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Behavioural Insights - GRASSLANDS CONSERVATION BRIEF

Canada's vast grassland ecosystem stretches from southern Manitoba across the Prairies and into British Columbia's interior. The Grasslands of Saskatchewan represent some of the most ecologically significant grassland habitat in Canada, yet they are the most threatened ecosystem in North America. There are over 20 species at risk in our grasslands, but less than 18% of this invaluable habitat remains.

The prairie ecosystem plays a critical role in the fight against the dual threats of biodiversity loss and climate change, providing much needed ecological goods and services in the form of buffers/mitigation to flooding and droughts (soil and water conservation), but also as a function for livestock forage, maintaining biodiversity, nutrient recycling, climate regulation, carbon storage, protecting watersheds, streams and river channels, for tourism and recreation, and for preserving Indigenous cultures.

CHALLENGES in Saskatchewan

- Global food system dependent on intensive agriculture and cropland expansion.
- Adaptive management void as result of federal and provincial pastureland programs ending.
- Lack of collaborative policy making for wetlands and water stewardship.
- Protected Area Downgrading, Downsizing, and Degazettement (PADDD).

WHY now? The prairie ecoregion is a unique landscape, mostly because of the significant alteration it has undergone over many decades, culminating in a patchwork of ownership (private/public), land use, and degraded/fragmented native prairie. Significant levels of natural habitat that once supported thriving biodiversity and sequestered and stored significant levels of carbon within its deep root systems have been lost. It is, therefore, critical - as we adapt to the effects of climate change - that not only are we ensuring Saskatchewan remains central to the Canadian Ag sector but that our federal and provincial policies and subsidies recognize and support the critical role biodiversity and our native prairie play in the context of delivering effective crop returns, safeguarding the resilience native prairie affords biodiversity and climate mitigation/adaptation, and ensuring citizens can remain connected with landscapes.

Government has not risen to this challenge, especially at the provincial level, and we continue to witness actions and policy that offer minimal to negligible effective outcomes for nature. In the 1990s

Saskatchewan committed to protecting 12% of the province's land and inland waters, over 30 years later, this promise remains unfulfilled. For example, the province's Ag Water Stewardship policy is directed at sustaining and increasing crop returns, providing limited focus and scant language on protecting, maintaining, and enhancing native prairie and wetlands – measures known to benefit the working prairie landscape through, for example, times of increasing drought and poorer soil health.

We need effective policy to protect and manage Saskatchewan's native prairie, not only for conservation and climate mitigation, but also for many communities within the prairie landscape that rely on this ecoregion for their livelihoods. For ranchers and their cattle, for the cultural and medicinal needs of Indigenous communities, and to secure the future of all that call Saskatchewan home.