



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

May 14, 2018

A Made-In-Manitoba Tragedy of the Commons

In February, a provincial news release about changes to agricultural crown lands advised that “The Manitoba government has launched a consultation focused on agricultural Crown lands, to ensure upcoming policy changes reflect the views of the livestock industry while improving fairness and transparency in the system [...]”.

How will these changes affect the Community Pastures Program, part of what was the federal government’s Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration initiative? Referred to as “Canada’s greatest success story” – the program started in 1935 to deal with the devastation the Dust Bowl brought to the southern prairies. It included initiatives to deal with erosion, water access, irrigation and grass management through the Community Pastures Programs. These pastures are found in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba and cover over 2 million acres in total.

This program gave farmers and ranchers access to valuable public land which benefitted from the cattle’s natural grazing behaviour. Pasture managers were trained in soil and water conservation and native plant management and understood the crucial role these processes play in protecting the endangered species that live on these ancient ecosystems. As reported in the *Globe and Mail*:

As rare and ecologically important as coastal old-growth forest, the PFRA grasslands are listed by the World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA)

as lands that Canada has made a commitment to protect.

The Harper government axed the program in 2012, and control of the pastures was ceded to Saskatchewan and Manitoba (Alberta’s were always under provincial control). Although Saskatchewan’s Agricultural Minister claimed in 2013 that there would be a requirement that the pastures would have to remain whole (no cultivation; no drainage), many were worried about a lack of regulation and enforcement of these stipulations.

Manitoba’s 400,000 acres fell under the control of the provincial government which continued renting them out to patrons under the management of a non-profit organization – the Association of Manitoba Community Pastures (AMCP). Trained pasture managers stayed on staff with the AMCP. The NDP government of the day agreed to support the program, understanding that the pastures help the province fight climate change and protect biodiversity. It pledged over a million dollars to the project.

In order to understand the current government’s commitment to ‘modernize’ the program, we have to unpack a couple of the purported improvements highlighted in the consultation backgrounder. The first one concerns “facilitating interprovincial trade, and complying with the principles of the New West Trade Partnership Agreement and the Canadian Free Trade Agreement” (CFTA).

Manitoba signed on to the New West Trade Partnership Agreement soon after

there is an alternative.

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the Pallister government took power. Although the agreement ostensibly lowers trade barriers between the provinces, critics argue that such barriers are few and far-between and that its primary purpose is to streamline industry, labour and environmental regulations to the lowest possible denominator. The CFTA came into effect in July, 2017, also with the promise to harmonize regulations across the country, and with international trade agreements like the Comprehensive Economic Trade Agreement (CETA) with the European Union. Agreements like CETA are notoriously pro-business to the detriment of environmental protection and the interests of dairy and poultry producers.

In the case of the community pastures, regulatory harmonization is a real problem. Saskatchewan recently completely abandoned its community pasture program, stating that “We don’t believe that looking after privately owned cattle is a core function of government”. This statement from Saskatchewan’s Agriculture Minister demonstrates a lack of understanding of the full purpose of the program, adding to what seems to be a long running disregard for the prairie ecosystem. A blog by prairie naturalist Trevor Harriet explains that “the Saskatchewan Party has sold 1.1M acres of crown lands in the prairie ecozone”. It is not clear how the pastures will be regulated once the province has fully withdrawn.

Talking to Manitoba cattle producers who support the current program revealed that concerns go beyond the loss of environmental stewardship. The stated goal of “removing the previous requirement that applicants had to be Manitoba residents” opens up the possibility that cattle will be shipped in from other provinces, then shipped home for processing, leaving no economic value added for Manitoba.

Changes will also remove the advantage currently given to younger Manitoba producers who need access to crown lands to build their herds. The modified application process will favour the wealthiest producers who can put in the highest bid, allowing out-of-province producers with deep pockets to elbow

out younger producers of more modest means. There are concerns that the desire to “modernize” the program will result in more intensive cattle production that is controlled by big business, and that small producers will fall victim to corporate farming the same way other agricultural producers have.

Finally, these changes fly in the face of economic reasoning. Cattle over-production is causing prices to fall, but the province is ushering in changes so cattle production can expand. And such expansion could put pressure on less agriculturally productive areas such as marsh and/or scrub land that needs to be protected so it can continue providing important environmental services.

Many worry that changes to the Community Pastures Program will be a variation of a familiar theme: the tragedy of the commons. That becomes clear in reading the March 2018 report by the International Institute for Sustainable Development, which concluded that:

Community Pastures were a policy response in a time of crisis. The pastures provide patrons with tangible benefits to their operations, yet the sustainable management practices used have provided benefits to the wider society. Some of these benefits are only now becoming valued by society through policy: carbon sequestration, for example, was until recently a benefit without clear value, yet in the near future the mitigation potential of pastures and other uncultivated landscapes could reach a broader audience and inform understanding of the complete value of these places.

Climate change and species extinction represent the greatest crises facing us today. Hopefully Manitoba’s government will show more leadership than Saskatchewan’s, and protect these lands for future generations.

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References available upon request.