Sharing a Landscape With the Greater Sage-Grouse
by Tara Mulhern Davidson

There aren't very many sage-grouse left around Randy Stokke's ranch near Consul, Saskatchewan. Then again, there aren't many ranchers left in the area either.

Randy and his wife Terry run a cow-calf operation in the far southwest part of Saskatchewan. Their ranch is located within the dry mixed grassland ecoregion, an area that is known for its challenges particularly when it comes to drought. “The cattle need to walk and cover lots of ground to get a belly full,” Randy explains. In spite of the sometimes tough conditions, running the family ranch was always a dream of Stokke’s. “Our family has been here for 71 years. I always wanted the job and I guess I got it,” he says, citing many benefits of ranch life, including the ability to work alongside his family. They have three sons who are all interested in or are already pursuing ranching in one way or another. “Ranching is a good life and a great place to raise a family. It’s...an interesting life,” he chuckles.

Life on his ranch is becoming increasingly interesting and even more complicated due to a recent Emergency Order for the Protection (EOP) of the Greater Sage-Grouse that has been implemented by the Government of Canada through the Species at Risk Act (SARA). The EOP was enacted as a means to protect the greater sage-grouse, a gravely endangered grassland bird species that is at risk of extirpation from Canada. It also impacts certain land and landholders, including Stokke, whose ranch has been deemed critical to the recovery and survival of sage-grouse.

“It’s like having a black cloud over your head,” Stokke quietly describes, when asked about how the EOP has affected his operation. “Every day you go out, knowing that you could be liable for something. You basically need to make a plan on how you’re going to defend yourself,” he says. The only defense he feels he has for an infraction is to continually practice due diligence, hoping that visiting enforcement officers are in agreement with his ranch activities, including grazing. “In the recovery strategies you read for the sage-grouse and other prairie [species at risk], they mention potential grazing restrictions,” Stokke explains, which is a concern for him and other ranchers who may be impacted.

Stokke has shared the landscape with the greater sage-grouse for decades. While their population has fluctuated a lot, he acknowledges that the diminishing number of sage-grouse is evident. “The more senior members in our area claim that around 1900 there were very few [sage-grouse]. From the 1920s to 1950s they increased quite a lot, but since the 1960s, their decline has been noticeable,” explains Stokke. Conversely, their predator population has increased. “Their only defense is camouflage and their flight pattern takes them a long time to get off the ground. They’re an easy meal for most predators,” he observes. He also lists other threats, including the extreme local weather conditions of the past 15 years that may have tested the species.

The Emergency Order for Protection restricts activities such as building new fences, developing new stock water sources, constructing roads, or installing machines or poles taller than a specified height. The EOP also prohibits other less obvious activities. “You cannot kill sage brush, grasses and forbs. There are a lot of different ranch scenarios that could cause this to happen,” Stokke comments. Areas under the EOP are also restricted from operating machines that have a noise level of 45 decibels or greater for more than 60 minutes in a day for 10 days of the month. At this point, there has been no financial assistance offered to affected producers for designing or modifying infrastructure to meet the criteria outlined in the EOP.

Stokke was frustrated by an early lack of communication about what the Emergency Order for Protection meant for him and his family. “We’ve always cooperated with [organizations] in the past who were looking for sage-grouse and were up front about what they were doing,” he says, and wishes these groups would have discussed their concerns about the species directly with him. “We had no prior knowledge of what was coming,” he comments, saying they first learned of the EOP by way of a registered letter they received in the mail before Christmas in 2013.

The Emergency Order for Protection may impact more than wildlife in the area, having potential social ramifications on remote and rural communities as well. Industries, including oil and natural gas and associated service sectors have been affected. “There are very few jobs available in our area, so it could force people away from a small community in the long term,” worries Stokke. There are
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also concerns about the effect the EOP may have on the beef industry as a whole. Already fewer young people are entering the ranching business, and the average age of Canadian ranchers is steadily increasing. "What rancher would want to buy into a place with these restrictions on their land?" he questions.

While much of the sage-grouse EOP has been an ordeal, Stokke says it has opened his eyes to what conservation means to different organizations. "I think the people we've talked to and who have listened to us seem to agree this is not the way to handle conservation. There should be a better way that involves one-on-one with landholders," he says and hopes that some of their discussions will change how conservation is handled now and in the future. Stokke, along with some fellow ranchers and landholders in Alberta and Saskatchewan, recently formed a group called Sustainable Canada. Their goal is working toward what he calls commonsense conservation. He has also been watching his American counterparts and their sage-grouse conservation efforts with interest. "We are the northern fringe of historical habitat and there is fragmentation between us and the sage-grouse core areas of Montana and south," noting it will be useful to see what develops from conservation initiatives south of the border.

Creating a way of life in an unforgiving ecosystem remains a challenge for humans and wildlife alike. However, ranchers across the province will continue to ranch alongside species at risk, sharing a landscape in common, as they have for generations. Hopefully, the Emergency Order for the Protection of Greater Sage-grouse will help stabilize the Canadian population of this species for the future, and perhaps recent favorable cattle markets will help maintain the population of ranchers as well, but the future is uncertain. One thing does remain constant on the prairie landscape and that is the cycle of life, which will once again start anew this spring for ranchers, wildlife and species at risk.

Note:
Environment Canada does provide funding for habitat protection, improvement, and other stewardship activities through the Habitat Stewardship Program for Species At Risk; Aboriginal Fund for Species At Risk; National Wetland Conservation Fund; EcoAction Community Funding Program; and the Environmental Damages Fund.
Descriptions of these programs can be viewed at:
http://www.ec.gc.ca/financement-funding/default.asp?lang=En&n=923047A0-1

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