

Fencing and Wildlife - Does Design Matter?

by Leanne Thompson

The Saskatchewan Prairie Conservation Action Plan (SK PCAP) is looking forward to hosting another fantastic native prairie event in January, 2015. The Native Prairie Restoration and Reclamation Workshop (NPRRW) will feature a full lineup of expert speakers, case studies and workshop activities. While it may appear that this event is aimed at environmental and technical staff, there is plenty of information for land owners and land managers with an interest in native prairie management.

Paul Jones from the Alberta Conservation Association (ACA) will be talking about the interface between fences, restoration and wildlife. On livestock operations, it is easy to focus only on the effect of wildlife on fence lines, especially when working on repairing broken wires and missing staples! However, we may also consider the effect of fences on wildlife and how they may limit mobility of certain species.

The pronghorn (*Antilocapra americana*) is the most specialized and representative large mammal that is considered to be endemic to the Grasslands Natural Region. Having evolved on the prairies of North America, pronghorn did not develop an instinct to jump vertical obstacles. The onslaught of fencing that followed the establishment of cattle ranching on the prairies has posed a serious barrier to pronghorn movement. Pronghorn may cross under fence lines in some locations, but it slows down their movement making them susceptible to predators, it may strip hair off their backs causing lacerations and making them vulnerable to infection and frostbite, or it may potentially result in them becoming entangled and trapped, sometimes resulting in death.

A proven solution to these problems is to replace the bottom wire with smooth wire and move the bottom wire higher; however, this may not be practical as this method is expensive and requires a considerable investment of time. There are alternatives that could allow pronghorn to freely cross a fence, although most

have not been tested. The ACA recently conducted a project to help identify fences that may need modifications, exploring different ways to do that more efficiently and increasing the public's understanding of the conservation challenges pronghorn face in Alberta.

The main objectives for the ACA's project are to map fence lines that inhibit pronghorn movement and evaluate fence design alternatives to improve movement for pronghorn. The ACA also wants to share this information with their partners, particularly those working to modify existing fence lines along key migration routes, as well as increase the profile of pronghorn and the conservation challenges they face in Alberta through presentations and publications. Attendees at the 2015 NPRRW can hear Paul Jones, from the ACA, discuss the results of this project.

Other key note speakers at the 2015 NPRRW include Dale Polster who will discuss ecological restoration principles relating to everything from mines to marshes, Chet Neufeld and Kerry Hecker will speak about invasive species identification and control in restoration projects, and Renny Grilz from Blazing Star

Wildflowers, who will discuss wild seed harvesting. Another key speaker includes popular blogger, Chris Helzer, the "Prairie Ecologist."

Chris Helzer is an ecologist and program director for The Nature Conservancy. He's responsible for the management and restoration of about 5,000 acres of Conservancy-owned land in central and eastern Nebraska – mostly along the central Platte River. In addition, much of his time is devoted to developing, testing, and exporting techniques for prairie management and restoration. To that end, he conducts a lot of research – both formal and informal – on how prairies function and how managers can help maintain that function and diversity. SK PCAP is very pleased to invite Chris as a keynote speaker and we are certain that attendees will be inspired by his passion for the prairies and will take away important information they can employ in their own native prairie management.

For more information or to register for the 2015 Native Prairie Reclamation Restoration Workshop (NPRRW), visit the SK PCAP website at www.pcap-sk.org or contact the SK PCAP office at pcap@sasktel.net or (306) 352-0472.



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