

## Grassland Conservation on Private Lands: Instruments and Incentives

By Diego Steinaker, SK Prairie Conservation Action Plan

Parks and protected areas on public lands are essential components for grassland conservation. Nevertheless, they cannot be considered sufficient to achieve conservation as they represent a small fraction of the entire ecosystem, and their effectiveness in isolation is questionable, studies have shown. Thus, the role of private lands in maintaining landscape connectivity and sustaining biodiversity is crucial.

However, integrating private land into conservation planning and management is very challenging because of the complexity of social and economic interests associated with land use. Within this context, there are a number of strategies that support grassland conservation in private lands, from regulatory prohibitions to direct incentives for actions to landowners. These strategies may be categorized as involuntary (e.g., compulsory land acquisition, or imposed restrictions) and voluntary (conservation easements, action-based incentives, market-based incentives, among others). In this article, I will focus on the latter.

An effective voluntary instrument for protecting critical habitats is the "Conservation Easement (CE)". A CE is a legal agreement between a landowner and a holder (government agency, conservation organization) that place restrictions on land titles for a specified time or in perpetuity. In Saskatchewan, a CE holder could be some conservation organization (e.g., Ducks Unlimited, Nature Saskatchewan, Nature Conservancy of Canada, among others) or most government agencies or rural municipalities. The terms of the agreement are negotiated to meet the interests of the landowner and the conservation objectives of the holder. It is an opportunity for a landowner to formalize their commitment to long-

term conservation of their land that ensures the land will continue to have careful stewardship by future owners. A conservation agency may offer to compensate a landowner for a CE. A landowner that donates a CE may be also eligible for special income tax incentives.

**“Private lands play a crucial role in maintaining landscape connectivity and sustaining biodiversity.”**

Cost-shared incentives are also important instruments for prairie conservation in private lands. These incentives provide payments to producers for reimbursable costs associated with different management actions (or equipment and material purchases) that contribute to conservation. Examples of cost-share incentives are "habitat management" and "habitat restoration" agreements that the Saskatchewan Stock Growers Association, in partnership with the South of the Divide Conservation Action Program, are offering to qualified producers. In these cases, producers who own or manage identified critical habitat for species at risk, or who own or manage currently cultivated (i.e., tame grass) qualifying sites, are compensated for all costs associated with implementing sustainable management and/or restoration practices.

Another type of incentive is the payment for the achievement of targets. These "results-based" incentives are generally aimed to provide habitat for a specific target species (e.g., Greater sage-grouse, Sprague's pipit, among others). "Results" refers here to quantifiable habitat requirements that a producer can manage under normal industry standards for

livestock production, for example, grass height, brush and forb density, and litter cover. If the requirements are met, then the producer receives the agreed payment. These agreements are generally non-prescriptive, meaning that the producer is the decision-maker. There also exist payments that can be one-time or periodic for the "avoidance of activities". This kind of incentive involves providing payments to ranchers if they have avoided a set of predefined activities on their properties that are known to have a negative influence on conservation goals (e.g. tilling, overgrazing).

Finally, "market-based incentives" are yet another type of mechanism to promote habitat conservation. These programs provide producers with a market premium for their commodities if they are produced in a way that supports conservation goals. An example of market-based incentives is the "certified beef programs" used to market beef raised on grasslands that are managed for conservation purposes. These programs attach attributes to a beef product that the consumer values and, therefore, will select over other products and be willing to pay a premium. Examples of these programs are "Carnes del Patizal" from the South America Alliance for the Grasslands and "Country Natural Beef" from Oregon in the U.S.

Instruments and incentives have proven to be effective mechanisms to promote ecosystem and species at risk conservation on private lands because of their ability to motivate stewardship behaviour. It is necessary that these mechanisms continue growing to convert private lands into effective counterparts of parks and protected areas in their role to conserve native prairies. ■