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ECOLOGICAL VALUE OF THE TWIN RIVER HERITAGE RANGELAND RECOGNIZED FOR YEARS

In their submission, the Southern Alberta Environmental Group noted that the Twin River Heritage Rangeland had long been regarded as an ecologically special and sensitive area.

The Twin River Heritage Rangeland (47,000 acres or 19,000 ha) was established by Order in Council in 2001. Protective designation of the Twin River Heritage Rangeland was recommended by a Local Committee in a report dated August 1998 to the Minister of Environmental Protection, the Honourable Ty Lund. The Local Committee recognized preservation of environmental quality and biological diversity as the primary concern which could be achieved while allowing continuation of domestic livestock grazing. The Local Committee recommended that no new roads be constructed and that industrial developments be prohibited. Their recommendations were accepted by the Minister in November 1999 and implemented in May 2001 through designation of the area as an Order-in-Council Natural Area by Community Development, the agency currently responsible for the *Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves and Natural Areas Act*.

According to the Special Places Web page, "Natural Areas protect special and sensitive natural landscapes of local and regional significance while providing opportunities for education, natural appreciation and low-intensity recreation. Facilities are limited to staging areas, trails and signs." "Local committee recommendations on permitted uses and management objectives guide the protected areas class that is selected for each site designated." The Local Committee did not recommend dam construction as a permitted use in the Twin River Heritage Rangeland, even though then Minister of Public Works, Hon. Ty Lund, reminded them of a proposed Milk River reservoir through a letter discussed at a meeting on June 17, 1998.

This Heritage Rangeland designation reaffirmed two previous protective notations which recognized the sensitivity of the area and demonstrated government intent to protect its significant environmental features. According to LSAS, in 1983, Public Lands placed a protective notation on 3,661 acres of public lands indicating there was an erosion hazard and there should be no agricultural dispositions. In 1993, Fish and Wildlife placed a protective notation on 27,112 acres for a Special Fish and Wildlife Management Area.

According to LSAS, a conservation notation for a potential dam and reservoir area was placed on 129 acres in SW 27-2-18-W4 in 1985 by the Department of Environment. It appears the notation did not include the lands which would be flooded as the reservoir area would far exceed 129 acres. The conservation notation was not removed at the time the Order-in-Council (O/C) Natural Area was established. Was this an error? Reservoir inundation impacts would be prohibited under the *Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves and Natural Areas Act*. Although the O/C states that "surface dispositions existing at the date of site establishment will be honoured," surely a notation on LSAS is not considered a "disposition." Disposition is defined under the *Public Lands Act* as "a conveyance, assurance, sale, lease, licence, permit, contract or agreement made, entered into or issued."





Twin River Heritage Rangeland is the only representative of the Grassland Natural Region – Mixedgrass Subregion listed on the Government of Alberta Special Places Web page. It is one of six large blocks of grasslands left on the glaciated plains of North America and considered as internationally significant (Alberta Wilderness Association, 2003). Level 1 Natural History Themes represented in the Twin River Heritage Rangeland include 9,100 ha of protected slope and 1,300 ha of floor/stream – about half of the area. These are habitats that would be most directly affected by a reservoir and dam in SW 27-2-18-W4 – the heart of the Heritage Rangeland. Valley slopes and floor are key habitat for several at-risk species known to occur in the Heritage Rangeland. These habitats include

- nesting sites for ferruginous hawks (COSEWIC species of special concern), golden eagles and prairie falcons,
- dens for yellow-bellied marmot,
- wetlands for leopard frog (COSEWIC species of special concern),
- aquatic habitat for St. Mary sculpin, stonecat, brassy minnow and sauger, and
- sites of rare plant populations including prickly milk vetch (*Astragalus kentrophyta*), tufted hymenopappus (*Hymenopappus filifolius*) and creeping whitlow grass (*Draba reptans*).

