

Ecological Goods & Services – Benefits for Producers and Piping Plovers

Submitted by Leanne Thompson for SK PCAP

Over the past number of years, Ecological Goods and Services (EG&S) has emerged as a term to describe the vast number of ecosystem services that arise from well managed landscapes. Some examples of EG&S include wildlife habitat, groundwater recharge, erosion control, carbon sequestration, biodiversity and air and water purification. These important services impact both those who make their living off the land as well as the general population.

Land managers are tasked with the difficult decisions that surround land use. Good managers understand that choices made today have long lasting impacts on the ecosystem and approaches to land management that incorporate “big picture” thinking can benefit not only their own operation, but the wider environment. For this reason, the connection between land managers and EG&S is a strong one.

For grassland ecosystems, management practices such as rotational grazing, developing off-site watering, delayed grazing during sensitive wildlife periods, riparian area management and fencing to protect sensitive areas can have positive effects on the EG&S that land can provide. In addition to the effects on EG&S, many of these management practices have also shown positive effects on livestock productivity and forage stand sustainability.

One example of an EG&S that has shown positive impacts due to the incorporation of responsible management practices is the recent resurgence of Piping Plovers in Saskatchewan.

The Piping Plover is a small shore bird that relies on sand and pebble beaches and saline wetlands as habitat. This smaller cousin of the Killdeer has experienced a sharp decline in population since 1945 and is designated as an Endangered Species under the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA). The greatest threats to this bird are predation, habitat loss and human disturbance.

Saskatchewan is important to these small birds as it is reported that our province is home to 30 per cent of the 4,700 Piping Plovers that live in the prairies and Great Plains. Efforts to conserve the habitat of this small bird have shown some encouraging results. In Saskatchewan, the 2006 International Breeding Piping Plover Census recorded 1,435 Piping Plovers, the highest number ever since the survey began in 1991. The next census will be conducted in 2011.

Why should beef producers be concerned about Piping Plovers? Loss and degradation of native prairie has made grasslands one of the most threatened ecosystems in North America. As a result, grassland nesting birds species have declined more consistently and sharply than any other group of North American birds. Therefore, restoring native prairie and grasslands can have a positive effect for this class of birds. Due to the connection between grasslands and beef production in this province, the beef industry is uniquely positioned to play a significant role in conservation of grassland birds such as the Piping Plover.

Another reason that beef producers should be concerned about this little bird is the public perception of beef production. There are currently many very vocal opponents to beef production which the public is exposed to every day. There is an opportunity (read - dire need!) for the public to hear about the strong connection between many of the EG&S they take for granted and beef production. Due to the link between healthy grassland ecosystems and beef production in this province, the

public is afforded many valuable EG&S such as wildlife habitat, biodiversity, groundwater recharge, erosion control, air and water purification and many other services. It is high time that the public hears about the many valuable side-benefits of beef production in Saskatchewan. The positive growth in the population of the endangered Piping Plover is merely one example.

For more information on the Piping Plover in Saskatchewan and things you can do to conserve this species, visit the Nature Conservancy of Canada's website at www.natureconservancy.ca or Nature Saskatchewan's *Plovers On Shore* Voluntary Stewardship Program at www.naturesask.ca/?s=stewardship&p=ploversonshore .

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