

Political leadership needed to preserve precious prairie grasslands

The feds should halt the transfer of community pastures to Saskatchewan and establish a trust to support conservation.



LORNE SCOTT AND STEPHEN HAZELL

Temperate grasslands are among the most endangered ecosystems in Canada and globally. For 80 years, the federal Community Pasture Program successfully restored and managed more than 800,000 hectares of native grasslands in Saskatchewan. These community pastures include some of the most significant remaining tracts of native grassland in Cana-

da with high concentrations of species at risk, and provide important grazing for livestock producers (so-called pasture patrons).

The 2012 unilateral decision of Stephen Harper's then-government to cancel the program and transfer management of these lands to the government of Saskatchewan has put these important prairie grasslands at risk.

Current Saskatchewan policy is to lease or sell these lands to patron groups who would manage them for cattle production only, although none of the 44 (of 62) pastures that have been transferred have yet been sold. Pasture patron groups are currently managing, or moving to manage, livestock production on the transferred pastures. Further, \$5-million in annual revenue from surface leases (e.g. oil and gas production) on the pastures will be transferred to Saskatchewan.

There has been widespread and sustained opposition to the 2012 federal decision and Saskatchewan's policy from livestock producers, conservation and farm organizations, and rural municipalities.

University of Regina research-

ers estimate that the former federal pastures store 150 million tonnes of carbon when they are managed well. Valuing this carbon at \$32 per tonne, the total value would amount to nearly \$4.8-billion. If the pastures are managed only for cattle production and oil and gas development, the carbon stored in these grasslands will be at risk of being released into the atmosphere, further adding to Canada's greenhouse gas emissions. Well-managed grasslands sequester almost as much carbon as forested land, contributing to Canada's climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts.

Currently, the community pastures in Canada count towards achievement of Canada's commitment under the UN Convention on Biological Diversity to protect at least 17 per cent of terrestrial areas by 2020. With no conservation regime in place, Canada could not count these 800,000 hectares towards the 17 per cent target. (By comparison, the new Rouge National Urban Park in Ontario will be roughly 8,000 hectares in size).

In June, Nature Saskatchewan, Nature Canada, and other nature

groups together with the Community Pasture Patrons Association of Saskatchewan and the Agricultural Producers Association of Saskatchewan jointly submitted a proposal to Agriculture Minister Lawrence MacAulay to resolve these issues.

First, we called on the minister to institute a pause on the transfer of the remaining 18 pastures to allow time for federal departments to consider conservation options. We are not seeking a reversal of the decision to transfer back to the federal government the 44 community pastures already transferred, given the financial investments and volunteer efforts that livestock producers have made.

Second, we called on the minister to establish an independently managed trust or other mechanism to provide sustainable funding to support conservation of all of the community pastures. This independent trust would provide funding to patron groups to pay for conservation measures such as controlling invasive species, conserving species at risk, protecting ecosystem health, and enhancing carbon sequestration capacity.

The trust would use performance-based financial support to achieve measurable outcomes that ensure sustainable grazing opportunities, as well as manage these critical grasslands as healthy and bio-diverse ecosystems for future generations. Livestock producers would continue to manage the livestock component on the community pastures.

Third, the federal government would undertake to review options to maintain federal ownership of the remaining pastures to allow for the application of the \$5-million in surface lease revenues to fund the trust.

The Grasslands Conservation Trust is an innovative, collaborative approach that would be a win for livestock producers and local communities, a win for grasslands wildlife and ecosystems, and a win for Canada in meeting international climate and biodiversity commitments, all without calling on any additional federal funding. The sole obstacle seems to be the reluctance of the bureaucracy to reconsider the Harper government's ill-considered 2012 decision to abandon the Community Pasture Program. Mr. MacAulay, surely this is where political leadership begins.

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The Hill Times