

## Prairie Conservation Forum

There are many threats facing native prairie and parkland ecosystems. Less than one percent of Alberta's grasslands is legislatively protected. Therefore the government essentially has delegated the responsibility to be good land stewards to private landowners and public leaseholders. In many cases this delegation has greatly benefited native grasslands with excellent stewardship over the generations. Yet land conversion, invasive species, overgrazing, oil and gas development, roads, and more continue to encroach

on the few remaining intact grasslands.

So what more is being done on public land? At times, it seems too daunting a task for one group or individual to pursue grassland conservation and restoration. But there are many stakeholder groups across southern Alberta that are concerned with the security of native prairie and parkland. These groups are using a common platform to share information, collaborate on projects, and promote conservation through education and stewardship. The common platform is the Prairie Conservation Forum (PCF). The PCF was established in 1989 by the provincial government in response to a Prairie Conservation Action Plan (PCAP) developed initially by the World Wildlife Fund. The first PCAP was a prairie-wide plan crossing several provincial borders. It was a five-year blueprint that focused on efforts to conserve and manage native prairie species, communities, and habitats. Since the first PCAP, the PCF has taken over the lead organizational role, solely within Alberta, on developing subsequent PCAPs.

The PCF has grown over the last three decades and now comprises over 50 member organizations. Its membership spans from government and industry to academia and environmental groups (including AWA). The latest PCAP expires at the end of 2015 so the PCF board of directors and members have begun developing the next five-year action plan. AWA participated in a PCF survey and facilitated workshop on November 13, 2014 to provide input on the direction and desired outcomes of the next PCAP (2016-2020). The three overarching goals from the last PCAP (2011-2015) were:

1. Maintain large native prairie and parkland landscapes
2. Conserve connecting corridors for biodiversity
3. Protect isolated habitats

The aim of the next PCAP is to build on these goals by planning more short and medium term activities that will offer measur-

able results. The idea is not to re-invent the wheel but to evaluate the progress of the last five years and decide what continues to be a priority and what can be added to the next plan. Priority areas that were discussed align critically with AWA grassland and parkland areas of concern. They include the Milk River Ridge, Wainwright, and Wild Horse Plains in the southeast corner of the province. The hope is to move forward in improving the ecological health of these areas by using information and research, stewardship, and education.

The PCF meetings are also an important way to get representatives from a wide spectrum of interests into the same room. Member updates are helpful to find out what different groups are doing and what projects are happening. Not every member has the same background but everyone is at the table for a common goal – native prairie and parkland conservation.

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