

# **Engaging Producers in the Future of Prairie Grasslands**

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**Producer Dialogue Workshop Summary Report  
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## Executive Overview

### The Challenge: Canada's Most Endangered Ecosystem

Eighty percent<sup>1</sup> of Canada's native prairie has already been lost to agricultural conversion, making grasslands—particularly native grasslands—the single most endangered ecosystem in the country<sup>2</sup>. The remaining grasslands continue to disappear at an alarming rate, despite their extraordinary ecological and economic value. These ecosystems are home to more than 60 species at risk, provide critical habitat for grassland birds (which have declined by 57% since 1970<sup>3</sup>), and store significant carbon in their deep root systems. Prairie grasslands also play a vital role in water infiltration and flood mitigation, filter nutrients, and support the cattle and beef sector which contributes close to \$35 billion annually to Canada's GDP<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (2010). ([https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection\\_2012/agr/A52-178-2012-eng.pdf](https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2012/agr/A52-178-2012-eng.pdf)) Management of Canadian Prairie Rangeland.

<sup>2</sup> Government of Canada (2024). (<https://www.canada.ca/en/services/environment/our-environment/nature-based-climate-solutions/grasslands.html>) Grasslands.

<sup>3</sup> Birds Canada and Central Grasslands Roadmap (2024). (<https://www.birdscanada.org/bird-science/grassland-birds-at-risk>). Stemming the Loss of Grasslands in Canada: A Scan of Policy Solutions.

<sup>4</sup> Canadian Cattle Association (<https://www.cattle.ca/canadian-beef-economics>).

Yet economic pressures, policy distortions, and market forces continue to drive grassland conversion to cropland. Without intentional management and conservation-oriented approaches, native grasslands, and the ecological services, wildlife habitat, climate resilience, and ranching livelihoods they support, are at risk.

A central finding of this dialogue is that grassland loss is driven by misalignment between short-term policy, market, and program structures and incentives and long-term stewardship goals—a gap the next phase of work will seek to address.

## Workshop Purpose

A coalition of producer organizations and policy partners convened leading-edge prairie producers to identify critical challenges and opportunities for grassland conservation. This producer-led dialogue represents the first phase of an initiative to develop policy frameworks and investment mechanisms that can halt grassland conversion while creating economic pathways for producers to maintain and restore prairie ecosystems.

A central insight from the producer dialogue is that producers' long-term stewardship goals are strongly aligned with grassland conservation outcomes; however, current policy and program structures often push decisions in the opposite direction.

## Key Partners

- **Producer Leadership:** Manitoba Forage and Grassland Association and Saskatchewan Stock Growers Foundation
- **Policy and Research Partners:** Centre for Land Conservation, Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, and International Institute for Sustainable Development

## Participant Profile

Forty-four practitioners attended the November 2025 workshop, representing innovative cattle ranchers, mixed farm operations, and regenerative agriculture from Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and select producers via the Rural Routes Climate Solution network in Alberta. Participants manage operations ranging from 60 to 1,000 cow-calf pairs and have implemented a variety of advanced grazing management practices, including adaptive multi-paddock grazing, extended grazing seasons, holistic management, and regenerative agriculture principles. Many participants are recognized leaders in their communities and serve on industry committees and producer organizations.

## Workshop Key Themes and Issues

The themes below were identified by producers as the most important forces shaping their grassland management decisions. While grounded in lived experience, these issues do not represent challenges faced by individual producers; rather, they reflect sector-wide concerns about how policy, markets, and programs interact with long-term stewardship goals. Understanding these themes helps clarify where current systems support producers and where misalignment limits innovation and creates pressure to alter grassland management.

### Profitability and Long-Term Sustainability

Producers emphasized that long-term grassland stewardship is only possible when operations remain profitable over multi-decade timeframes, and that economic and ecological sustainability are unified. The consensus was clear: "If it's not profitable, it's not sustainable, and if it's not sustainable, it's not profitable."

### Producer Experience:

- When management decisions are designed for long-term profitability, they must be made over 25–50-year horizons, prioritizing long-term land health and sometimes sacrificing short-term gains
- Successful operations focus on decreasing overhead costs to maintain low-cost operations rather than chasing yield maximization
- Mimicking nature helps reduce input costs, through practices like rotational grazing, bale grazing, extended grazing seasons and avoiding monoculture
- Diversified income streams and stacking enterprises helps maintain profitability over time

A key takeaway is that policies rewarding gross margin stability, cost reduction, and grassland health outcomes align more closely with producer decision-making timelines and reinforce the reality that effective grassland conservation depends on long-term profitability rather than short-term production incentives.

