

ESTABLISHING STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS: MITIGATING THE FRAGMENTATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF BC'S GRASSLANDS



Ken Johansson

BACKGROUND



Grasslands Conservation Council
of British Columbia
954A Laval Crescent
Kamloops, BC V2C 5P5
(250) 374-5787
gcc@bcgrasslands.org
www.bcgrasslands.org

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I. THE GRASSLANDS CONSERVATION COUNCIL OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

The Grasslands Conservation Council of British Columbia (GCC) was established as a society in August 1999, and subsequently as a registered charity in December 2001, due to growing concerns from a wide variety of organizations and individuals about the future of British Columbia's grasslands.

The GCC is the only organization of its kind in BC, with a well-defined niche and tremendous support from a wide range of organizations and individuals, including the ranching community, environmental organizations, government agencies and First Nations. The GCC is often referred to as a strategic alliance of organizations and individuals with a broad spectrum of interests, experience and expertise.

The GCC is a volunteer-based organization, guided by a dedicated Board of Directors and Executive Committee. The GCC's Board and Executive are comprised of individuals who volunteer their time and expertise to the development of programs and assist in the day-to-day operations of the GCC. The GCC operates with a small staff and a growing volunteer base to assist in the implementation of programs.

Learn more about GCC programs and activities at www.bcgrasslands.org.

II. PROJECT OVERVIEW

Grasslands are a small but significant component of BC's natural landscape. Although they represent less than 1% of British Columbia's land base, they provide critical habitat to over 30% of BC's threatened and endangered species. In fact, grasslands are considered one of Canada's most endangered ecosystems.

Grasslands not only provide habitat for a variety of species, but also provide a significant forage base to BC's ranching industry. Ranching in BC has been occurring for generations and has played a major role in shaping the province's social, economic, and cultural fabric.

The fragmentation and development of large portions of grasslands is denigrating the social, cultural and ecological values associated with grasslands. The complexities involved in this issue are closely interrelated. A provincial analysis of these emerging concerns is necessary if we are to achieve the sustainable management and conservation of grasslands in British Columbia.

The Grasslands Conservation Council of British Columbia has informally surveyed a broad range of parties with a vested interest in grasslands to find that there is great uncertainty and confusion around the fragmentation and development issue. What are the issues? What are the solutions? What are the barriers to achieving these solutions?

This lack of knowledge and information is hindering the ability of non-government organizations, industry and government to address key issues and threats to BC's grasslands. The GCC is initiating a provincial analysis based on the consensus amongst many interested parties that there is a need for clarification of issues and a need to take action on this emerging and growing problem. The GCC is in a good position to facilitate the process and bring people together to solve the problem of fragmentation and development of BC's grasslands.

III. PROBLEM

The loss of large, natural grassland areas is due largely to:

- Urban encroachment, and
- Development and fragmentation of rural landscapes.

Grassland ecosystems are extremely valuable in terms of grassland diversity, species habitat and species movement and migration. Because of their high agricultural value and accessibility, these areas are also generally private holdings, mostly as working ranches.

The problem envelops due to simple supply and demand: grasslands are very alluring real estate for developers and intensive agricultural entrepreneurs (i.e. vineyards, ginseng) due to their warm climate and recreational opportunities. In many cases, the strong demand inflates land values beyond the natural grasslands/forage production value of the land, making it very difficult for ranchers and other landowners to turn down large sums of money for their land. This equation is tantamount to ecologically rich grasslands being at great risk from development.

Additionally, grassland municipalities and regional districts are under increasing pressure to expand urban boundaries in order to accommodate demand for housing. Many Interior communities are experiencing tremendous growth, yet planners lack the tools and awareness to properly plan for local growth while still maintaining the very values that make their communities attractive in the first place.

