

Land Use Comments **Submitted by Tom Gilchrist**

Sections 4.2.1, 4.6.2.3 and 5.3.14.2 of the Regional Advisory Council (RAC) for the South Saskatchewan Regional Plan (SSRP) report recommend enhancement of economic viability, best possible use of land, conservation and stewardship tools including economic market based incentives. These are laudable goals for ranchers that use public grazing lands as their primary grazing resource. The report concentrates on establishing Integrated Conservation Management Plans (ICMPs) for those areas of the native grass resource contained in rancher's grazing leases.

Public Lands staff has managed those areas in consultation with the lessees for the last 50 years. The large leaseholders, especially, have maintained their grass resource for the people of the province and themselves in a fashion that is a credit to Public Lands regulations, Public Lands staff and the ranching community.

The Multisar projects carried out on cooperating ranches have documented the fact that the plant community and wildlife, including endangered species, are being maintained for the long term under the present grazing regime.

Management of oil and gas activity on ranch leases has been assumed by the ranchers under the umbrella of the of Public Lands staff. As the ranchers are the most intimately acquainted with these lands, they are best equipped to recommend sites, access road placement and pipeline routes that minimize damage to the native grass resource. Public Lands do not have enough staff to be on top of the day-to-day impacts of drilling and pipeline activity.

The grass and wild life on public land leases have been enhanced over the last 50 years under the present management system.

The RAC recommends the establishment of Integrated Conservation Areas (ICAs) complete with management plans. Recent history shows us that the management committees for plans established for Natural Areas and Ecological Reserves seldom meet. Leases cover 2.16 M acres or 10.4% of the South Saskatchewan plan area. An army of Public Lands staff will be required to implement and manage the ICAs. The RAC thinks that no management of the native grass resource is presently in place. That is not correct. The present state of the resource and its management couldn't be better.

The RAC proposal for ICAs on leases has placed a pall over the ranching community. What will happen to carrying capacity? What will happen to tenure? Uncertainty of the future manifests itself in decreased value of a lease contract. A prospective buyer must be extremely cautious in his valuation of a lease contract in a ranch purchase. The seller obviously is disadvantaged, especially in a retirement situation. A ranch sale valuation in the southeast area of the province suffered this consequence immediately after the RAC recommendations were announced.

The establishment of the ICAs will certainly lead to changes in carrying capacity for grazing under lease contracts. Lease contracts with tenure purchased by ranchers are real property. A rancher can provide these contracts to a financial institution as collateral

for a purchase loan. Lowering of carrying capacity results in decreased income from grazing under the lease contract, decreased value of the contract and financing problems. This flies in the face of the RAC philosophy stated above i.e. to enhance the economic fabric of the region. The Multisar reports have acknowledged the fine balance now in place between grazing, wildlife and the ideal intensity of use of the plant community for the long term, as nurtured by the management practices of the ranchers.

Research from North Dakota State University has indicated partial defoliation of grass by livestock grazing during the vegetative growth stages of grasses is instrumental in mineral nitrogen fixation. That available nitrogen provides a huge boost to plant production, even in poor precipitation years. No grazing during the growth period of grasses is a detriment to long-term annual forage production.

If the enhancement of habitat, at the expense of the leaseholder or landholder, for whatever reason, is deemed to be valuable to the people of Alberta, that landowner or lessee should not bare the cost in decreased income. If the enhancement is good for the province and its people, compensation is due the landowner or lessee. Paid hunting and paid tourism access would set the value of that experience and mitigate the cost of managing those programs on a lease.

The present management system for leases has provided stability for the ranching industry, very adequate and demonstrated protection of the plant community and associated wild life, including endangered species. The proposed ICA philosophy contained in the RAC report is a very serious retrograde step following 50 years of excellent Public Lands lease administration.

The controversy over Bill 36 resulted in the defeat of a significant number of PC MLAs. One would have thought that the government would have learned the fact that property rights are very important to the rural community. The wording in Bill 2 has rural residents in an uproar again. It appears that the government still believes that the rights of rural residents are expendable in the industrial development arena. The cooperation between oil and gas extraction companies and landowners, built up over the past many years, is doomed. This is a sad prospect for rural Albertans.