### Government Policy Distortions and Market Pressures

Producers described government policies and market structures that—in the view of this community—create economic pressure to convert grasslands to croplands. Several participants emphasized that these pressures often make grassland conversion a rational economic decision, even for producers committed to long-term stewardship.

#### Producer Experience:

- Grain subsidies and AgriStability programs disproportionately favor monoculture cropping over sustainable grazing, accelerating grassland conversion
- Crop insurance is heavily subsidized (60% by provincial and federal governments) while Livestock Price Insurance requires producers to pay 100%
  - Pasture insurance options exist but are limited in scope and flexibility
- Crown land lease rates have increased dramatically (3x increase in some areas) in some jurisdictions, creating financial instability for grazing operations
- Grazing leases are being pulled and sold for cropping despite prohibitions on farming lease lands, with limited enforcement
- Short political cycles contrast with producers' long-term stewardship horizons
- Public misunderstanding of grazing's ecological value reinforces poorly aligned policies

Producer perspectives indicate that existing risk management tools, land policies, and improvement incentives currently privilege annual cropping systems over perennial grasslands, and that better aligning insurance equity, lease stability, and enforcement with long-term stewardship could reduce conversion pressure without introducing additional regulatory complexity.

### Land Market and Access Challenges

Land access and affordability were identified as growing constraints on grassland stewardship, particularly as land markets increasingly favor non-agricultural or short-term economic uses.

#### Producer Experience:

- Rising land values and assessments create pressure to convert land to development or cropping to justify higher tax burdens
- Land price speculation by investors and offshore buyers drives up prices beyond agricultural viability and production
- Competition from grain farmers during boom cycles limits ranchers' ability to compete for land purchases
- Urban sprawl around cities continues to consume prime agricultural land

- *Post-COVID recreational buyers* purchase land but don't allow grazing or haying, removing land from agricultural production
- Young and new producers face significant barriers to entry without creative land access solutions

Producer insights reveal that land market pressures are largely disconnected from agricultural productivity and conservation outcomes, yet they strongly shape land use decisions and long-term access for grazing operations. Policy tools that address tax burden, speculative pressure, and access for next-generation producers could stabilize land tenure and support long-term grassland use. Without policy tools that address access and tenure, even well-designed conservation programs face structural limits.

## Knowledge Transfer, Innovation, and Succession

Producers identified the loss of extension services and succession pathways as critical threats to innovation and the continuity of grassland stewardship, emphasizing that the challenge is not lack of motivation but loss of system capacity.

### Producer Experience:

- Provincial livestock specialists and multidisciplinary extension services have largely disappeared
- Programs like the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA) that provided trust, system-based support, no longer exist
- An aging producer population is retiring with limited mechanisms to transfer knowledge
- Family succession is failing in many cases due to economic barriers, lack of transition tools, and difficulty having intergenerational conversations.
- Formal agricultural education often emphasizes conventional, yield-focused approaches
- Peer-to-peer learning and producer led and focused groups remain among the most trusted and effective form of knowledge transfer

The dialogue emphasized that reinvesting in producer-focused extension services and structured peer learning networks would strengthen innovation adoption and succession outcomes. Policies that value experiential knowledge alongside formal research could further accelerate regenerative practice uptake, underscoring the importance of investing in system capacity and continuity rather than incentives alone.

## Regen Ag, Conservation Practices and Program Design

Producers emphasized that conservation outcomes depend less on specific practices and more on how programs are designed—particularly whether they are flexible, outcome-based, and aligned with on-farm realities.

### Producer Experience:

- Soil health, organic matter, and plant diversity are viewed as foundational assets
- Prescriptive programs often fail to account for regional variation and adaptive management
- Administrative burden discourages participation, even when incentives are attractive
- Short funding windows create start-stop dynamics that undermine long-term outcomes
- Competing or conflicting requirements hinder ability to access multiple complementary programs without creating additional administrative burden
- Producers value regenerative principles including context, minimizing disturbance, soil cover, diversity, living roots, and livestock integration
- Need credible, independent monitoring systems to help advocate for their practices with lenders and insurers, provide credibility for payments, and document ecological improvements over time

- Conservation easements can be valuable but may limit financial flexibility for families

Producer perspectives highlighted that flexible, outcome-based program design that allows for adaptation and multi-year participation could improve uptake and effectiveness. Exploring outcome-based conservation tools could balance ecological goals with producer flexibility.

## Labour, Mental Health, and Decision Fatigue

Labor constraints and mental health pressures were consistently described as economic and operational risks that directly affect management decisions and long-term stewardship capacity.