The provincial Liberal government has made several changes that affect the decision-making authority of each level of government pertaining to subdivision and zoning of land. Ministries have been entirely re-organized. This has resulted in new departments and downsizing of existing agencies: 30% to 50% reduction of staff in the Ministries of Forests; Water, Land, and Air Protection; Sustainable Resource Management; and Agriculture, Food and Fisheries.

In the new Agricultural Land Commission/Reserve structure, including a decentralized Commission, more authority is devolved to local governments on issues of land use within the reserve. With greater decision-making power over land within the Agricultural Land Reserve, municipalities and regional districts will play a much larger role in land-use decisions. Equally important is the introduction of the new Community Charter, designed to empower local governments (especially municipal governments) to have more autonomy in zoning and land-use decision-making. Regional districts and municipalities will be inheriting a much stronger role in land use planning. Some land use management tools and zoning policies are not fully understood and may have a negative or positive effect on the grasslands.

Additional issues complicate the problem and expedite the loss of grasslands to development:

- 60.9% of BC's grasslands are within the Agricultural Land Reserve.
 - The Southern Interior grasslands account for 89% of total grasslands in BC, and 62.9% of these grasslands are in the ALR.
 - Applications for removal of land within the ALR (exclusion applications) have increased by 27% in 2004 (June 2004).
 - We are beginning to see the trend of ALR exclusion applications coming from municipalities in order to accommodate more growth.
 - There is no provision in the ALR for natural agricultural grasslands (i.e. rangelands) thus grasslands are always under threat from both exclusion applications and conversion to intensive agriculture (crops).
- Changing demographics and succession within the ranching community.
 - Due to an aging rancher population more ranchers will be reaching retirement age.
 - It is very difficult for ranchers to pass on their land to the younger generation and still extract an appropriate amount of equity for a comfortable retirement. It is equally as difficult for the younger generation to accumulate enough equity to purchase their parents' land.
 - More ranchers are moving to the Peace River area, leaving grasslands within the southern Interior vulnerable to new owners that would convert natural grasslands to other, less

- sustainable land uses. From 1986 to 1996 the number of cattle farms in the Peace River region increased by almost 18%, approximately double that of the Kootenay, Cariboo and Okanagan regions¹.
- Grasslands are being developed for ranchettes, vacation homes and other types of development
 - 20 percent or 3,000 hectares of the native grasslands of the Southern Okanagan Highlands (Boundary country) have been lost to development.²
 - Over 55 percent or 14 000 ha of native grassland in the Central Okanagan have been lost to development³. The Central Okanagan Regional District has an estimated two percent population growth per year, an estimated increase of 70,000 people over the next 20 years.
 - The Thompson Nicola Regional District accounts for 300,807 Ha or 39.5% of the provinces grasslands. Average annual growth rate of 2.8% in the Thompson Nicola Regional District from 1991-1996 exceeded the provincial average. The regional population is expected to balloon to 160,000 by 2015, marking an increase of 25% from 1995.⁴ Due to their accessibility and desirability, much of this rapid growth will take place on grasslands.
 - Many grassland urban communities (e.g. Kamloops, Vernon) are undergoing rapid growth, particularly the sprawl of “big box store” development. As development encroaches onto adjacent grasslands, many small acreages are being gobbled up in the process. These smaller acreages provide an important buffer between large, working ranches (and contiguous tracts of grasslands) and growing urban centers.
 - As development increases, so does the physical infrastructure. New roads through grasslands bring more recreation, invasive plants, decreased wildlife carrying capacity, fragmented rural properties and numerous other problems that impact grasslands.
 - Rural subdivisions encourage a leapfrog-effect of rural development, further alienating grassland landscapes and placing more onus on regional districts, municipalities and utilities to service remote residential areas
 - Some aspects of the current tax structure related to land use (agricultural tax credits, etc) favor a non-ranching use of grasslands, inadvertently pressuring landowners to develop or convert natural lands to crops
 - Grassland habitats are being converted to intensive agricultural use (crops), displacing the high biodiversity values associated with grasslands in favor of monoculture and biological sterility.

