

Grasslands:

Give the Gift of Protection to Milk River Ridge

By Christyann Olson, *Executive Director*



There is a magic in the 360 degree view the grasslands landscape offers and it is a magic those who have walked on the prairies know. For me, the grasslands are a place of renewal, of song and whispers, of mystery and freedom. It is a land where sunrises and sunsets span the full horizon.

If I had a wish for wilderness this year it would be to see a missing piece of our grasslands network protected. The expansion of the Twin River Heritage Rangeland Natural Area to include part of the Milk River Ridge and its reclassification to a Heritage Rangeland from a Heritage Rangeland Natural area would be a gift long overdue. It seems simple enough, a “no brainer” as some might say, and as my grandchildren offer with their carefully chosen wishes, this expansion and reclassification isn’t a very expensive gift to ask for.

Although inexpensive to deliver, this gift is very valuable and will help to sustain any

number of wildlife species. Some of those species are endangered, some are threatened, and some are secure on their home landscape. Rare plants and rough fescue grass, wild native flowers, bees and butterflies, hawks and owls, deer and elk all are found here. So too has this land been visited by a sow grizzly and her three cubs. Sharptail grouse dance here while pintail ducks nest. The presence of such a variety of species reminds us how valuable a wild and intact grasslands space can be.

And so, while it seems crystal clear and commonsensical to protect this wild space, why has it taken so long for its proposed protection?

The South Saskatchewan Regional Plan (SSRP) identified this area as valuable conservation lands – there are three layers of Protective Notations on them. Yet, their more formal and stronger protection has been blocked by the aspirations of a petroleum company that believes it should be

allowed surface access to the area in order to drill and build a pipeline. AWA’s long-standing efforts to secure protection for the native grasslands of Milk River Ridge summarize well the challenges we face in getting the government to manage our conventional oil and gas resources in a manner that is sensitive to ecological values.

AWA is not opposed to subsurface directional drilling access. Through directional drilling oil and gas companies now can exploit pools that are kilometres away from their drilling platforms. We want to see the surface of this internationally significant area left undisturbed and we believe that if technology needs to catch up to make this so – then we need to wait until it does.

AWA has worked with local landowners for years to ensure that this special place is protected. The saga of the Milk River Ridge through the past year or so is a case worth taking a look at. In June 2017 Granite Oil Corporation’s leases in the area were due to expire – an expiry that AWA repeatedly urged the Alberta Energy Minister to approve. Instead, without any explanation and knowing full well the concerns and the intent from the Minister of Environment and Parks that this area should be protected, Alberta Energy renewed the Granite leases. AWA and others filed Statements of Concern with the Alberta Energy Regulator and renewed those concerns with phone calls and further letters of concern.

In June 2018, a full year later and only months before the leases would again expire in December 2018, Granite applied to the Alberta Energy Regulator (AER) to drill a multi-well battery and pipeline just



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outside the existing boundaries of the Twin River Heritage Rangeland Natural Area on the Milk River Ridge lands identified in the SSRP for protection.

In August 2018, after years of preparation, review, on the ground assessments, documentation and consultation, Alberta Environment and Parks (AEP) proposed to expand the boundaries of the Twin River protected area and reclassify it to a rangeland from a natural area. The reclassification fully supports grazing - AWA always has supported cattle grazing practices that promote healthy grasslands and the family that has leased these lands are highly recognized for their outstanding stewardship and care of these lands. The proposed expansion will take in the lands Granite Oil hopes to industrialize and thereby should prevent the proposed drilling and surface disturbance. New oil and gas, with associated development, would be prohibited if the proposed expansion proceeds. What Granite has applied for is new oil and gas development. The two-month consultation period yielded an overwhelming public response giving support to the Ministry of Environment and Parks proposal for expansion and reclassification.

What happened next belies all common sense. AWA along with others concerned about the area were contacted by the Alber-

ta Energy Regulator (AER) to meet and consider Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) over the application for surface access. Interviews began and, before they were finished, AER wrote to say there would be a hearing to determine whether the Granite Oil application would be approved.

There are now three parallel processes, all costly ones, in play that leave one wondering if the departments know what each other is doing and what the government's goal truly is for this small but vitally valuable area. AEP is close to obtaining cabinet approval for the reclassification and expansion, AER wonders if we will consider ADR while another division within AER is proceeding with a hearing process and has denied AWA standing at that hearing.

Due diligence demands that an individual, person or corporation, is aware of and understands the status of something, the condition it is in, and its risks and potential liabilities. This applies to the purchase of an automobile or a subsurface lease and it is a responsibility that belongs to the purchaser, to the developer. Why would we facilitate the ambitions of a company that has known what they were proposing would compromise important conservation values and the protection of our biodiversity. Due diligence here rested with Granite Oil and, in our opinion, they have failed to exercise that responsibility well.

The Milk River Ridge case tests significantly the province's commitment to protect this area and say "no" to the additional industrialization of Alberta's native grasslands. Despite years of pleading for our governments to protect this environmentally significant area from surface disturbance, there seems no urgency to make it so. We hope this isn't the case and that, before the end of the year, government realizes the ecological costs of surface drilling far outweigh the possible benefits that will accrue to one small cap Alberta oil company. That is my hope for wilderness in these last days and weeks of 2018. ▲

Much of Alberta's native grassland is fragmented or degraded. Although there are few large intact blocks of native grasslands left in Alberta, they support approximately half of the rare ecological communities, 40 percent of rare vascular plant species, and 70 percent of mammal, bird, reptile and amphibian species considered "at risk" or "may be at risk." The remaining large blocks of native grassland are extremely significant for biodiversity conservation and their protection is essential.

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