

## Livestock Grazing and Native Grassland Conservation

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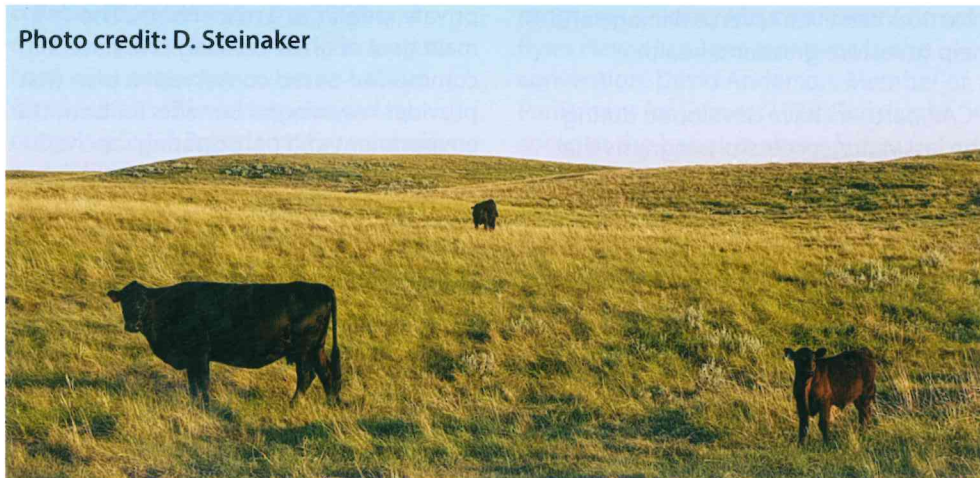
Prairie grasslands are our most threatened ecosystem, making them a conservation priority. Around the world, temperate grasslands are faced with continuing habitat loss and fragmentation, mainly due to conversion to cropland. In North America, tall-grass prairie has been reduced to 1%, and mixed-grass and short-grass prairie to 20-30% of their former range, together exceeding losses reported for any other major ecological community on the continent. In Saskatchewan, it is estimated that between 17% and 21% of the original native prairie remains intact.

The endangerment of grassland habitat in Canada has cascaded into the endangerment of many grassland species. More than 60 Canadian species at risk depend on this habitat, including plains bison, swift fox and Greater Sage-grouse and many grassland birds such as Sprague's Pipit and Chestnut-collared Longspur.

Livestock grazing is one of the few recognized land uses compatible with native prairie conservation. Grasslands evolved with and depend upon herbivory. Proper grazing management can stimulate plant growth, enhance nutritive value and accelerate nutrient cycling. Grazing plays a key role in maintaining species-rich habitats by controlling more dominant species and allowing other species to increase in the understory. Moderate grazing also removes excessive litter and alters the fuel-load, changing fire-return cycles and fire intensity. Thus, grazing can be used to intentionally manipulate fire fuel-loads in prescribed burning programs. Overall, effective grazing management may contribute to sustainable and healthy natural grasslands.

There are a number of agencies and organizations representing producers, industry, provincial and federal governments, non-government organizations and research and

Photo credit: D. Steinaker



educational institutions, that deliver prairie conservation activities which benefit the social, cultural, economic and ecological fabric of Saskatchewan. Since 1998, the Prairie Conservation Action Plan (PCAP) Partnership has brought those groups to work together under a common vision for prairie conservation in Saskatchewan. The PCAP Partners believe that more can be accomplished by acting together than by acting alone, and that it is possible and desirable for groups with diverse interests and needs to find mutually agreeable solutions to the challenges of prairie conservation.

The PCAP Partners see prairie as a working landscape that can include people and their livelihoods as a positive part of the ecosystem. Key and unique to this partnership is the collaboration with the Saskatchewan Stock Growers Association (SSGA), that provides a Chair and a Representative to the Partnership as a means to recognize the critical importance of the ranching community to the conservation of native prairie, and to emphasize how central the concept of a working landscape is to the vision of the PCAP Partnership.

The SK PCAP Partnership recognizes the importance of collaboration beyond Saskatchewan borders, including nationally and internationally. Across provinces, the PCAP Partnership

interacts with the Alberta Prairie Conservation Forum, the Manitoba Forage and Grassland Association, and the Carolinian Canada Coalition. On an international scale, PCAP liaises with organizations including the Chihuahua Mexico Grasslands Partnership, which was modelled on PCAP, the Grassland Foundation in Nebraska, U.S., the Transboundary Grassland Partnership, and the Alliance for the Grasslands-Initiative for the Conservation of the South American Southern Cone Grasslands, in Argentina.

