

# Cowboy Welfare:

## The few exploit the many

By Kevin Van Tighem

**I**magine that you and your extended family own a large tract of land full of native vegetation and wildlife. Some of your family fish there in summer or hunt there in the fall. Others simply enjoy the birds, flowers and fresh air. The native prairie on the land would benefit from some grazing, so your family offers a seasonal cattle-grazing lease to a local rancher.

Then one day, much to your surprise, you find some new roads and natural gas wells on the place. The rancher who leases your grass has granted an oil company access to your land in exchange for annual payments—to himself. Not only that, he's put up "No Trespassing" signs around the property and he stops you at the fenceline. "I lease this land," he says. "You can't go in there."

"But it's my land!" you exclaim.

The rancher grins slyly. "Hmmm..." he says. "How much you willing to pay?"

Impossible? Not in Alberta. Our public land is treated like private property when the government leases out the right to graze our grass. About 5,700 private individuals and groups lease more than 202,000 km<sup>2</sup> of Alberta Crown land for livestock pasture. They pay less than \$3 per animal unit month (or AUM; the equivalent of what a cow and calf eat each month). This is far below market rates for private grazing leases. For example, when my wife and I lease out our private land for grazing, we get about \$25 per AUM—eight times more than the government land just across the fence. Red Deer lawyer Bob Scammell, who has spent decades fighting for the public's right to enjoy its own land, calls the grazing lease issue "cowboy welfare."

Grazing leases are just that: leases for cows

to eat grass. The land still belongs to you and me. But previous Alberta governments allowed lessees to sell their public land leases rather than surrender them when they no longer needed the grass themselves. Buying a public grazing lease creates the illusion of land ownership, but that's all it is: an illusion. That land is owned, on our behalf, by our government.

Because of that illusion, grazing lessees have asserted rights not granted by the actual leases. The government even allows leaseholders to act as "gatekeepers" for public access. The presence of livestock is considered reason enough to deny access. Some unscrupulous operators exploit that angle to turn public land into private hunting reserves. After pulling their cattle out for the season, they turn a few horses loose and use the presence of those horses as a reason to deny public hunting access—while giving their friends and family exclusive hunting rights. Some have even been caught illegally charging access fees to guide companies, profiteering not only from our public land but our public wildlife too.

If there's oil and gas under the land, grazing leaseholders can pocket serious profits. Government looks the other way when energy companies pay leaseholders for permission to build roads, pipelines and well pads—even though that money should go to the owner, not the renter. Auditor General Merwan Saher's 2015 annual report estimated that Alberta forgoes more than \$25-million annually by way of this unearned subsidy to a wealthy few. Meanwhile the provincial treasury is bare.

It's not a pretty picture, but in fairness nei-

ther is it the whole picture. The exploiters are probably a minority. Many grazing-lease holders are good folks who protect the land from motorized abuse while still welcoming hikers, hunters and others who travel on foot. Their low grazing fees are more than offset by many volunteer hours of land stewardship. Those good lessees are as offended by the abuses of the few as the rest of us ought to be.

Previous attempts to reform cowboy welfare foundered, largely because Conservative governments depended on politically influential rural elites. Our new, less beholden government might do better. Their challenge will be to not throw out the baby with the bathwater. Cattle grazing is, after all, the best economic use of our public rangelands and can be important in sustaining native prairie.

There's no question that non-grazing revenues from public land should flow into government revenues rather than lessees' pockets. Public foot access should be allowed at all times. And grazing-lease fees should reflect private market rates to ensure the fairest return to us who own the resource.

Still—the best grazing lessees work to keep our native prairie in prime condition, protect endangered species, remove invasive weeds and sustain wetlands and water supplies. It's only fair that excellent stewardship should earn discounted grazing rates. Responsible reform should lead to the best lessees paying the same low rents as before—not as cowboy welfare but as fair compensation for careful stewardship of Alberta's family treasures. ♣

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