures and set up an organization to manage them.

- So far no Saskatchewan pastures have been sold. The land is being leased by pasture patrons, requiring a process for setting up management groups that has been difficult and frustrating. The resources for managing the grassland ecosystems are not adequate. Unlike private land owners, patrons leasing the land are required to allow public access, including hunting after the livestock are removed in the fall, as well as access by the oil and gas industry and other members of the public, without any extra resources for this oversight.
- The government is offering other publically owned lands for sale. The Ministry of Agriculture states that none of these lands are ecologically sensitive, yet investigation shows that at least some of the lands for sale contain environmentally important areas.

### Why are the Community Pastures and Other Grasslands Important?

- Canada has its own threatened Amazonian forest - our native prairie. It is widely considered **one of the most endangered ecosystems in Canada**. Less than 20% of our native prairie remains in Saskatchewan. The rest has been turned into agricultural fields, cities and roads. Some types of native grassland, such as northern fescue, are even more diminished, to less than 10% of their original.

- Many of the federally-listed Species at Risk in Saskatchewan are found in our native grasslands. This is a direct result of the habitat loss. In Southern Saskatchewan, many of the **native birds and animals require native prairie** to survive - it is their only home. Over 30 Species at Risk are known to live on the Community Pastures.
- While a quarter section of agricultural land may contain a few agricultural crop species, **a quarter section of native prairie will support over a hundred species** of grasses and wildflowers and hundreds of animal species including birds, insects and myriad bacteria and fungi. Sadly our croplands are biological deserts bereft of almost all of their original native diversity.
- **Grasslands help mitigate climate change** through carbon sequestration by the grasses and other plants. They prevent soil erosion. They also contribute to **water security** as healthy plants and their root systems filter and purify our water.
- Most of the carbon held in the ecosphere is found in soils. Unbroken native prairie sequesters a vast deposit of soil carbon - one of Canada's largest carbon sinks. Most of this carbon is lost when prairie is broken. This happens because soil bacteria quickly convert the stores of soil carbon into CO<sub>2</sub>, a greenhouse gas that directly contributes to global warming. Acre for acre, prairie soils hold more carbon than boreal forest soils.
- Grasslands are **important to cattle ranchers and their communities** as they provide land for grazing - for both domestic and wild species of animals. As publically owned lands, they can support smaller producers, and can demonstrate how economic, cultural and environmental objectives can be integrated.
- Many archaeological sites are still to be found on these relatively undisturbed prairie grasslands. These sites have significant **cultural and heritage values** for all Saskatchewan people: indigenous, settler and other newcomers.
- Saskatchewan people use these publically owned lands for **recreational and cultural purposes**. They are important to the nearby **rural communities** and are very important elements of **Indigenous traditional culture**.
- Public lands are more than a commodity. While they have financial value for agriculture, they also provide important environmental, heritage, cultural, indigenous and recreational values.
- These grasslands - as threatened as the Amazon rainforest - are our children's heritage and our responsibility. Our children's prairie heritage is under threat: the beauty of a fresh prairie morning; birds singing; wildflowers dancing in the breeze. **We must ensure that our children inherit a province rich in the possibilities of our grasslands.**

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