

Saskatchewan Prairie Conservation Action Plan is pleased to announce that Orin Balas is the winner of the 2020 Native Prairie Stewardship Award! Orin was recognized at an awards ceremony at the 7th Native Prairie Restoration/Reclamation and 5th Transboundary Grasslands Partnership Workshops.

About Orin Balas:

Orin was raised on a ranch in southwest Saskatchewan. He spent his first four years of school at in a one room country school before going to school in town where he graduated in 1975. Since then, he has spent all his time on the ranch. The land base of his ranch is mainly native grasslands complimented by tame pasture. “This forage based operation showed me the value of native grasses not only from a livestock perspective but also a wildlife one”, says Orin.

Orin became involved with the Saskatchewan Stock Growers Association (SSGA) in the 1980’s. While on the board, he sat on the land use committee which dealt with many issues involving native prairies. This also led to him first involvement with the Saskatchewan Prairie Conservation Action Plan (SK PCAP), which he served as the Executive chair for over six years. As the SSGA representative on SK PCAP, he was part of the group which developed the range health protocols for Saskatchewan. “This led to one of the first tours the ranch hosted when two American range scientists visited to explain the methods they used to the group”, recalls Orin. After this, Orin’s ranch has welcomed many more groups including Ag in the Classroom, Society for Range Management tours a couple times, as well as the first class of students in PCAP’s Adopt a Rancher program.

In 2010, a group of ranchers organized Ranchers Stewardship Alliance Inc. (RSAI) to give local input in the action planning process for the South of the Divide Action Plan. Orin became President of this new group and continue in this position still. This has kept him involved in many stages of the action planning process including recovery measures workshops as well as numerous meetings leading to the formation of a transition team and finally to the incorporation of the South of the Divide Conservation Action Program. Orin served as the co-chair on the transition team and has been co-chair of SODCAP since it was formed.

In this time RSAI also formulated a method to identify range indicators which would allow land managers to use the best scientific knowledge available to provide habitat for species at risk. This has involved more workshops and tours to Orin’s ranch refining and explaining this new protocol to researchers, government staff, program delivery personnel, ranchers, and land managers. SK PCAP is continuing this work so more SAR habitat targets can be developed and provided to land managers in a form which is easy to understand, recognize, and implement.

“It has been my belief that people who manage the land and observe changes on an almost daily basis react to those changes quickest” said Orin Balas, and continues: “What practices they use vary widely and are nearly impossible to define. Because of this I saw the need for programing which was science based but still easily understood and did not define or restrict an individuals preferred methods or practices of management”. These Orin’s views led to the development of

what is called Results Based Programs: “These programs allow management practices to be as varied as the individuals implementing them yet allow measurements based on science to be used to ensure habitat is created for all species using the landscape. While many of these practices do not show a change from a beef production standpoint they can make a major difference environmentally”, in Orin’s words.

A reflection transcribed from Orin:

“It has been rewarding to me to see the interest taken by others in program ideas I have been involved in helping develop. The decades of involvement and the hundreds of meetings attended would not have been possible without the support of a family who understood the importance of looking after the natural landscape so that it would provide for all. Now that my kids are grown and still help on the ranch I take pride in passing on some of what I learned from my parents to them and my grandkids. I can also pass on all I have learned from people who took the time to get a formal education in a subject we live with every day. My going to events and meetings as well as touring people through the ranch has become second nature to the family and I’m sure it’s going to continue. I feel very confident that the landscape that I currently manage will be protected by ranch families into the future just as past ranchers have protected it before I came along”.