The fragmentation and development issue is complex. In order to be effective, we must examine how conservation issues, socio-economic aspects and land use planning and decision making processes interrelate. These issues must be grappled with, made clear, and applied to future land use and decision-making processes if we are to attain conservation and stewardship of BC's grasslands.

IV. PROJECT RATIONALE

Key points and rationale for confronting and finding solutions for the fragmentation and development problem:

- Grasslands are rare and threatened. Native grasslands represent less than one percent of the provincial land base (~730,000 Ha). Of this, approximately 40% are privately owned. Boundary and Merritt districts have more than 60% of their grasslands privately owned.
- Preserving large, contiguous tracts of grasslands by keeping working ranches viable and intact supports each of the three pillars of sustainability: a healthy economy, ecological biodiversity and a

¹ British Columbia Cattlemen's Association, *Socio-Economic Survey of the Beef Industry in British Columbia*.

² Grasslands Conservation Council, BC Grasslands Mapping Project: A Conservation Risk Assessment

³ Ibid.

⁴ Thompson Nicola Regional District, *Regional Growth Strategy*, available at: <http://www.tnrd.bc.ca/>.

rich social and cultural fabric.

- The trend is for large, working ranches to be replaced with vacation properties for a semi-retired population in need of a second residence. This ‘shadow population’ doesn’t use the amenities offered in rural communities to the extent that ranchers and their employees would, instead opting for the familiar services in their home community. This leads to impoverished rural communities wholly dependent on a transient population for economic vitality.
- Rural communities will begin to suffer as the diverse economic infrastructure that supports the ranching industry decreases. Feed companies, machinery retailers, mechanics, and animal health practitioners are just a few of the associated industries that will be replaced with low paying jobs in tourism, reducing the overall wealth of the community in the process.
- As suburbs and satellite communities proliferate, so too does the degree of motorized transportation. Increased congestion, air pollution, public transportation costs and road servicing costs both reduces the liveability of a community and places more economic stress on the municipalities’ operating budget.
- Municipalities tend to promote development as a means to achieve fiscal viability, though recent economic studies done by American Farmland Trust illustrate that converting agricultural lands to other uses costs more in services that it produces in revenues. Cost of Community Services studies⁵ done for Bandera County, Texas illustrates:
 - The net fiscal impact on the country of agricultural conversion to residential is actually negative
 - Ranch and open land generate four times more in revenues for the county than they require in public service costs.
 - For every dollar ranch and open land provides in revenue from property tax, sales tax and other revenues, they demand only \$0.26 back in services whereas residential development in Bandera county requires \$1.10 in services for every tax dollar it generates
 - These economic data are derived solely on studies done in American counties, but they demonstrate the disparity in economic value for local communities between two adversely different land uses, namely agricultural preservation versus residential development
- Due to the need for increased infrastructure and servicing, urban encroachment onto grasslands results in an increased economic burden to municipalities and citizens. A study by the Urban Land Institute found that the average new home 10 miles from downtown costs taxpayers \$69,000 USD to service whereas a home near downtown costs taxpayers only \$34,500 USD – half the amount of the home 10 miles out of town.⁶ These additional costs can only be generated through increased taxes.

Grasslands continue to be lost to development. Unless we attain a better understanding of the pressures that lead to the fragmentation and development of grasslands and working ranches, we will continue to lose this endangered ecosystem.

V. GRASSLANDS CONSERVATION COUNCIL’S STRATEGY-BUILDING

⁵ American Farmland Trust, *Finding the balance: Ranching and rapid growth in Bandera County, Texas* can be found at http://www.farmland.org/texas/cocs_bandera.htm. This is just one of many COCS studies, many more are available at the American Farmland Trust website: <http://www.farmland.org/research/index.htm>

⁶ NALGEP and SmartGrowth Leadership Institute, *Smart Growth is Smart Business: Boosting the Bottom Line and Community Prosperity*, 2004. View report at: <http://www.sgli.org/sgbp.html>.

