

# Heritage Rangelands: A Bold Step to Preserve a Legacy

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"On the trail, as far down as the cattle might have drifted, we passed through an absolutely unsettled land; no towns, no farms, no fences, just one big grass-covered range, such grass as we never see now. The buffalo had been gone for years, and what cattle there were wandered at will from Sheep River (just south of Calgary) almost to the border."

This vivid image of the spring roundup of 1884 is that of pioneer rancher Frederick Ings in his 1936 autobiography, *Before The Fences*. Commenting on the passing of the open-range ranching era that was all but gone by 1900, Ings further reflects, "Gradually, the range had been closed out. The great leases were cut up into farms and smaller ranches. The cattle were restricted in their wanderings by the home fence. Wheat took the place of cattle on the plains."



*Black Creek Heritage Rangeland*

Alberta has taken a bold step in preserving the legacy of both its ranching heritage and its prairie grasslands. The prairies of southern Alberta have seen major changes in a short period of time. The vast herds of bison that early explorers had reported as stretching as far as the eye could see were, in fact, wiped out in a few short years between 1860 and 1880. Elk, the other large grazers, were reduced to a few small herds. The numbers of Pronghorn Antelope dramatically reduced. The Plains Grizzly, Gray Wolf, Black-footed Ferret and Swift Fox disappeared from

the prairie landscape. Significant cultivation of the fertile soils of the prairies began in the early 20th century.

Although less than one-third of the natural prairie landscape remains, some very large tracts of the continent's finest prairies are found in southern Alberta. These natural prairie landscapes continue to support viable populations of many of the plants and animals native to southern Alberta. The ecological integrity of these remaining prairie landscapes is due, in no small way, to the excellent stewardship of Alberta's ranchers.

Soon after the announcement of Alberta's Special Places initiative in 1995, it became apparent that, while the ranching community and the environmental community shared a common interest in preserving the environmental diversity of the prairie landscape, none of the existing protected area designations was ideally suited to do the job. This common interest and understanding evolved into the concept of Heritage Rangelands.



*Heritage Rangelands preserve the environmental diversity of the prairie landscape*



*Ranching heritage and prairie grasslands come together through Heritage Rangelands*

maintaining native prairie vegetation through carefully managed cattle grazing.

Everyone quickly agreed that preservation of the environmental diversity of the varied prairie landscape, while continuing the traditional grazing approach that has preserved these grasslands for so many years, should be the focus of Heritage Rangelands. Limited opportunities for non-facility-based outdoor recreation, to the extent that it is compatible with the preservation of natural values and grazing management, were seen as appropriate. In short, Heritage Rangelands would recognize the unique relationship that ranchers play in

In 2000, the Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves, and Natural Areas Amendment Act was drafted to set out the provisions for Heritage Rangelands, which allowed for legal designation and management of Heritage Rangelands and made provisions for regulations to be developed, if required, to address any emerging management concerns. Recreational use of off-highway vehicles is prohibited to protect these sensitive areas.

The bill also provided for a consequential amendment to the Public Lands Act that extends grazing lease terms to a period of up to 30 years subject to good stewardship of the land. Grazing dispositions will continue under the Public Lands Act with day-to-day stewardship being the responsibility of the lessee.

On June 24, 2003, with the proclamation of the Act, the Heritage Rangeland designation formally became a new class of protected area. At the same time, the Black Creek Heritage Rangeland in the Whaleback region of the province became Alberta's first Heritage Rangeland.