

**Public Pastures–Public Interest (PPPI)**  
**Brief to the Government of Saskatchewan on the Saskatchewan Pasture Program**  
**April 27, 2017**

Public Pastures–Public Interest (PPPI) is a multi-sectoral group formed in response to the transfer of the federal community pastures to provincial control and the subsequent decision by the Government of Saskatchewan to offer the pasturelands for sale (most are currently leased and managed by entities controlled by former public pasture patrons). PPPI is unique in Saskatchewan and Western Canada in terms of the range of interests and perspectives it brings together, and the dialogue it fosters between naturalists, environmental conservation groups, cattle producers, agricultural groups, Indigenous communities, pasture management specialists, civil servants, university researchers, other educators, hunters, photographers, filmmakers, writers, and concerned citizens from rural and urban locations. PPPI is governed by an elected 10-member board and has several hundred individual supporters. Official endorsement of its principles has been received from 47 organizations representing many tens of thousands of members across Canada and internationally. One can learn more about PPPI and its initiatives at our Internet site: <https://pfrapastureposts.wordpress.com/>

PPPI has a broad interest in the preservation of native grasslands and wildlife habitat, and in maintaining public access and public control on Crown pasturelands that are managed as part of a sustainable working landscape. Interacting frequently with other grassroots organizations and with government agencies, PPPI members work to inform themselves and others about the ecological value of grassland habitats, to evaluate potential impacts of restructuring initiatives and alternatives, and to seek policy and program changes that integrate holistic, long-term sustainability goals and objectives.

The 50 community pastures in the Saskatchewan Pasture Program (SPP) provide organizational infrastructure for sustainable management of ecologically important grasslands. These pastures integrate diverse production, agricultural development, conservation, and public access objectives on 780,000 acres of Crown land. They promote agricultural diversification and development, conserve soil and water resources, protect endangered species, facilitate recreational and cultural opportunities, and support the economic and social development of local communities.

The SPP provides 1300 farmers and ranchers with access to professionally managed pastures. Use rights are allocated equitably under recognized rules, lease rates are similar to those for other Crown pastureland, and the cost to the government is net-neutral given revenues from patrons and from entities accessing oil, gas, and mineral resources. The public pastures also help the federal and provincial governments to meet national and international obligations with respect to native grasslands and endangered species protection, and they are important sites for low-cost carbon sequestration.

These community pastures are internationally recognized as successful examples of commons governance via a partnership of public servants and livestock producers. The SPP gains

coherence and efficiencies as a system through shared program design and administration, through sharing of expertise and technical supports, and through the sharing of co-generated knowledge. The presence of professional pasture managers helps to ensure that environmental stewardship aims and regulations are honoured by all users—pasture patrons, recreational users, researchers, and enterprises using pasture sites for resource extraction and transport activities. The managers and riders share pasture and livestock management expertise with patrons, ensure the equitable enforcement of standards and rules, and keep systematic records that help to make the pastures useful as agro-ecological observatories.

While there are always opportunities to improve, to renovate, and to reinvest, the SPP is not broken and no evidence has been brought forward with respect to any substantive gains to be realized by dismantling the program. Privatizing, fragmenting, and removing professional management from these community pastures all represent risks in terms of lost opportunities to advance the public good by preserving affordable access to grazing lands, pursuing multifunctional management of old-growth grasslands, meeting regional and international treaty obligations, and maintaining desirable organizational, agricultural, and biological diversity.

PPPI is deeply concerned about the March 2017 budget announcement of an intent to decommission the SPP and to implement a transition plan broadly modeled on the restructuring of the former PFRA pastures. We are concerned about the fundamental wisdom and purpose of such an initiative, about the lack of due diligence with respect to possible losses and costs, about the apparent unwillingness of the government to consider ways to build on the existing physical and organizational infrastructure, about the rushed schedule for implementation and completion of this plan, and about the superficial character of the supporting analysis and consultation. This includes an online survey replete with ambiguities and with questions that seem designed to elicit answers consistent with the government's intent. Moreover, the survey starts from a position that the SPP will be dismantled and replaced and thus sidesteps the most central and debatable question.

Consistent with the values and principles previously enunciated in response to the federal pasture transition program, PPPI calls on the Government of Saskatchewan to take note of and to act on the following:

1. No dismantling of the SPP before a serious inquiry into its ecological, agro-economic, and socio-cultural value, and into the risks and costs of privatization of management or ownership of these parcels.
2. No restructuring of the SPP until a study of the ecological, agro-economic, and socio-cultural effects of the transition of former PFRA pastures to private, patron-group management.
3. No transition of the SPP system of community pastures before evaluation of alternatives, including maintaining, reinvesting in, and updating the SPP.

4. Public consultation that meets industry standards in terms of timing and research instrument design: no premature closure on alternatives, sharing and disclosure of background analysis and research documents (including survey and consultation results), resources for participating groups, and inclusion of civil servants as participants.
5. Institution of an 18-month pause as the minimum lead-time required for due diligence. There is no urgency and no demonstrated case for haste re decommissioning a system that took decades to build.
6. If any restructuring of the SPP is deemed to be in the public interest, this should occur only in a manner consistent with foundational principles:
  - a. No sale of Crown pasturelands.
  - b. No subdividing of SPP pastures for individual/exclusive use.
  - c. No breaking of native grasslands or long-established tame grass.
  - d. Public access should be preserved but controlled to limit risks for habitat, livestock, and people.
  - e. Leases should be affordable and equitable, and use rights should be allocated fairly.
  - f. Public pastures should model multifunctional management, seeking balance and complementarities between agro-economic, ecological, and socio-cultural goals.
  - g. Management of public pastures should equal or exceed standards currently mandated by the province.
  - h. Public pastures should model co-management involving producers, public servants, and other interested parties.
  - i. Management for SPP (and former PFRA) pasturelands should include regional coordination and collaboration to assure ecological sustainability and to facilitate sharing of expertise and services.

PPPI welcomes all opportunities to be involved in public deliberations related to genuine renewal and to the elaboration of coherent plans for ensuring environmental integrity and advancing the public good. We will continue to dialogue with interested parties and to seek solutions that include agro-economic, ecological, and social sustainability as top-line program design criteria. In the meantime, we also advocate adoption of the precautionary principle. Once damaged or dismantled, Prairie ecosystems and community pastures are not easily resurrected. The first responsibility of those proposing significant changes is to ensure these are not harmful or inequitable.

In the Saskatchewan context this means that any government-mandated changes in land tenure and land management will serve public policy goals related to promoting agricultural sector economic and environmental sustainability, advancing climate change mitigation and resilience (including carbon storage), accommodating Species at Risk initiatives, retaining the protected areas status of the land where applicable, promoting food security, assuring workable and

sustainable conditions for the resource sector, recognizing the centrality of land relations in community development, protecting historic and archaeological heritage, and honouring First Nations and Métis rights. As we move forward to collaborate in the development of viable and attractive arrangements, we are ready and able to work with all stakeholders including governments, ENGOs, pasture patrons and other livestock producers, the resource sector, and First Nations and Métis community representatives.

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