The Manitou Cattle Breeders Co-op Pasture has Pushed Leafy Spurge to the Top of Its Priority List

by Tara Mulhern Davidson

Farming and ranching are jobs that, more often than not, involve hard work, long hours, and little recognition. For one Saskatchewan grazing cooperative however, their diligent work and efforts in managing their native prairie grasslands were rewarded at the recent Native Prairie Restoration and Reclamation Workshop in February in Regina, SK.

The Manitou Cattle Breeders Co-op Pasture (MCBCP) were winners of the inaugural Saskatchewan Prairie Conservation Action Plan (SK PCAP) Native Prairie Stewardship Award. The award provides recognition to a community leader or group who is having a positive impact on native prairie, wildlife, species at risk, or working to raise awareness to improve overall health of range and riparian resources. The MCBCP is one of thirteen grazing cooperatives operating on Crown Lease land located within the Manitou Sand Hills near Neilburg, Senlac and Unity in west central Saskatchewan. The MCBCP operates on more than 25,000 acres, providing grazing for approximately 720 pairs for 15-20 members.

The Manitou Sand Hills are known to be sensitive and complex, comprised mostly of Dune Sand ecosites on native rangeland that is flanked by both fresh and saline water lakes. The area has been recognized by the United Nations as the Artland Sandhills, important for its unique and diverse natural resources. The Manitou Sand Hills have also been deemed an Important Bird Area by BirdLife International, providing valuable migratory bird habitat for many shorebirds including piping plovers, red-necked phalaropes, sandpipers, and stilts and sandpiper. The area is home to many rare plant species as well, including sand nutgrass, Richardson needlegrass, sand dune wheatgrass, marsh felwort, and smooth monkeyflower, to name just a few.

While the Sand Hills are home to many beautiful and diverse species, unfortunately they are also home to one very undesirable plant — leafy spurge, a noxious and invasive weed. Leafy spurge reportedly entered the area in the 1970s with industrial development and now infests approximately 15,000 to 20,000 acres in the overall area, and approximately 7,000 acres within the MCBCP. Spreading by both seeds and an extensive network of deep roots, leafy spurge quickly invades into prairie, taking over native grasses, forbs and shrubs, reducing biodiversity, and eventually decreasing grazing capacity.

On Crown Lease land, lessees including grazing cooperatives, are responsible for controlling noxious species, which can be an expensive and time-consuming challenge for individual producers, let alone a group of 15-20 shareholders. The MCBCP has met this problem head on. Initially, the group received herbicide to control leafy spurge and applied it on their own time using a hand sprayer for years until their supply of herbicide eventually ran out. This didn’t deter the MCBCP and they committed to using their own time and resources to diligently control leafy spurge. “We do feel responsible for trying to manage our resources well,” said Brian Nattress, a rancher and member of the MCBCP. “When we ran out of herbicide and found out that we couldn’t get money for more spray, it was decided among the co-op members that we would pay out of our own pockets to supply the spray,” Nattress added. “We are committed as a group to doing what we can to preserve what we have.”

The group marks and maps their leafy spurge patches with a GPS unit to monitor patch location and size. “If no one does anything with spurge, it really does take over quickly. We’ve seen what happens when the spurge is left uncontrolled and unchecked,” Nattress said. There are approximately 75 patches, including three that are really large. “We’ve divided up the workload so each member has between five and ten patches to manage and maintain,” Nattress explained.

The Manitou Cattle Breeders Co-op Pasture operates within an area that is very active in oil, gas and seismic exploration. The cooperative has chosen to take any funds from industrial development and dedicate the money to continuing their leafy spurge control program. Recently, the MCBCP was able to
hire a helicopter to spray larger patches of spurge.

For Nattress and the other cooperative members who have been battling leafy spurge for decades, the Prairie Stewardship Award is meaningful. “It’s kind of nice to have the recognition,” Nattress admitted, but added that bringing attention to invasive weed control is even more important. “For years we’ve been trying to bring attention to the area about leafy spurge. We’ve been working with local RM’s and the local weed inspector, industry, and government to keep building momentum,” Nattress said. “We’re definitely moving forward,” he concluded.

Leafy spurge, a noxious and invasive weed, has milky sap, bright lime-green flower-like bracts, and spreads quickly from seeds and a network of deep, strong roots.

Photo courtesy of Tara Mulhern Davidson.