



Celebrate, Educate, Protect!

NC/10-0100-20
October 21, 2010

The Honourable Ed Stelmach
Premier of Alberta
Room 307, Legislature Building
10800 - 97th Avenue
Edmonton AB T5K 2B6

Dear Premier Stelmach,

Subject: Proposed Sale of Public Native Prairie in the Bow Island Provincial Grazing Reserve for Conversion into Irrigated Cropland for Potato Production

Nature Canada is one of Canada's oldest national non-profit conservation organizations. Our mission is to protect and conserve wildlife and habitats in Canada by engaging people and advocating on behalf of nature. Our network includes 40,000 supporters and more than 350 naturalist organizations across Canada.

It is our understanding that there is a proposal before Cabinet to sell 13,600 acres of public native prairie rangeland in the Bow Island Provincial Grazing Reserve (BIPGR) to SLM Spud Farms for conversion into irrigated cropland for potato production. We are writing to urge you to prevent the significant impacts this conversion will have on Canada's biodiversity by rejecting this proposal.

The central grasslands of North America are considered one of North America's most endangered ecosystems. In this International Year of Biodiversity and as governments from around the world are gathered in Nagoya, Japan to work towards addressing alarming biodiversity loss, entertaining a proposal to convert endangered native prairie lands to potato production should be out of the question.

While native prairie occupies approximately five percent of Alberta's land base, it supports half of its rare ecological communities, 40% of rare vascular plant species and 70% of federally and provincially designated at risk mammal, bird, reptile and amphibian species. Converting this land to produce potatoes will cause irreversible damage to critical habitat for species that have been designated as 'Endangered' or 'Threatened' under the federal *Species at Risk Act* and Alberta's *Wildlife Act*. This would likely contravene these laws and jeopardize the survival and recovery of these species at risk. Many of the species that occur in this area are also protected under the federal *Migratory Birds Convention Act*.

Alberta's Grassland Natural Region has already lost over 60% of its native prairie, and what remains is fragmented and under continuous threats. The BIPGR is an area of high biodiversity. There are healthy populations of Pronghorns, according to extensive surveys over the last 30 years, and above-average potential habitat for several species such as the Burrowing Owl, Ferruginous Hawk, Prairie Falcon, Sharp-tailed Grouse, Sprague's Pipit, Loggerhead Shrike, Great Plains Toad, Plains Spadefoot, Prairie Rattlesnake, Short-horned Lizard, Richardson's Ground Squirrel and Badger. The South Saskatchewan River valley provides important deer habitat, highly productive breeding areas for raptors, Canada Geese, American White Pelicans and migrating and overwintering waterfowl, and includes critical ungulate winter range, and numerous large snake hibernacula.

As you know, native prairie grasslands provide important ecosystem services such as pollination, soil and moisture conservation, carbon storage and clean water – all of which contribute to the well-being of neighboring communities. Failing to conserve what remains of these areas will have serious implications on the future of this imperiled ecosystem and the livelihoods that depend on it, and will be felt on a continental, if not global, scale.

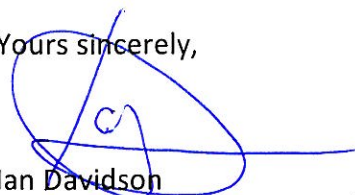
Finally, the conversion of this public land would contradict and compromise Canada's efforts to conserve endangered native prairie, promote sustainable development and ensure good stewardship of the land. Canada's newly released report on the status and trends of Canada's biodiversity, produced jointly by the federal, provincial and territorial governments¹, classifies grasslands as "impaired", meaning that this ecosystem in Canada is "outside of range of natural variation, unstable, or likely not recovering" and indicating "poor progress or insufficient actions, or stressors causing major impacts". Urgent action is therefore needed to reverse these trends of grasslands degradation. Conversion of public native prairie lands to potato production would instead reinforce them. Also, the North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC) of which Canada is part, has highlighted the need to conserve

¹ Federal, Provincial and Territorial Governments of Canada. 2010. Canadian Biodiversity: Ecosystem Status and Trends 2010. Canadian Councils of Resource Ministers. Ottawa, ON. 146 p.

this imperiled shared North American ecosystem. In fact, the area proposed for conversion lies within one of the Grassland Priority Conservation Areas identified by the CEC, Bow Island PCA².

In summary, we urge you to reject the proposal to sell and convert this area and to ensure that public native prairie is managed as to contribute to the conservation of the endangered grasslands ecosystem and the numerous species at risk that depend on it. We look forward to celebrating your commitment to the conservation of Alberta's and Canada's biodiversity.

Yours sincerely,



Ian Davidson

Executive Director

cc: Hon. Jim Prentice, Minister of Environment
Hon. Mel Knight, Minister, Sustainable Resource Development
Hon. Rob Renner, Minister, Alberta Environment
Hon. Jack Hayden, Minister, Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development
Mr. Evan Lloyd, Executive Director, Commission for Environmental Cooperation

² CEC and TNC. 2005. *North American Central grasslands priority conservation areas: technical report and documentation*. Eds. J.W. Karl and J. Hoth. Commission for Environmental Cooperation and The Nature Conservancy. Montreal, Quebec.