### Producer Experience

- Skilled agricultural labor is increasingly difficult to find and retain
- Mental health challenges, isolation, and burnout affect decision-making and financial performance
- The cognitive load of adapting to new practices creates decision fatigue
- As farms consolidate and rural populations decline, producers report fewer informal support systems to share labor and manage stress

An important insight from the dialogue is labor and mental health are rarely addressed directly in agriculture policy, even though stewardship outcomes are directly affected by these issues. Policies that support labor availability, reduce administrative burden, and strengthen community networks could improve both producer well-being and stewardship outcomes.

### Cross Cutting Insight

Across all six themes, a consistent conclusion emerges—grassland loss is not primarily driven by a lack of producer awareness or willingness to steward land. Rather, the key insights highlight misalignment between long-term management realities and short-term policy, market, and program structures. Addressing grassland conversion therefore requires policy approaches that correct misalignments, strengthen system capacity, and support the economic viability of stewardship-oriented operations.

## Priority Actions and Recommendations

The following priority actions emerged directly from producer discussions about what would most help them sustain grasslands while maintaining viable operations. These recommendations emphasize practical, producer-informed policy and program changes that build on existing networks, reward stewardship already underway, and reduce barriers created by current systems. These actions are not final policy prescriptions, but producer-informed priorities intended to guide the next phase of collaborative policy development in this initiative.

### Reward Innovation and Recognize Past Stewardship

These actions address policy and insurance distortions that penalize early adopters, increase financial risk, and discourage innovation despite clear stewardship benefits. Producers emphasized that rewarding past stewardship is as important as supporting future adoption, both for fairness and credibility.

- **Reduce risk through financial incentives:** Lower forage insurance premiums, offer preferential lending terms, and allow stackable results-based incentives. Identify discounts for programs that remove marginal lands from annual crops in exchange for perennial crops.
- **Retrospective recognition programs:** Compensate producers who have implemented successful regenerative practices over time, recognizing their innovation and ongoing stewardship.

- **Innovation support for new adopters:** Infrastructure funding and transition support for producers adopting regenerative agriculture or grassland conservation practices.
- **Innovation and Experimentation Boosters:** Design incentive structures that reward risk taking and innovation based on outcomes rather than prescriptive practices.

### Strengthen Place-Based Learning and Knowledge Networks

These actions respond to producer-identified gaps in extension services, knowledge transfer, succession support, and trusted technical assistance.

- **Establish Learning Hubs:** Utilize and create grazing club type events and learning networks that bring thoughtful practitioners and respected researchers together for deeper learning and mentorship. These could function as "4-H Clubs for adults."
- **Applied Demonstrations:** Support community pastures, demonstration farms, and field days to allow producers to observe and evaluate practices in action.
- **Strengthen Existing Networks:** Ensure peer-to-peer learning has sustainable funding that reinforces, rather than replaces, authentic producer relationships.

### Improve Measurement, Benchmarking, and Verification

These priority actions respond to producers' need for credible, independent evidence to support engagement with lenders, insurers, conservation programs, future eco-service markets.

- **Create Independent Measurement Systems:** Develop standardized benchmarking and verification systems that measure performance of fields that provide producers with advocacy tools and demonstrates the value of their practices.
- **Fund Range Health Assessments:** Support comprehensive baseline assessments covering soil health, plant diversity, biodiversity, and water holding capacity to enable long-term monitoring and adaptive management.
- **Combine Remote Sensing + Ground Truthing:** Combine satellite data with on-the-ground verification to create credible, cost-effective monitoring systems.
- **Build a Youth Monitoring Corps:** Hire local youth/interns to conduct landscape monitoring, pairing workforce development with data collection through multi-year program models.

### Expand Payments for Ecosystem Services for Multiple Co-Benefits

This priority reflects producers' concern that current incentive structures focus too narrowly on single outcomes, while overlooking the full suite of ecological benefits provided by well-managed grasslands. Participants emphasized that payments should reinforce long-term function rather than short-term, single-metric performance.

- **Recognize multiple ecosystem services:** Move beyond carbon-only focus to compensate producers for wildlife habitat, biodiversity, water holding capacity and infiltration, flood and drought resilience, climatic weather event resiliency.

### Reform Agricultural Policy and Programs

These reforms respond directly to the structural policy and market misalignments identified by producers as primary drivers of grassland conversion pressure. Producers emphasized that these reforms could reduce conversion pressure without increasing regulatory complexity.

- **Insurance Equity:** Align subsidy levels for livestock and perennial crop insurance with those available to annual cropping systems.

