Give Grass a Chance: 
Restoring Native Prairie for Productive Grazing

By Anne Lazurko, for SK Prairie Conservation Action Plan

Julie MacKenzie spends a lot of time thinking about grass, especially after she and her husband Neil successfully turned a thirty-acre patch of marginal cropland into a lush-seeded native pasture that’s been part of their rotational grazing plan for over ten years.

“We came home to farm and recognized that, as our cow numbers increased, so did the need for carrying capacity and that we needed to seed some crop down to grass. Knowing there were burrowing owls close to that piece, we chose native grass and did a 50/50 cost share project with Nature Saskatchewan,” she said.

The couple owns M-over-C Land and Cattle Co. Ltd at Hazenmore, Saskatchewan, and, along with Neil’s parents, run 250 head of mostly Simmental-Red Angus cross cows.

The land the MacKenzies chose was flanked on one side by tame hay and on the other by native prairie. To avoid increased invasion of crested wheatgrass, they chose to reclaim the cropland using a native blend of Northern, Western and Slender Wheatgrasses, Green Needlegrass, and Purple Prairie Clover, a legume good for both the cow diet and fixing nitrogen for soil health.

“It’s an older stand now and it gets used once a year like the rest of the native grass. We usually graze the native later, starting mid-July and then back to the tame for a quick once over,” MacKenzie said. “Native prairie restoration isn’t just for big companies mandated to do it. When we as producers restore native grass, it provides a versatile grazing option the cows like and really does have good production that is comparable to an older tame stand.”

As an agrologist who does off-farm contract work on various forage and restoration projects, MacKenzie is convinced it’s easier to seed grass than people believe and is well worth the effort. It’s all in the details. The type of site will determine seed choices. Using seed with good vigour and germination at proper seeding rates will go a long way toward success. But the most important component is weed control.

“Weed control after the site is identified is the most important thing, whether it’s industrial reclamation or a farm field,” stated Larry Gabruch. After 25 years of conservation work, Gabruch currently works with South of the Divide Conservation Action Program Inc. (SODCAP) and is a native grass seed grower. “Once grasses are planted, you are limited in what you can use for weed control.”

Any post-emergent herbicide options will be off label, so it’s important to talk to an agronomist with expertise, he said. The second option is mowing with a rotary mower or swather to control annuals before seed set.

Seed mix depends on the objectives for the reclamation. If it’s done for diversity for wildlife habitat, then a mix with a variety of seeds adapted to the area is appropriate, he said. But four or five grasses along with a legume would be the proper mix for grazing purposes. Seed in early spring for best results, said Gabruch. Although dormant planting can be done right before the first snowfall, it is not as good for warm season grasses.

Seed should be placed at one quarter to one half inch, not broadcast, followed by on-row packing. While Gabruch said a specialized grass seed drill like Truax is likely best for rate and depth, an air drill will work providing a carrier, such as phosphorous, is blended with the seed to maintain even flow.

continued on page 44
Julie and Neil MacKenzie used an air seeder. Julie stressed that only 100 to 150 pounds of seed can be put in the cart at a time and it has to be mixed properly. "The process is a bit painstaking and we hate doing it," she laughed. "But we actually have more success [with native] because we're taking the time to be particular about it."

Patience is a virtue as native grass emergence can vary anywhere from ten days to three weeks depending on soil and moisture conditions, Gabruch stated. And it can’t be grazed until its second year to allow for strong root development. “Ultimately, you have to treat each project separately and have a recipe for that field and for your objectives on that field. Then follow the steps to get good establishment.”

An advocate for restoration, Gabruch said native prairie is more resilient to drought and flood and provides associated benefits for the diversity of pollinators and species. With a multitude of informational resources and funding available from various conservation groups such as Ducks Unlimited Canada, Nature Conservancy of Canada, Nature Saskatchewan and SODCAP Inc. as well as government programs, reclaimed native prairie is something ranchers only have to do once and are happy with because it works into their rotation, and they don’t have to reseed in ten years, he said.

Julie MacKenzie sees it as a long-term investment that M-Over-C Land and Cattle Company will make again as their grazing needs change. On top of that, reclamation provides habitat for burrowing owls and other hunting and foraging species, outcompetes tame grasses and weeds and so acts as a buffer to invasive weed species. Maybe it’s time to consider restoring that cropped land to native prairie.


Two Native Grassland Workshops Under One Roof in Regina!

The Saskatchewan Prairie Conservation Action Plan (SK PCAP) is looking forward to hosting the 7th Native Prairie Restoration and Reclamation Workshop, in conjunction with the 5th Transboundary Grassland Partnership Workshop on February 25-27, 2020, in Regina, SK, at the Ramada Plaza.

This event marks the seventh time that SK PCAP has hosted the forum that brings together diverse stakeholders who have an interest in prairie and species habitat restoration and reclamation. This is the first time SK PCAP has hosted the Transboundary Grassland Partnership Workshop and combining the two events has been an interesting challenge. For those who are not familiar with the Transboundary Grassland Partnership, it provides a forum where transboundary (Saskatchewan, Alberta and Montana, U.S.) jurisdictions and sectors work collaboratively to conserve and enhance native grassland landscapes.

Attendees, including scientists, researchers, technical staff, ranchers, communicators and naturalists, will participate in sessions that address tools for restoration, soils, invasive weed strategies, prescribed burning, native seeds, bison reintroduction and partnerships, among others. Prairie restoration, reclamation and management practices continue to shift and evolve as does land use and development. Many experts from across the prairies and northern United States will be sharing their collective experiences and knowledge. The workshop theme is "The Big Picture: Planning and Partnerships" and SK PCAP is anticipating over 230 participants during the three-day event.

The event also includes a poster session and trade show, where participants can discuss some of the specialized restoration equipment and plant material required for their projects.

"Few events bring together prairie restoration and reclamation specialists such as the Native Prairie Restoration and Reclamation Workshop," said Carolyn Gaudet, SK PCAP Manager. "In addition to those specialists, we'll also have a number of grassland conservationists who will be attending that otherwise would not attend NPRRW, so it provides a great opportunity to broaden the scope of the event. We look forward to bringing these diverse people together to learn from everyone's collective experience," she added.

To Register
Registration is now open:
Early bird = $275+GST
After January 21, 2020, regular registration = $325+GST
Any single day = $150+GST

*Please visit the website for a Draft Program and more information: https://www.pcap-sk.org/upcoming-events/native-prairie-restorationreclamation-workshop-2020