

Wetlands, Forage, Grassland and Crops — Going Further Together

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How can Saskatchewan's farmers and ranchers best prepare for extremes in weather? How can the beef and grassland sector maintain resiliency and stability for the future?

The answers might lie in the farm landscapes themselves.

In a recent webinar from Saskatchewan Prairie Conservation Action Plan (SODCAP) "Prairies Got the Goods Week," Michael Champion with Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC), presented ways to maximize on-farm assets in order to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

Champion explained, "Saskatchewan's grasslands are important assets for livestock producers, the entire ag sector, and society. Grasslands and their associated wetlands, shrub, and bush habitats, are hotbeds of biodiversity with vast carbon stores as well as the ability to sequester additional carbon. They are key to our provincial fight against climate change."

He also said there is a clear connection between cattle, grass, and water. Within Canada's estimated 52 million acres of grassland, there are 60 species at risk that make their homes in grassland and wetland habitats, 30 of which live on Saskatchewan's prairie.

However, Saskatchewan's grasslands and wetlands are taking a hit and always have from a historical context.

"Looking into Western Canada, we have lost a lot of habitat," he said and added

that in order to establish a homestead during settlement (1870-1930), farmers were expected to increase the land value through developments and cultivation, leading to many acres of broken native prairie.

"In Canada, we only have about a quarter of our remaining native prairie and what is left is at risk of cultivation. In 1990, Saskatchewan had about 41,000 square kilometres of grassland, and by 2015, it had eroded to about 14 per cent or about 33,000 square kilometres," Champion stated.

Conserving grasslands and wetlands with competing land use interests is a challenge.

"We do have a growing population that is going to require more food," he said. "How do we meet the world's demand for food, have farms be profitable, and protect the environment without bringing a bunch more land into production?"

There is also the matter of lacking grassland policy, according to Champion, "It is not illegal to break grasslands in any province that I'm aware of."

"Does this mean that all grassland is at risk of loss tomorrow? Not at all," he clarified. "However, it does highlight that one of the most important ecosystems is essentially operating on the goodwill of grassland managers in these provinces."

He says farms that have converted grasslands to cropland shouldn't be demonized, but rather policies should

be developed that address the shift in land use.

"It's important we remember when a farmer takes their commodity to market, they are paid only on their weight, protein or oil. If the market cares about other things like carbon, habitat or biodiversity, we should probably be looking at ways to pay for those commodities as well," he said.

Quick Facts from Michael Champion

- Within Canada's estimated 52 million acres of grassland, exists 1.6 million acres of wetlands.
- Canada is home to a quarter of the world's remaining wetlands.
- The same amount of carbon that is stored by implementing zero-till on a quarter-section of cropland for 25 years can be achieved by maintaining just four acres of wetlands.

Some organizations, including Canadian Roundtable for Sustainable Beef (CRSB), have been working to enhance ecosystem services and biodiversity on lands grazed by cattle, reduce greenhouse gas emissions from the industry, and promote healthy water sources — all while trying to reduce waste and support a high standard of animal care.

According to CRSB, land used in beef production accounts for about one-third of total agricultural land, but it provides about 68 per cent of wildlife habitat capacity within the agricultural landscape.

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Michael said, "These private land managers are punching well above their weight in terms of managing those systems and are doing a bang-up job."

"Not only is the beef industry addressing species at risk, they are addressing carbon. They want to maintain and expand the native grassland in the country, and they want to be the guardians of the grasslands and the wetlands," he said and added that the beef sector took the initiative to accomplish that.

This past year, more than 7.4 million pounds of beef were sold under CRSB's certified sustainable label.

"By and large, the beef sector saw an issue, saw that they had a solution to the issue, and went on their own to get there."

Data from the 2016 Census shows that just eight per cent of farms accounted for two-thirds of gross farm receipts, which

prompted Champion to say that in order for programs and policies to be successful, they must be practical to implement.

"If we want to influence the landscape, we need to find solutions that work for large and mainstream agriculture," he said — and these solutions need to work within the existing supply chain.

Champion says Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC), a Saskatchewan Prairie Conservation Action Plan (SK PCAP) partner, uses its deep roots in conservation management to help develop practical programs.

"We would like to expand on our work so farmers can realize economic benefits to stewarding those natural areas."

He added that DUC's marginal areas program is designed to help producers realize benefits from their land in non-traditional ways.

"The marginal areas program is targeted at acres that are less profitable due to flooding, poor soils, or other issues," he explained. Participating farmers can "retire" hard-to-access or poor-producing areas and seed them to forage in exchange for a financial incentive through this DUC's program.

Champion says there is a sustainability movement right now and regenerative agriculture principles that include crops, livestock, and soil health are gaining traction.

"Crops and livestock integration is growing with the use of more and more by-products used in livestock feed like canola meal and pea



Most of what we see of prairie and wetlands is happening above ground, however below the surface, these landscapes store vast amounts of carbon

screenings."

The integration of these sectors results in less waste.

"Without cattle, the crops would have a larger footprint," he said and added that in order for beef cattle to make use of crop waste, they also need grasslands and forage to balance their diet.

Champion concluded, "There are hundreds of different plant species and thousands of different wildlife, bird and insect species that can live within a quarter section [65 hectares]. If we lose beef acres to crops, we lose much more than beef."



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