

HABITAT CONSERVATION IN CANADA

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TO:

HOUSE OF COMMONS
STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Mr. Chair, Honorable Members,

Thank you for being given the opportunity to speak to the subject of habitat conservation in Canada. The Alberta Wilderness Association has been working in this area since the late 1960s. We work with governments, private landowners, and First Nations to achieve greater protection for wild species, wild lands and wild waters in all the natural regions of Alberta.

I know you have received some good input already on this subject, including the views of our sister organization, Nature Canada. We support their notion that all wildlife species deserve a no net loss of productive capacity of habitat as a principle underlying federal policy and law governing habitat conservation. We are in complete agreement that we need strong networks of protected areas, focusing on areas of highest conservation value (e.g. important bird areas, habitat for species at risk, unfragmented/unroaded areas etc.).

Canada is a signatory to important conventions on biological diversity, migratory birds, and wetlands (RAMSAR). It has made commitments to protected areas. Unfortunately, we have not met our targets nor the aspirations of most Canadians who consistently state in polls that this is important to them.

Canada has led in establishing national parks, national wildlife areas, migratory bird sanctuaries, national marine protected areas, and other management areas. We need to complete these systems of protected areas by federal and provincial governments if we are going to meet our goals. Unfortunately, one could characterize government policy (federal and provincial) as going fast on economic development and slow on conservation. This must come more into balance and we would argue that conservation, especially in some threatened regions of the country like grasslands, needs to be sped up dramatically.

In 2011, Canadian farmers got 16 per cent of their revenues from the federal and provincial governments, according to the OECD. Altogether, direct support payments to farmers totaled almost \$2.5 billion in 2011. An insignificant amount of money goes into subsidies for conserving biodiversity either on private land or on leased public lands. Even less of the subsidy ends up with ranchers who steward large areas of native grassland that support a rich biodiversity and some of the largest populations of species at risk in Canada. Since removal of agricultural subsidies seems unlikely, we believe that subsidies need reform. A good proportion of the subsidy must go towards providing ecological goods and services that Canadians want.

We have not looked critically for some time at forest industry and energy subsidies but both direct and indirect subsidies of these industries have worked against conservation and

promoted massive changes in habitat quality in Alberta. While we would be happy to see all these types of subsidies that promote habitat degradation removed, it is unlikely. At least some of them should be refocused on conservation and provision of ecological goods and services.

As an immigrant myself, I think it is important to help connect new Canadians to wild spaces and wild species. And as someone who spent a good part of his youth (and later life) outdoors, I think it is essential to find ways to re-connect our young people to the outdoors, both for health and conservation support reasons.

We are working with local ranching communities and First Nations on initiatives like the Sage Grouse Partnership and the Hay-Zama Committee. We co-manage with the local community a large protected area in the grasslands of southeastern Alberta along the Milk River Canyon and advise on management of the Hay-Zama Wildland Park Ramsar wetland as we phase out oil and gas activity in this internationally significant complex. These types of processes in which government facilitates but does not lead are some of our most rewarding.

In the end, a national approach to conservation must be both place-based and people-based and it must be well-resourced. If we fail on any of these, we will not be as effective as we should be. The Alberta Wilderness Association recommends:

1. Considering a “No Net Loss” principle for conservation, especially on federal lands.
2. Completing Canada's systems of protected areas/conservation lands at all levels of government (federal, provincial, and First Nations) as well as on private lands. Priority should be placed on endangered natural regions like the grasslands.
3. Finding ways to engage Canadians, particularly new Canadians and youth, with wild places and wild species.
4. Reform agricultural and energy policies to fully recognize the value of native habitats and the communities, ecosystem services, and biodiversity that depend on them.
5. Institute payments for ecosystem services from private and leased public lands through both private markets, such as those being created for carbon credits, and direct government payments.
6. Expand support for First Nations' interests in biodiversity conservation that builds on the traditional linkages of tribal cultures and economies with wildlife and wild spaces.
7. Conduct a review of federal lands to determine if they are well managed for biodiversity and ecosystem services and to determine if Canadians may be better served by managing them primarily for their biodiversity values, e.g. Suffield Military Reserve which is being managed for multiple use (oil and gas and grazing), contains a National Wildlife Area and is also used for military training that may be phased out with British Army reconsidering its use of the area. PFRA Govanlock Pasture should be designated a National Wildlife Area with existing pasture patrons continuing to benefit from grazing the area. Transfer of PFRA pastures back to the provincial government management should include incentives/caveats to guarantee native habitats remain native and that there is a focus on biodiversity conservation.
8. Provide education and extension services that enable private land managers to manage their land and businesses in ways that are profitable and sustainable and that continue to provide a full range of ecosystem services and their associated economic benefits.