

Celebrating 25 Years of Grassland Conservation

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This article is part of a series celebrating 25 years of prairie conservation through the Saskatchewan Prairie Conservation Action Plan (SK PCAP). Watch upcoming issues of Beef Business Magazine for additional features.

Through changes in policies and programs, weather extremes, and market fluctuations, Saskatchewan's remaining prairie grasslands have stood the test of time. For the past 25 years, the SK PCAP Partnership has also endured, making an important mark on the province's prairie conservation landscape.

The concept of a multi-stakeholder partner group was first introduced in the mid-1990s with the launch of World Wildlife Fund's Canadian Prairie Conservation Action Plan.

"[The first plan] was full of a lot of wishes with no action," says Miles Anderson, a Fir Mountain rancher and first PCAP chair. After that initiative fell flat, an ad-hoc committee went back to the drawing board, and as a result, Saskatchewan Stock Growers was approached to kick-start the budding conservation group.

Anderson emphasizes that it was important to ensure native prairie was, and still is, conserved as a grazing resource, "There was no other way to protect prairie more than that, and it still holds," he said.

Chris Nykoluk was the original manager. "By the time they hired me, PCAP had already formed as a group," she said. "It was like taking their goals and objectives and trying to make something real out of it, move it past the hypothetical stage," she explained.

"It was a team effort," said Anderson, who is quick to credit Nykoluk and Lesley Hall, both of whom worked for SK PCAP at the time. "You couldn't hardly handpick a better set of folks to write this stuff up and make it so palatable," he added.

Diversity and Discussion

Similar to the biodiversity of grassland, assembling a SK PCAP Partnership with intricate, and sometimes inter-relationships was

"I think what sets SK PCAP from other environmental governmental organizations (ENGO) is that 25 years the founders knew how it was to work with native landowners and producers, as other stakeholders," said Manager Carolyn Gaudet.

The Partnership originated with 16 core stakeholder groups, including agricultural producer groups, environmental organizations, federal and provincial government agencies.

"I really like the concept of PCAP bringing everyone together," said Michael Burgess, a rancher from the Big Muddy and former chair. "I think PCAP bridged the gap. We realized we were all the same people with the same interest just looking at it from a different angle," Burgess affirmed. "What I also liked about PCAP is that there are less politics there than almost anywhere," he said.

"There was a need for PCAP and for these people to get into each other's environment," Nykoluk said. "People would love to get together and get to know each other, get in the same room and develop a relationship," she said and added that in-person meetings created empathy among partner groups.

Over time, partners have come and gone, but today, SK PCAP has 34 partner organizations.

Current PCAP Chair Kelly Williamson says working with differing perspectives has value. "Because you have that quantity and diversity you are going to have a range of views," he said. "The opportunity in that is getting that bigger picture,"



In 2001, SK PCAP was successful in being the first province to declare a provincial grass emblem, Needle-and-Thread Grass.

he said and added that it gives the organization a well-rounded approach.

A Catalyst for Collaboration

A lasting strength of SK PCAP has been its ability to bring groups together to work towards shared goals. While the prairie conservation community in Saskatchewan and beyond has shifted greatly over the past two decades, SK PCAP continues to adapt and be a key player at gathering stakeholders together for events, workshops — and most importantly, discussion.

"Collaboration between organizations and reducing duplication of projects — PCAP facilitated all of that," said Michael Burgess. "A deep appreciation for the value of native prairie was common ground that everyone could agree on."

Anderson's recollection is practical. "Some people had money, and other people just had good ideas, so we leveraged some people's money and some other people's ideas to make things happen — and it worked very well. With 16 partner organizations that sat around the table, we could usually make it work," he said. "You'd get four or five different groups working together on the same project and all PCAP did was make it happen."

At the inception of SK PCAP, the group created a five-year action plan that outlined goals and objectives. The tradition continues and a new five-year framework will be under development for 2024-2028.

Consensus-Based Conservation

A unique feature of SK PCAP is that it started as a consensus-based group, which means in order to undertake projects or initiatives, all partner organizations must agree.

"With consensus, it requires facilitating more of a conversation and searching for solutions that really take in multiple perspectives," explained Kelly Williamson. "You just can't take the typical majority-based approach and drive a solution forward."

"With such a big group, it can be hard to get anything done if it goes against policies of one or more partners," said Carolyn Gaudet. "Then again, it also

provides the opportunity to hear and understand someone's opinion on a subject that you may not have considered previously," she continued. "That can inform you how to move forward in your own work."

Over time, the Partnership has evolved to require near consensus, or 90 per cent agreement. This reduces the risk of a single Partner vetoing an idea that the vast majority would like to pursue.

Miles Anderson was a proponent of consensus, even if it was frustrating at times. "There were a lot of things that got left on the table that could have happened and should have, but didn't because we couldn't get consensus," he said, and added that "good notions usually reappear. Things never go away, even though it didn't make it — the idea — it's still there. It's planted in everyone around the table. Someone is going to see the same thing and see it with a fresh set of eyes."

While other provinces started similar initiatives in the 1990s, very few, if any, persisted; although, there is a resurgence in partnership conservation.

"In recent years, there has been a lot of traction with grassland conservation. Large foundations are getting involved and financially supporting grassland conservation, or there are large groups of stakeholders throughout the Great Plains who see how important it is to work together to make positive moves forward," said Carolyn Gaudet. "I like to think PCAP is a great example of how that can work."

Looking back, SK PCAP was an innovative concept which took a lot of teamwork to develop and still relies on active participation to maintain momentum, but the efforts pay off.


"It's easy to start something, but hard to keep it going," Anderson concluded. ■

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