

Students Set to Work on Native Prairie Project by Leanne Thompson

One of the ways to raise awareness of native prairie land management issues is by engaging youth and young adults – especially those whose career path may see them working in this area. That's why an idea to include a native prairie land management case study as part of a Renewable Resource Management class at the University of Saskatchewan was met with great enthusiasm by SK PCAP Manager, Tara Mulhern Davidson.

Davidson was contacted by Tom Yates and Angela Bedard-Haughn from the College of Agriculture to talk about a project that could assess land use changes in relation to native rangeland on the Canadian Prairies, possibly identifying the rate at which these land use changes have occurred, identify threats, as well as discuss the potential impact of these threats. Both the U of S Professors and Davidson quickly realized that a project of this size and scope would take years and require a significant amount of funding to accomplish. However through one of the project-based courses in the Department of Soil Science, there may be an opportunity to develop a methodology to approach this very big question.

Renewable Resource Management 421 is a project-based course administered through the Department of Soil Science at the University of Saskatchewan. This unique course sees groups of students assigned to work on real land management issues where they are mentored by a professor from within the Department as well as a person from a partner organization. Students also receive tutorials in project management. The overall goal of the course is to have students work on a real world problem starting by doing the research, looking for the data and resources they need to work through the problem, and finally developing a management plan.

Partner organizations who have provided mentoring in the past have included government departments (Ministry of Environment, Parks and Recreation,



Photo courtesy of Tara Mulhern Davidson

Forestry), NGO's such as Ducks Unlimited Canada and Nature Conservancy Canada, as well as City and Municipal groups from around the province. SK PCAP can now add their name to this list as Tara Mulhern Davidson will be providing mentorship to the students working on a native prairie case study during the 2014-2015 academic year.

The native prairie case-study will look at the issue of quantifying native prairie acres, identifying threats and the scope of their impact at the Rural Municipality (RM) scale. Students will start with the existing grassland survey and use satellite imagery from the last 15 years along with other available resources to look at changes to the landscape and identify the possible cause for changes. The next step is to look at the potential impacts on wildlife and species at risk, wetlands, soils and other natural resources in the area. At the end of the project (April 2015), students will present their findings in both report and presentation format. The idea that this case-study could provide a road map for wider analysis of native prairie resources in

western Canada is exciting for all involved.

While the majority of work on this case-study will involve research and literature reviews, students are familiar with native prairie resources and most have had practical training in range assessment and soils classification which required them to spend time in native prairie landscapes. Soil Science Professor, Tom Yates commented that while most of the students in the program are from an urban background, they have developed a strong connection to native prairie and are engaged by the issues surrounding this important natural resource.

As an organization concerned with the conservation of native prairie, could SK PCAP ask for anything more?! 