

Things to Consider in Letters Supporting the Retention of Crown Lands

Issue:

Last fall the Government of Saskatchewan announced a program to sell 1.6 million acres of Crown land (an area equal in size to PEI) to current leasees at a price of up to 10% below market value.

While lessees are not required to purchase their leases they have been told in writing from the Government that they should know that it is the government's intention to see saleable land in the hands of private ownership.

Saskatchewan residents recognize and appreciate the important role many landowners play in maintaining habitat on their privately owned and leased lands. However, Crown land that currently has an ecological value on it should not be sold. These lands should remain protected and cherished as a "Crown Jewel" for the future benefit of all Saskatchewan residents.

A significant amount of Crown Ag land in Saskatchewan contains habitat that is critical in preserving our native flora and fauna.

The lack of concern being expressed by Saskatchewan residents to date regarding the sale of Crown owned land is being interpreted as support for the sales program.

Background:

There are over 7 million acres of Crown Agricultural leased land in Saskatchewan administered by the Ministry of Agriculture and almost all of these lands are in a native state.

About 3.4 million acres of these lands are protected from cultivation and sale through the Wildlife Habitat Protection Act (WHPA). Both the Ministers of Agriculture and Environment have publicly stated WHPA lands are not for sale.

However, it is my understanding that Agricultural officials have instructed the Environment Ministry to review the status of some 700,000 acres of WHPA lands to determine if they still meet WHPA criteria. Obviously, if political pressure is used to remove public lands from WHPA, they can then be sold. This is of grave concern.

Of the lands not protected by WHPA 3.5 million acres of Crown land is leased for grazing. The goal is to sell 1 million acres of these lands. An additional 600,000 acres of public land is referred to as cultivated leased land. These lands are all for sale and in many cases there is prime natural habitat found on these lands.

Status of Natural Habitat in Southern Saskatchewan:

- Overall we have lost 80% of our natural landscape south of the forest fringe. We have one of the most modified landscapes in North America.
- 85% of the land is privately owned. 15% is public land and includes, Provincial Parks, Community Pastures, Fish and Wildlife Development Fund lands and Agriculture leased lands.
- Our public lands (15% of the land base) contains half of the critical wildlife habitat remaining in southern Saskatchewan

Loss of Habitat - Impact on Biodiversity:

- 40% of our original wetlands are gone
- 20% of our native plants are rare and disappearing at an alarming rate.
- Two out of three bird species are declining in numbers including burrowing owls, Sprague's pipits and familiar well known species like meadowlarks and killdeer.
- Once common mammals such as, long-tailed weasels and Franklin's ground squirrels have declined and have disappeared from areas of their former range.

Our Goal

- To retain and protect all public land that contains natural habitat.
- To make government aware that the people of Saskatchewan treasure the value of Crown owned land and under no conditions should any Crown owned land that has an ecological value be considered for sale; present or in the future.

Solution:

- Do not sell public land that contains native habitat.
- Retain and preserve public land containing natural habitat for Ecological Goods and Services benefits for society as a whole.

Your Letters to Premier Brad Wall:

- Should be polite and constructive.
- State why maintaining wildlife and public lands are important to you personally i.e.: bird watching, hunting, conservation, enjoyment and inspiration, etc.
- Provide reasons why the sale of public lands is an issue. Refer to examples and some of the facts and statistics above.
- What do you want the Premier to do?
 - Do not sell public lands that contain natural habitat
 - Do not remove lands designated under WHPA.
- Ask questions such as;
 - How will the province meet its goals set out in the Biodiversity Action Plan, if it sells off over a million acres of public land with no guarantee that the natural lands will be preserved?
 - How does the province plan to halt and reverse the decline of our native flora and fauna without protecting remaining natural habitat on public land?
 - Has the province considered the value of Ecological Goods and Services that native Crown lands provides for public benefits such as controlling soil and water erosion, carbon sequestration and preserving biodiversity?
 - Use your own words, experiences, concerns and questions.
 - Be sure to ask questions in your letter and say that you look forward to his response and a response from the Minister of Agriculture.

Final Comments:

- Your letter need not be long. Short and to the point is fine.
- Hand written letters are excellent.
- If you communicate by email, be sure to include your complete name and mailing address. An email with just a name may go unanswered.

If you have any questions, concerns, ideas or want more information contact: Lorne Scott at 695-2047 or at lorne.scott@sasktel.net

Mailing and email address for the Premier:

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Regina, SK
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Email Premier Brad Wall at: premier@gov.sk.ca

It would be worthwhile to send a copy of your letter to the Honourable Bob Bjornerud, Minister of Agriculture and your MLA. All MLAs can be reached at the Legislative Building or their constituency office.

Thank you for your help on this very important issue. Your letter will make a difference.

Lorne Scott
Conservation Director
Nature Saskatchewan

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