



Wild Lands Advocate, October 2008, Vol. 16. No. 5

Milk River Management Society

After 25 years of involvement, AWA continues to participate, as a member of the Milk River Management Society, in formal stewardship of the Milk River Natural Area. This rolling grassland in extreme southeastern Alberta contains a wide variety of habitats supporting hundreds of native species, some of which are endangered. Cliff Wallis represents AWA on this committee, working alongside representatives from the local county, the ranching community, Southern Alberta Group for the Environment, and provincial government agencies.

The decision to form the society and take out a lease for the area came out of the management planning process in the 1980s. As part of its mandate, the society is responsible for administering the grazing contract and long-term research monitoring, which has been ongoing since the early 1990s. This region is perhaps the longest continuously monitored grassland site in the province, at least in terms of biodiversity. This year, the society hired researchers to assess the ecological impacts of fire after a recent burn. The arrival of endangered mountain plovers after the burn in an area in which they had not previously been recorded shows the potential role fire can play in mixed grass ecosystems.

Researchers from the U.S. have also been attracted to the ungrazed spring wetlands on the site, and in the summer of 2008, conducted detailed biodiversity research in those unique habitats.

The Management Society has also installed traffic counters to establish current levels of vehicle usage. An old wellsite road gives vehicles access to the edge of the Milk River Canyon, leaving 80 percent of the Natural Area upland free of vehicle traffic. However, EnCana Corporation has developed a number of wells right next door, with gravel track access almost to the corner of the Natural Area. The Natural Area is currently unregulated with respect to vehicle use. The society is concerned that this could open the area to increased and undesirable use. Formally monitoring vehicle use will provide baseline information so that concerns can be expressed promptly if increases are detected.

The society generally meets twice a year and will continue to manage this area with maintenance of ecological integrity as a priority. Over the years, the local representatives have taken ownership, responding appropriately to threats to the area. Along with the Hay-Zama Committee in the far northwest of the province, the Milk River Management Society is an excellent example of collaborative management of a protected area.

– Joyce Hildebrand

