

Communication is Vital when the Prairie and Oil Share Common Ground

by Tara Mulhern Davidson

The energy industry is a vital part of Saskatchewan's economy. Gas wells and oil pump jacks dot the landscape in many parts of the province. The infrastructure that goes along with a booming energy business – the well heads, pipelines, rights-of-way, transmission lines, roads, compressor stations, and more – are located mainly on agricultural lands.

While there are pros and cons to industrial activity on any type of land, the potential environmental risks of such operations are unique on native prairie.

Darren Ippolito, a beef producer from Kiseby, SK, is no stranger to oil activity on his ranch, which is situated south of the Moose Mountains in the heart of the Bakken Field. He operates Moose Creek Red Angus along with his parents Glenn and Donna, and partner Kylie and young son Kord, and their farm has dealt with

the oil industry for generations. At SK PCAP's 2017 Native Prairie Restoration and Reclamation Workshop, Ippolito shared some of his experiences and expectations regarding oil development on native prairie, during a producer-focused session titled "Landowners and Industry Working Together."

When it comes to ranching alongside oil development, "communication is the be-all and the end-all," explained Ippolito, who has himself worked in the oil field. "One of the biggest issues is companies often don't understand native prairie. They treat it the same as tilled acres or tame grass, even though it isn't," he said. "It's hard to relay that a decision made today could have twenty-five years of effects, and no matter how hard we work or how good our management is, we can't fix it," he pointed out. Money often means



Minimal disturbance drilling sometimes includes the use of matting when on prairie. Photo credit: Sheila Taillon

more to oil businesses than time, "but with native prairie, we talk in years, not in hours."

"I am pro oil and gas, I know it is good for our communities, it's good for the tax base," he clarified, but added it certainly changes the dynamics of a cattle operation. He also cited challenges with land ownership, and said because of oil

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revenues; land simply doesn't trade hands as often, but rather is kept in the family. This means ranchers often have to rely on rented pasture, which can create risk for long-term viability. "From the outside looking in, it all looks pretty good, but there is good and bad."


From his perspective, Ippolito believes prairie restoration and reclamation goals are more likely to be achieved when the oil company is open minded. "The companies we deal with that tend to be successful are open to anything and any suggestion," he explained. Other companies are more rigid and have a set plan and do not like to deviate from that plan. "You have to build relationships and work to find common ground with all of them," he said. "The easier it is for them, the easier it is for us."

Ippolito is straightforward about what he expects from industry. He wants companies to honour timelines and appointments and listen to the landowner's perspective. "When families have been ranching here for a century, we know the land," he explained. He also suggested working directly with company decision makers to have an efficient flow of information. Face-to-face meetings with project managers and environmental consultants are helpful for minimizing risks to native prairie. Ippolito tries to stop potential problems by making himself available to work with companies on everything from project location to seed mixes and noxious weed prevention. "Native prairie gives us great joy, it is a link to our history," Ippolito stated. "I expect industry to respect what is there."

SK PCAP will host the 2018 Native Prairie Restoration and Reclamation Workshop (NPRRW) in Saskatoon, SK on February 7 and 8, 2018 at the Saskatoon Inn. The



A prairie landscape at Moose Creek Red Angus.
Photo credit: Kylie McRae

theme is "Look to the Future, Learn from the Past" and the event includes expert speakers, case study exercises, a trade show, a poster session, and many networking opportunities. Visit www.pcap-sk.org for more information or to register. 

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