

RANGELAND SUSTAINABILITY

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“Grazing leases and Alberta’s rich range heritage”

A historical look at grazing leases shows they’ve played a key role in rangeland sustainability



“Grazing lease policies leave a local steward in place to manage and look after the land”

-Wayne Heller

Perhaps the simplest, most direct way to get a sense of the scale of natural grazing lands in Alberta’s ecological landscape is to fly over them in spring as the land slips out of its winter sleep and the first gentle green of native vegetation begins to show.

Starting at the province’s deep southern borders, these vast native rangelands stretch their way across the U.S border, snake north up along the western and eastern edges of the province’s mainstream agricultural base, and link in a ragged network across the top of the northern agricultural boundaries.

For well beyond the past century, these lands, both pure grasslands and more recently grazed forested lands, have anchored a way of life for the ranchers and farmers. In the process they may well have anchored a critical ecological link to the future for all Albertans.

As intensive cropping-based agriculture has nibbled away at converting these native areas to tame crops, grazing leases have protected a vast tract that is now seen as critical to natural ecological systems and the increasingly recognized intrinsic value of provincial wild lands.

Most of the ranchers who ride these lands have always known and appreciated this value. Those people who work closely with ranchers on the front lines of grassland management innately understand this value. But a recently completed report on the history of grazing leases in the province, commissioned for the internal use of Alberta Sustainable Resource Development, offers a unique opportunity to pause and reflect on this process.

In today’s new era of land and resource management it is valuable for those who live this life of range management and for those charged with maintaining its future.

Protecting native landscapes

The first grazing leases were put in place in 1881. Currently, 5,700 grazing leases cover 5 million acres across the province, the vast majority of which are native landscapes. Many of these natural lands have survived the pressure of immigration, agricultural settlement and crop expansion but they now face new pressures. Residential sprawl, industrial development and recreational demands are currently challenging their protection and management.

“The Code of Practice lays out the expectations for both the leaseholder and the government”

-Larry Sears

Although the native grasslands found in the south are integral to ranching operations, their value goes far beyond that. “This land has incredible heritage value because it provides a connection to the past and what the prairie looked like before the Europeans arrived,” says Barry Adams, provincial range specialist with Alberta Sustainable Resource Development (SRD). “This landscape also provides important habitat for wildlife including many species at risk.

“A healthy native rangeland helps provide watershed protection, improved water quality and also carbon sequestration,” he says. “And on top of all this, recreational areas for the public to enjoy the beautiful scenery of the native land as well as activities such as hunting and fishing.”

Research links to a new generation

Public land grazing leaseholders have driven range research developments. During the very dry climate beginning in the 1920s, cattlemen realized the impending deterioration of the rangelands was threatening their operations. They petitioned the government for help in studying the problem and finding solutions.

Leaseholder Roy Gilchrist provided 18,000 acres of his grazing lease along with cattle and winter feed to carry out the studies. As a result, and through the cooperation of government and the ranching community, a research station dedicated to studying native rangeland was born near Manyberries, Alberta.

Researchers performed studies on carrying capacity of rangelands and management strategies to optimize sustainable grazing yields. “The stewardship resulting from studies out of that research station is huge,” says Brian Laing, Prairies Area rangeland program manager for Alberta SRD.

“Even today, the research station is the one of the few in Canada doing research on native rangelands so the initiative of southern Alberta ranchers all those years ago has proven incredibly beneficial to rangeland managers of today and tomorrow.”

Linking with multiple users

One of the realities of public land is that, in most cases, there will be multiple users. Industrial development such as oil and gas development and timber harvesting are important activities that occur on these lands. Also of increasing importance is the recreational merit of the land. Grazing leaseholders have provided stewardship value in managing industrial opportunities and educating recreational users.

The grazing lease structure encourages the cooperation of industry, recreational users and leaseholders to ensure disturbance to range plant communities is minimal and that industry’s reclamation and restoration efforts are effective.

“The grazing leaseholders have built up a long-term understanding of the soils, the plant community and the climate so their management experience provides a tremendous asset by way of insight and coaching to users of the public lands,” says Adams. “All parties working together ensures the value of the land is protected.”

Southeastern Alberta grazing leaseholder Wayne Heller says, “The oil and gas industry in Alberta is important to the public so I’m not about to stand in its way, but as a leaseholder I feel directly responsible for this land and as a result, I do have requests of industry to minimize the impact regarding how they work on the land.”



“Animal and plant ecosystems don’t exist independently... Grasslands require grazing to remain healthy”

-Bill Newton



The emerging northern industry

The most dynamic sub-region in the grazing leaseholder network is in the north. Over the last 50 years, leased acreage in northern Alberta has grown to the point where the northern forest pastures nearly match in acreage the extensive leased blocks in the more southerly mixed-grass prairie. Most northern grazing leases are native boreal bush land and some have a small portion of cleared land seeded down to tame grasses.

This northern growth has produced an entirely new generation of rangeland management. Grassland management in the south is not transferable to developing and maintaining the “bush pastures” of the north.

Many producers are drawing on a single generation of experience so strategies for rangeland protection and production are still evolving. As well, the typically smaller, more fragmented lease units on northern rangelands face challenges from multiple users such as oil and gas development and recreational users.



From a producer perspective, public grazing lands provide complementary grazing that helps take the pressure off their private lands, says Debbie Stover, Grande Prairie-based rangeland agronomist with Alberta SRD. “Ranchers can use their private lands for hay or forage production for wintertime feeding while their grazing leases are used exclusively for summer and fall grazing. The alternative is the use of private lands for both grazing and winter feed production which can be taxing on the land.

