

# PFRA COMMUNITY PASTURES - THE CANADIAN COMMUNAL GRAZING EXPERIENCE AND MULTIPLE VALUES OF PUBLIC GRASSLANDS

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## ABSTRACT

The Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA) Community Pastures origins are rooted in a climate catastrophe response that assembled initial areas of overgrazed native range and severely eroded cereal cropland in the Palliser Triangle into community pastures as a public conservation mechanism. Today this conservation system has grown to encompass 929,000 hectares in total that serve a multiple set of area objectives with important social, economic and ecological benefits. Management of these pastures has expanded considerably, necessitating close cooperation between local livestock producers, government agency staff and other users of the resource. Over the last half century a unique communal grazing operation on the PFRA Community Pasture System has evolved that constitutes an integral part of the economic structure of prairie livestock enterprises as well as sustaining an increasingly important set of general societal objectives for biodiversity and endangered species habitat.

## INTRODUCTION

The Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act was passed in 1935 and the development of PFRA Community Pastures began in 1937. Several years of drought and severe soil erosion by wind generated a requirement for a soil conservation program. On many areas of light textured land, soil drifting had progressed to such a degree that the land had become unfit for annual cultivation and constituted focal points of soil drifting that threatened larger areas of good cropland. Because this land should never have been promoted and settled as an area with the capacity for economic crop production, corrective measures had to be taken. The federal government's response was to relocate and resettle the destitute farm families that were abandoning the land. The lands were then removed from cultivation, fenced to prevent trespass grazing and cultivated areas were regrassed with drought resistant grass species. One of the final phases of this land use adjustment initiative was to designate these land parcels as community pastures under agreements with the Provinces of Manitoba and Saskatchewan and to introduce controlled livestock grazing.

The original PFRA Land Utilization Program had three objectives:

1. The permanent withdrawal of submarginal prairie land from cultivation.
2. The establishment of grass cover on these areas to protect the soil from further erosion and to provide grazing for livestock.
3. The resettlement on suitable land of farmers removed from submarginal areas.

## DISCUSSION

Implementation of the pasture program commenced in 1938 with the operation of 14 pastures providing grazing for 3231 head of livestock. The seeding of grass on eroded soils, the controlled grazing of livestock and the development of stock watering sites in strategic areas, more than doubled the sustainable carrying capacity on these lands within a few years. In addition, the biodiversity improved and these large blocks of predominantly native vegetation became preferred habitat for many birds and animals. The lead taken by PFRA in developing pasture provided the incentive for farmers and ranchers

in surrounding districts to improve the management of grasslands on their own holdings.

Uses other than grazing are secondary to the program objectives under the current mandate. Inherent in the range management practices of PFRA is sustainable use of the resource. The Federal Policy on Land Use provides overall guidelines and consistency to PFRA land resource management. To this end, the policy ensures that federal policies and programs and the management of federal lands contribute to the wise use of Canada's land resources. Land of ecological importance, or containing fragile or critical habitat, is to be preserved and protected by way of this policy.

As a method of documenting and monitoring the management of the resource use on the pastures, the Range Management component of PFRA collects data on range condition, range condition trends, species composition, and a general inventory of the rangeland resource within PFRA control. This information is used in combination with pasture improvements, historic livestock utilization, soil type and associated moisture conditions to calculate the carrying capacity of each pasture. Annual adjustments are made to stocking rates depending on local pasture conditions to ensure optimal utilization of annual forage production. During periods of drought stocking rates are reduced to levels that will ensure the native grass stands do not become overgrazed.

In addition to conserving the soil base, the pastures have helped stabilize the livestock industry in Western Canada. These grazing reserves allow farmers to make the best use of their land while also maintaining sizeable livestock herds.

The Community Pasture Program today has two primary objectives:

1. To make possible the removal of lands from unsuitable or unacceptable land use and to facilitate improved land use through their rehabilitation, conservation and management.
2. To utilize the resource primarily for the summer grazing of cattle while assisting in stabilizing small farms and providing breeding bulls to encourage high quality long-term cattle production.

As a result of the long-term management of this resource by PFRA, there currently exists a significant area of native rangeland that represents some of the largest contiguous blocks of wildlife habitat in Western Canada. Albeit these areas are not pristine, in that there has been some disturbance by livestock grazing, and other agricultural use prior to PFRA control, however, the biodiversity has been retained and possibly enhanced as a result of the current management practices. Under the sustainable levels of utilization that have been applied, the ecological integrity of the rangeland resource has been maintained and these areas have become prime-habitat for a variety of wildlife species including many rare and endangered plants and animals.

PFRA pastures have other intrinsic value. Canada was one of the more than 100 countries that signed the Convention on Biological Diversity at the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro in 1992.

The native grass areas on PFRA pastures are currently being targeted as candidate for identification as part of the protected areas network under this international agreement. The pastures have also recently become the subject of increased research and investigation into the contributions or roles the resource plays in the carbon sequestration cycle, endangered species protection as well as the biodiversity initiatives. Several formal partnerships for ecosystem management have been entered into and PFRA has cooperated with numerous public and special interest groups on projects related to specific plant and animal species and their interaction in the ecosystem.

Because of the value of the resource to other wildlife and environmental stakeholders, PFRA is committed not only to an environmental assessment review of all work plan activities on pastures, but also to a review of work plan activities by other major stakeholders. The interested parties are given an opportunity to make recommendations relative to the work plans in order to mitigate or avoid activities that may have a negative impact on their programs. In a proactive approach to wildlife and environmental concerns, consultation, cooperation and exchange of information take place in combination with grassroots input from client user groups, to ensure representation of all interest groups in land use planning and resource management decisions.

#### **SUMMARY**

Today PFRA Community Pasture lands total 929,000 ha. There are 87 separate pastures: 62 in Saskatchewan; 24 in Manitoba and one in Alberta. The pastures vary in size from 2,000 to 45,000 ha, with the average pasture encompassing an area of approximately 10,000 ha. The forage resource is allocated among approximately 3700 clients who benefit from an estimated 707,500 animal unit months of grazing each season. The number of livestock grazing on each pasture depends on the pasture size and the forage resource, but will range from approximately 250 to in excess of 4200 cows plus calves. The number of clients who patronize each pasture will also vary from as few as 13 to as many as 115. The demand for grazing privileges surpasses the carrying capacity of the forage resource. Approximately 200 eligible applicants, wanting grazing for in excess of 25,000 animals, are turned away each year.

The federal land use policy, as demonstrated through the PFRA Community Pasture Program, contributes to prairie agriculture as well as contributing to the environmental demands for biodiversity and protection of rare and endangered plant and animal species. The value of government involvement in the management of these areas becomes more apparent as time goes on. The key factors in the overall success of this land use policy, are the long-term management which has been applied and the permanent removal of this land from cultivation. This marginal, severely eroded land was taken out of cultivation, restored to permanent cover and has been providing grazing for livestock as well as wildlife habitat for the past 40 to 50 years. The initiative stopped the spread of soil degradation to adjacent lands and the soils were brought back into production as a livestock grazing and wildlife resource. This land has remained productive through subsequent drought. Provision of grazing has had a stabilizing effect on the livestock industry on the prairies. This in turn has helped to stabilize farm incomes and subsequently improved the living standards of the prairie farmer and rancher. Long-term responsible resource management has evolved into a balanced perspective of environmental, economic and social components.