- **Innovation-Friendly Insurance:** Create insurance products that accommodate experimentation and regenerative practices rather than penalizing deviation from conventional systems.
- **Reform Tax Policy:** Implement tax incentives for grassland retention and provide relief where rising land values and assessment create pressure to convert.
- **Crown Land Management:** Establish stable, long-term lease structures that reward and recognize the land value of well-managed grazing and reduce volatility that encourages conversion.
- **Program Coordination:** Develop navigation tools to help producers understand, compare, and access available programs and funding.
- **Extension Service Restoration:** Rebuild government, private, or not-for-profit extension capacity with staff who understand regenerative practices and biological systems, not just conventional approaches.

## Educate Multiple Audiences

These actions reflect producers' concern that misperceptions among consumers, conservation practitioners, and policymakers reinforce poorly aligned programs and land use decisions.

- **For Producers:** Holistic management, regenerative principles, financial literacy, range health assessment, succession planning, and advanced technologies (virtual fencing, precision agriculture).
- **For Consumers:** Farm tours and educational programs that help urban populations understand "where food comes from" and how sustainable agriculture creates healthy food.
- **For Conservationists:** Education on the conservation values within the biological systems of regen ag, i.e. the role of grazing in maintaining grassland health and the importance of outcome-based rather than prescriptive conservation approaches.
- **For Policy Makers:** Increase exposure to long-term land management perspectives and the downstream impacts of policy design and implementation.

## Other Ideas and Emerging Opportunities

Producers also shared ideas that extend beyond traditional agricultural or conservation programs and respond to gaps they experience on the ground. While exploratory, these ideas highlight opportunities for pilot efforts, cross-sector collaboration, and future policy innovation where existing tools do not yet align with producer realities. Together, they illustrate how greater policy flexibility could unlock new pathways for stewardship.

**Agritourism and Farm Experiences:** Develop infrastructure to support agritourism ventures including wedding venues, farm tours, and ag-in-the-classroom programs. Provide checklists and support services to navigate insurance, commercial kitchen requirements, and liability concerns. Models like Hillsborough Ranch (US) and Harvest Hosts demonstrate potential.

**Livestock Grazing Exchange and Temporary Grazing Partnerships:** Facilitate land arrangements between grain farmers and cattle operations to allow grazing on harvested crop land, dryland pivot areas, and cover crops. Such partnerships can improve soil health and resource efficiency while reducing barriers between sectors.

**Independent Farm Enterprises Model:** Enable independent enterprises (e.g., managed woodlots, goat operations, chickens) to operate on producer land without increasing labor demands on landowners. This model supports income diversification while keeping land in productive use.

**Land Transfer and Succession "Connector App":** Develop a matching service connecting retiring producers with aspiring farmers, including mentorship programs that address the emotional and relationship dimensions of farm succession.

**Reference Sites and Visual Standards:** Create and utilize existing regional reference sites or visual tools that illustrate healthy grassland conditions across different ecoregions and soil types.

**Plastic Recycling Incentives:** Develop incentives and infrastructure for recycling agricultural plastics including silage bags, grain bags, and bale twine.

**Cross-Border and Cross-Provincial Water Governance:** Develop integrated watershed management and governance for entire watersheds that straddle provincial and international borders.

**Virtual Fencing at Scale:** Provide financial incentives and technical support to expand adoption of virtual fencing technology.

**Municipal Collaboration Models:** Support multistakeholder partnerships at the municipal level to co-develop shared infrastructure solutions. Collaborative models can align agricultural, conservation, and community priorities through flexible, locally driven agreements.

**Goal setting and Vision Framework:** Co-develop with producers and partners a unifying, long-term vision for the future of Canada's native prairies. This collaborative vision should integrate multiple perspectives and values (government, Indigenous, producers, private sector) to create a shared framework for action.

Taken together, these priority actions and recommendations illustrate how targeted policy alignment—rather than prescriptive management—can strengthen grassland stewardship, reduce conversion pressure, and support viable producer livelihoods.

## Scope, Representation, and Next Steps

This report reflects the perspectives, priorities and lived experiences of the producer community that participated in the *Engaging Producers in the Future of Prairie Grasslands workshop*. These findings are not intended to represent all grassland stakeholders or regions, but rather to document one critical set of viewpoints that shape on-the-ground land management decisions. As this initiative continues, similar engagement processes will be taken with Indigenous knowledge holders, to ensure distinct perspectives are captured.

The producer identified priorities and challenges captured here will guide the phase of collaborative policy development work (November 2025 - August 2026), during which policy partners will develop and refine solutions with ongoing guidance from producer leaders. Insights from each stakeholder group will later be synthesized to inform more inclusive and durable policy frameworks. All findings will be returned to the producer community for review and refinement at a Solution Forum in Fall 2026.

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