

PUBLIC PASTURES – PUBLIC INTEREST

MEDIA RELEASE

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CROWN ASSETS BEING PLACED AT RISK: THE ONGOING PRIVATIZATION OF SASKATCHEWAN'S NATIVE GRASSLANDS

Regina, Saskatchewan:

In its March, 2017 budget the province announced the end of the Saskatchewan Pasture Program. Public Pastures- Public Interest wants the public to be aware and have its say on the future of these lands.

The Province's official position is that the pasture program has outlived its usefulness. The Ministry of Agriculture says that the livestock community does not need community pastures anymore and the government should not be in the business of managing cattle.

Most cattle producers in the province seem to disagree, but even if that were true, cattle production is merely one public good among many that well-managed community pastures can provide. Because light to moderate grazing keeps the land healthy, the other values that come from these lands — carbon sequestration, habitat for species at risk, protection of rare ecosystems in the province's Representative Areas Network, sites for research — are often best served by a system of management influenced by a sustainable and long term public agenda rather than short-term private interest of lease-holding producers.

Over three-quarters of the 780,000 acres in the provincial pastures, especially in the southern part of the province, are still in native condition. This type of land can be home to many species at risk, and long-established stands of non-native grass often provide important habitat too.

The Ministry of Agriculture is looking at options, which could include leasing the land to corporations of farmers and ranchers with livestock operations, but initial communications from the ministry said that they will also look into the possibility of selling some of the lands.

PPPI sees the closure of the provincial pasture program as another step in privatizing Saskatchewan's grassland commons. By removing public involvement and management of these lands, the Province is first giving up the infrastructure that could be used to do a better job of managing public grasslands for climate change mitigation and species recovery. But it is also exposing their carbon storage capacity, biodiversity, and species at risk to the market forces and private interests that inevitably drive land use decisions and lead to habitat erosion and fragmentation over time as good private stewards retire and are eventually superseded by managers who push the land harder for short term gain. A community pasture management

system gives government at least the capacity to protect the commons for the long term public good.

The grazing on these lands needs to be monitored to ensure preservation of the natural habitat. However, the Ministry of Agriculture is unlikely to replace the 130 pasture management staff who are losing their positions with enough range ecologist staff to properly monitor and support the private management of these ecologically critical public lands.

These lands and the system that manages them are Crown assets as much as Crown corporations. The only difference is that if land is degraded or plowed the native prairie can't be restored. Outside of grazing season they are accessed by hunters, naturalists, Indigenous people, educators, writers and photographers. Keeping them publicly-owned ensures that this kind of access will be retained.

The government is conducting a consultation, with stakeholder meetings and an on-line survey that ends on May 8. Unfortunately, the survey doesn't ask the primary question – do people want the Saskatchewan Pasture Program to end? The government could also take the opportunity to bring together all the people concerned about pastures for dialogue: pasture patrons, environmentalists, Indigenous people and people who look forward to local, sustainably-produced beef.

PPPI is urging all members of the public to fill out the survey and write to their MLA and the Premier about the future of these Crown assets.

<http://www.saskatchewan.ca/government/public-consultations/pasture-land-consultation>

PPPI has forwarded its recommendations to the government. (See summary below)

Public Pastures – Public Interest is a network of individuals and organizations supporting the preservation and sustainable use of Crown pasturelands and grasslands, with a wide range of supporters in Saskatchewan and internationally.

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