“Resting grazing areas is of integral importance in allowing plants time to recover. Alberta rangelands enable cattle producers the capability to set up a grazing system such as rotational grazing with their private lands so they can apply good range management practices.”

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VIEWS FROM THE FRONT LINE

Long-time rancher perspectives on sustainability from yesterday and today

“ The lease system is a structure that has been managed to maintain as much native range as possible and the importance of native range to the landscape cannot be understated. On our ranch, it has given us the opportunity to manage at a higher level and afforded us the scale to make improvements such as water development, cross fencing and other range projects.

Provincial rangeland specialists have been and are instrumental in providing assistance with rangeland management and improvement by way of education opportunities and extension. Two heads are always better than one. ”

Larry Sears, Flying E Ranche, southwestern Alberta

“ The native grasslands today are managed under a grazing regime similar to the grazing regime of the buffalo herds in times past. As far as sustainability goes, how can you do better than that?

Somebody else enjoying the land in no way diminishes my enjoyment of it but just as there is a carrying capacity for livestock, there is a carrying capacity for people and recreational activity. Private lease tenure provides for very knowledgeable ground resource management by the rancher that could not be matched with government resources or staff. That round-the-clock management helps protect this land. ”

Rick Burton, Burke Creek Ranch, southwestern Alberta

“ Grazing lease policies leave a local steward in place to manage and look after the land. We can supervise the activity on the land to ensure the other users don't disrupt or destroy the value of the land. In a broad sense, the lessee helps protect all things on the land beyond the grass we graze, including the aesthetic, wildlife and recreational values.

Key to the lease system is the relationship between the province and the rancher which has been cultivated over many generations. It's much like working with a neighbour. You can get more work done working with a neighbour than working by yourself. ”

Wayne Heller, Heller Ranching Company, southeastern Alberta

“ Animal and plant ecosystems don't exist independently. There's a big interrelationship. Grasslands require grazing to remain healthy, particularly in the more brittle environments. The grazing lease system is a win-win situation where the rancher gets something out of it but so does the landholder, being the province.

There's a public desire to maintain these public landscapes and ecosystems. I'm strong on the ecological goods and services these undisturbed landscapes provide. Watershed functioning, for example, is a pretty significant benefit for Alberta as a whole. Native grazing lands do a better job of that than anything else we can do with the land. ”

Bill Newton, rancher, southwestern Alberta



"This land has incredible heritage value"
-Barry Adams

Linchpins to a sustainable future

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One clear message from history is a tradition of stewardship. Past generations of ranchers have built this and it is being adopted with vigour by the present generation of ranchers. "Our ranch in the Porcupine Hills has been in operation for 118 years," says grazing leaseholder Rick Burton. "My son is a fourth-generation manager. He benefits greatly from the long history of management and the valuable knowledge of this land that comes with it."


"Generally speaking," says Brian Laing "the land base is in good shape and it's due to the ranchers doing a good job and that, in turn, is partly due to the partnership between the ranchers and the men and women in the field who administer the leases."

Perhaps one of the strongest examples of that relationship is the recent development of the "Grazing Lease Stewardship Code of Practice." That collaborative

document identifies the roles and responsibilities of the grazing leaseholders. It focuses on promoting sustainable use of public grazing land for the long-term benefit of leaseholders, the environment, industry, recreational users and all Albertans.


"The Code of Practice lays out the expectations for both the leaseholder and the government," says rancher Larry Sears, chairman of the Alberta Grazing Leaseholders Association. "These guidelines provide stability in terms of determining responsibilities which, in turn, helps to strengthen the efforts of stewardship made on these lands."

More information

More information on grazing and range management is available from Alberta Sustainable Resource Development. The report *An Outline History of Alberta's Grazing Leases* was not produced for broad distribution, but a copy is available by contacting the Rangeland Management Branch at (780) 427-3595. 

PROOF OF PROGRESS

Three stewardship examples from leaseholder experience


 **Improved management of invasive weeds.** Leaseholders around Grande Prairie are controlling the spread of invasive weed species on grazing leases by using herbicides and handpicking, as well as insisting that oil companies accessing the land steam clean their equipment prior to entering their leases. "That has kept the weed populations in check on these lands," says Debbie Stover. "These producers also change their grazing management practices so that weeds don't have a chance to become established."

 **Drought lessons guide grazing standards.** Many times, range managers deal with less than ideal conditions. For example, during the drought from 1999 to 2001, ranchers in the Medicine Hat area, an area that was particularly hard hit, had to make some very difficult decisions on destocking, culling and selling parts of their herds and shipping animals out of province to keep from overgrazing and damaging the rangelands.

"These decisions are a result of the experience in carrying capacity and balancing demand with production that past range managers learned in the dustbowl of the 20s and 30s," says Barry Adams.

"Even when the rains returned in 2002, many ranchers maintained conservative stocking rates to ensure range recovery. In 2002, ranges were stocked at 50 percent the normal stocking rate and a full 25 percent of the land base received another year of rest and weren't grazed at all.

"The current range community has a consciousness about carrying capacity that goes back 70 or 80 years," he says. "There is a respect for maintaining light to moderate stocking rates that is anchored in what happened in the 20s and 30s."

 **Local stewardship provides guidance.** There is multiple use on lease lands, including recreational and industrial users. "We are immediately available to help educate the other users to leave the land in as good a state as possible," says Wayne Heller. "We can also provide critical on-site supervision of industrial projects and intervene if necessary to reduce the environmental impacts of industry."

About this Report

This "Perspective on Rangeland Sustainability," is one in an ongoing series of Perspective Reports produced by Meristem Land and Science, a Web-based, educational information service developed by Calgary-based Meristem Information Resources Ltd. This edition was supported by Alberta Sustainable Resource Development.

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