One main goal of PCAP is to promote adoption of land management and grazing practices that have a positive impact on biodiversity, species at risk, and prairie ecosystem health. An effective grazing management seeks to optimize livestock production and maintain productive grasslands by minimizing overgrazing, improving forage production and increasing plant and animal diversity. An effective grazing management involves, among other practices, adjusting stocking rates to livestock demand and forage availability, allowing effective rest periods after grazing and deferring grazing during sensitive periods by implementing appropriate rotation systems. Grazing, when well-managed, allows healthy grasslands to be sustained, livestock operations to meet economic

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requirements and other plants and animals to flourish. Well-managed grazing practices can even reverse damage and help to restore grassland health.


PCAP partners have developed during the last years' successful programs that include livestock grazing management as a conservation strategy. For example, the SSGA in partnership with the South of the Divide Conservation Action Program Inc. (SODCAP Inc.) have developed Habitat Management Agreements with producers who own or manage identified critical habitat for species at risk in southwest Saskatchewan. Producers are funded for implementing sustainable management practices such as upholding appropriate stocking rates and applying sustainable grazing plans.

Another example that uses livestock grazing as a tool in conservation projects is the named "Grass Banks", which are lands where forage is made available to

ranchers, at a reduced fee, in exchange for tangible conservation benefits being produced on participants' home ranches. Lands in grass banks can be entirely private, public, or a mix of both. The main goal of grass-banking is to have a community-based conservation plan that provides meaningful benefits for both the environment and participating ranchers. Several grass banks have emerged across the U.S. and Canada.

A recent example in Saskatchewan is the grass bank project implemented among Grasslands National Park (GNP), SSGA, SODCAP and local ranchers to conserve habitat for species at risk, particularly the Greater Sage-grouse, Sprague's Pipit, and Chestnut-collared Longspur. The project area covers 40,000 acres of public and private land, much of which is considered critical habitat for these species at risk. Local ranchers manage grazing on portions of the East Block of GNP and their adjacent private land with a goal of achieving habitat targets for the three species. Habitat targets are set

and measured by SODCAP Inc. Ranchers benefit from the program when they meet the habitat targets through a reduced grazing fee on GNP land, and through a financial incentive from SSGA through the Species at Risk Partnerships on Agriculture Land (SARPAL) program. The project is being undertaken with financial support of Environment and Climate Change Canada through the SARPAL fund. With this project, Parks Canada is implementing recovery and conservation for the species at risk by restoring grazing on a landscape where it was excluded for more than 20 years.

With parks and protected areas insufficient to sustain prairie biodiversity, the role of private land in grassland conservation is becoming increasingly significant. We have to recognize ranchers and land managers who carefully steward the native prairie. Sustainable prairie management takes years of hard work and compromise, and the positive role of these stewards should be appreciated as well. 

## SSGA Welcomes New Director Barry Wasko



**Barry Wasko of Eastend, Saskatchewan, joins the SSGA Board of Directors as Director-at-Large.**

The Saskatchewan Stock Growers Association (SSGA) welcomes Barry Wasko to its Board of Directors. Barry was elected as Director-at-Large at the SSGA's 105<sup>th</sup>

Annual General Meeting and Convention in Swift Current on June 12.

Barry and his wife Anne operate Bar 4 Bar Ranches Ltd. near Eastend, Saskatchewan, a third-generation ranch founded in the 1920s. Their ranch includes a commercial cow-calf herd and both backgrounding and grass yearling programs. They run the ranch with the help of one full-time employee.

Together, Barry and Anne have three adult children and eight grandchildren. Barry's youngest son and family operate a ranch nearby and they work together when needed.

For Barry, being involved with SSGA gives him the advantage of being able to stay involved with industry issues and to keep up-to-date on its developments. He feels his experience of being involved on other

boards will also complement his work with SSGA.

Barry feels the biggest challenges and concerns that the livestock industry is facing currently are being able to listen to consumers and to communicate knowledge about the livestock business to them. The sustainability and advances achieved by producers need to be conveyed to those outside the industry. Part of being sustainable means remaining viable and profitable.

In order to support the livestock industry into the future, Barry believes that SSGA must ensure that our industry's activities are accurately communicated to producers, government and consumers. In addition, he sees another important role of the SSGA as working proactively on trade issues with national cattle groups.