

# **Grassland Stewardship Conservation Programming on Natural Grasslands Used for Livestock Production**

## **Project Summary**

### **Participating organizations and geographic locations of the project**

The lead organization was the Ranchers Stewardship Alliance, Inc. (RSAI), with participation from Nature Saskatchewan, and Prairie Trust. Supporting partners included the Ranchers Stewardship Alliance in Montana, and the Western Stock Growers Association, in Alberta. The project was focused on natural grasslands managed by livestock producers in the Prairies-in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

### **Why was the project carried out?**

Economically sustainable ranchers and ranching communities are the cornerstone to conservation success in natural grasslands. In Canada, agricultural policies provide more support and safety nets for crop producers than for livestock producers, making crop production more financially stable and profitable than livestock production, particularly livestock production on natural grasslands. This inequity in profitability drives grassland into crop production and places pressure on remaining ranchers to increase profitability, often at the expense of the ecological services provided by grasslands. One method of addressing ranch profitability while simultaneously targeting the enhancement of ecological services is the development and implementation of stewardship incentive programming. Our goal was to find appropriate programs already in use around the world which, if implemented here, would provide stewardship incentives for ranchers raising livestock on natural grasslands and also enhance the endemic biodiversity on the lands they manage.

### **General description of the project**

The project identified existing payment-for-ecosystem-services (PES) schemes from around the world that were relevant to livestock production occurring on grasslands supporting species at risk. Five such schemes were shortlisted for in-depth analysis. A synopsis of the successes and challenges associated with the design and implementation of each program was presented in report format. The report also includes recommendations with respect to the designing of PES programs relevant to Canadian grasslands.

Another part of the project identified stewardship certification programs from around the world. Our goal was to focus on beef certification programs, for natural grasslands, that aimed to reward stewardship for biodiversity. Only one existing program fit our criteria so we broadened the focus to include failed programs, as well as programs that factor in biodiversity as a minor component of certification. A synopsis of the success and challenges associated with the design and implementation of each program was presented in report format. This report also explored challenges and recommendations for certification programming specific to the Canadian context.

In addition, a valuation report was prepared, consisting of five different methods for valuing the ecological contribution of ranchlands. That report includes an in-depth analysis of the economics associated with each method of valuation. Recommendations are also provided regarding the usefulness of each valuation method in informing the design of ecological services programming.

### **Description of outcomes and follow-up**

The Miistakis Institute produced two reports for the project:

*Grassland Stewardship Conservation Programming on Natural Grasslands Used for Livestock Production: Payment for Ecosystem Services Program Review, and*

*Grassland Stewardship Conservation Programming on Natural Grasslands Used for Livestock Production: Grasslands Stewardship Certification Schemes.*

These reports can be viewed or downloaded from the Miistakis website:

[http://www.rockies.ca/project\\_info2.php?id=56](http://www.rockies.ca/project_info2.php?id=56)

A third report was produced for RSAI by Chris Nykoluk, entitled “What Are Native Prairie Grasslands Worth—And Why It Pays to Conserve This Endangered Ecosystem.” This report can be obtained from RSAI. RSAI is continuing to provide information from these reports to partners and the public and is proceeding to develop one or more PES programs specific to species-at-risk on ranchlands.

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## **Analysis**

### **Successes**

The Ranchers Stewardship Alliance, Inc. (RSAI), contracted the Miistakis Institute at the University of Calgary to complete the first component of the project Grassland Stewardship Conservation Programming on Natural Grasslands Used for Livestock Production. This involved undertaking an evaluation of programs from around the world that reward landowners and land managers who manage livestock on landscapes where natural habitats have been retained and species at risk are stewarded.

Miistakis divided this work into two distinct, yet related, evaluations and produced two separate reports (cited above) for the partners. One part focused on the evaluation and recommendations associated with payment-for-ecosystem-services (PES) schemes. The other part focused on certification programs for livestock on grasslands important for conservation. These reports were completed in January 2013 and are posted on the Miistakis website.

The second component involved the valuation of ecological goods and services from natural grasslands grazed by livestock and was completed by Chris Nykoluk in consultation with Dr. Ken Belcher, an agricultural economist who works with ecological goods and services programming at the University of Saskatchewan. This valuation report (cited above) was completed in March 2013.

### **Challenges**

These reports have provided information and guidance on the design of incentive-based programs that promote conservation of grasslands and species-at-risk as well as improve ranch profitability. In particular, the Miistakis review of certification programs identified many challenges to beef certification programming in Canada. All three reports from this project have generated substantial interest among conservation partners and the livestock industry. The challenge now is to determine how to put this programming into action on the ground. To this end, RSAI plans to design and implement one or more programs based on the PES model.

### **Lessons learned**

The partners learned that beef certification is likely only feasible in Canada on a small regional scale or as part of a North American initiative.

The review of PES programs demonstrated that this kind of programming is feasible in Canada and would have the ability to achieve RSAI's dual goals of helping recover species at risk on natural grasslands while also improving the livelihood of ranchers managing natural grasslands. The Miistakis review provides a long list of recommendations on how to design an effective PES program.

The many lessons learned from the Nykoluk valuation report include the following:

- The extent and value of ecological services from natural grasslands needs to be further defined and refined before it can be used to inform programming.
- One of the biggest drivers of conversion of grassland to other uses in Canada has been subsidies for crop farmers, which have been variously in existence for nearly a century.
- Grassland stewardship is not free. Organizations that steward natural grasslands spend a minimum of \$5/acre/year to steward prairie, over and above costs associated with grazing cattle.
- Of the methods used to place a dollar value on the retention and stewardship of natural grasslands, the one best suited to helping determine incentive payments is the cost of stewarding land.

### **What next?**

This project, funded under the Commission for Environmental Cooperation's NAPECA program (North American Partnership for Environmental Community Action), is now complete. RSAI will be moving on to designing and implementing one or more PES programs. RSAI would like to continue to participate in the North American Grasslands Alliance and will also continue to build on the relationships we have formed as a result of this project.