

Bob Scammell – Alberta Outdoors

Now well into its 49th year, this weekly column has celebrated some red letter days over the years, mostly related to successful advocacy campaigns for or against various government outdoors - related policies or programs. For example, I am proud of the role the column played: in the ending of useless mandatory barbless hooks for angling in Alberta, in legalizing Sunday hunting in most of Alberta, in ending the stupidly harmful rule to the fishery of allowing the killing of two brown trout per day after June 16th in the North and South Raven Rivers, provided they were more than 16 inches long.

A really prime day was when a feature article of several years ago, "Trophy Rules = Stunted Mules," won a national journalism award and also changed the way we have managed mule deer in Alberta ever since.

But the events of July 7th top them all: in the mail were the plaques and cheques for two first place journalism awards, and in The Calgary Herald of that date was a story headlined: "Cowboy Welfare" costing Alberta taxpayers millions."

The column and I will probably pack the plaques away, but prominently display a framed copy of that story, because it not only uses a term only I have previously used in print in Alberta, but also vindicates much of what I have written about the sticky-sweet deal of Alberta public land grazing leases for at least the last three decades.

In August last year, I finally concluded that the Alberta Wilderness Association, for reasons best kept to itself, was never going to refer the matter of Cowboy Welfare to the Auditor General as I had urged and

encouraged them to do, so I went it alone, on this issue, once again, and did it myself.

Generally I am delighted with Auditor – General, Merwan Saher's July 6th report, except to say that his estimate of the annual cost of Cowboy Welfare to Albertans is low at \$25 million; my estimate is over \$100 million, but who knows? The report confirms my long conviction that even the government has no idea what this boondoggle costs us annually.

Key Findings of the report: "Certain leaseholders receive surface access compensation fees in excess of the actual rent they pay to the province for grazing livestock on public land and the costs incurred from allowing industrial access to their leased land."

"The department does not know: how many grazing leases have oil, gas or other industrial sites on them; the amount of money leaseholders receive in surface access fees; the value of leases when they are sold or transferred.

"The province charges less for rent for grazing leases than private land-owners charge." (A 2012 government report found \$30 per head per grazing season on private land vs. \$2.79, tops, on a public land grazing lease.)

The AG surprised even himself by finding 1999 Alberta legislation that was passed but, inexplicably (heavy lobbying is usually what usually leaves legislation in limbo) never proclaimed, which would effectively have ended Cowboy Welfare and had the big bucks go to the people of Alberta where they belong. The AG confesses to be flabbergasted, because the unproclaimed law would have dealt with what he considers to be a fundamental principle for all Albertans: that personal financial benefit should not derive from public assets.

As it happens, my dithering delay in referring this matter to the AG is probably a good thing. Had the same AG's report come out with the pitiful PCs still in power, it would now be as unheeded and forgotten as that 1999 corrective legislation that was passed but never proclaimed.

Timing being what it is, Shannon Phillips, new Minister of Environment, Parks, Sustainable Resource Development has already accepted the AG's report and notes that the new government must act quickly to correct a mess that has flouted the public interest in public land for far too long. I suspect that unproclaimed 1999 PC legislation could provide a basic blueprint. Touch it up, cover all the bases, take back the land and the money, pass it AND proclaim it this time.

The lobbying, the piteous bawling of the herd bulls, of Cowboy Welfare has already started. Already Drew Barnes, new Wildrose MLA for Cypress - Medicine Hat, rancher, and recipient of surface disturbance payments, cautions us against major changes to a lease system that has served rural communities well. Funny, what I have found for 30 years in those rural communities is loathing, and people fearful of going on the record with who, and how much they know about Cowboy Welfare

If any of Mr. Barnes's payments come from public land grazing leases, he should consider the concept of conflict of interest, personally, and with regard to his parroting of the standard heifer-dust argument that grazing leaseholders are the best stewards of public land: some are, but most are in it for the money, and the more of your lease you let industry destroy, the more money you make