PROCESS

To help guide this project, the GCC established the Mitigating Fragmentation and Development Project Advisory Committee. The committee consists of representatives from Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries; BC Cattlemen's Association; The Land Conservancy of BC; SmartGrowth BC; Aspen Park Consulting; Ministry of Sustainable Resource Management and the Grasslands Conservation Council of British Columbia. The committee is currently being expanded to include representation from other key sectors.

The Advisory Committee established a three-phase process to develop and implement a strategy for mitigating the fragmentation and development of grasslands:

1. Stakeholder Workshop – a think-tank session with a wide range of interests to identify the key issues and explore potential solutions. Based on the results of the workshop, a workshop summary and strategic planning tool document were developed. The planning tool identifies priority focus areas for more in-depth analysis in Stage Two, the problem analysis.
2. Problem analysis – critically examine the priority issues determined at the stakeholder workshop and develop strategic recommendations for government and non-government organizations to resolve the loss of grasslands to fragmentation and development.
3. Strategy development and implementation of an action plan, including a conference or regional workshops for planners, land managers and decision makers.

A workshop was convened on May 18th and 19th, 2004, in Kamloops to complete the first phase. A consulting team consisting of Stuart Gale (Stuart Gale and Associates), Gary Runka (Land Sense Ltd), Sandra Bicego (Dovetail Consultants) and Janet Fontaine (Logistics Consulting) were retained to work with the Project Advisory Committee to organize and facilitate a workshop, prepare a workshop summary, and produce a strategic planning tool document to assist in the development of a strategy.

The Project Advisory Committee has since convened twice to further filter the list of priority issues. The committee decided on two broad categories for attention in phase two of this initiative and categorized priority focus areas accordingly:

1. Policy issues
 - Agricultural Land Reserve – Explore policies and opportunities where we can preserve agricultural values and achieve grassland conservation
 - Taxation – Opportunities/obstacles to achieve grassland conservation and preservation of working ranches
2. Land Use Planning
 - Regional and municipal planning – Opportunities for better co-ordination, incorporating grassland values, tools for planners
 - Inter-government collaboration – Interaction of planning processes at various levels (LRMPs, RGSs, OCPs)
 - Effective evaluation/feedback mechanism for development applications
 - Incentives/tools for “green” development

VI. PROJECT GOAL

To bring definition and clarity to the fragmentation and development issue as it pertains to grasslands and to provide strategic direction and recommendations to government and non-government organizations that will mitigate future loss and fragmentation of BC's grasslands.

VII. OBJECTIVES

Stage One objectives - **completed**

The objectives of Phase One of this initiative are to:

1. Plan, organize and facilitate a multi-stakeholder workshop that will help the GCC identify priority areas of focus for Phase Two of this initiative (the problem-analysis and strategic recommendations document).
2. Produce a Workshop Summary document.
3. Produce a “Strategic Planning Tool document,” based on the workshop – to include:
 - a. A clear list of high priority issues and focus areas. The list will assist the technical advisory committee and consultant undertake a problem analysis and develop strategic recommendations for government and non-government organizations to take action on mitigating the loss of grasslands to development.
 - b. A list of lower priority focus areas that will assist the GCC, other non-government organizations and government agencies to address the fragmentation and development issue over the long-term.
4. Determine clear priority focus areas to hire a consultant for an in-depth problem analysis and strategic recommendations document.

Stage Two objectives

The objectives of Phase Two of this initiative are to:

1. Produce a Problem Analysis document that includes strategic recommendations for action that will lead to the mitigation of fragmentation and development of grasslands.
2. Conduct in-depth literature review and research as the basis for the aforementioned Problem Analysis based on priority focus areas determined at the Stakeholder workshop and further distilled by the Project Advisory Committee.
3. Solicit a wide range of expertise through a consultative process in order to ensure the problem analysis and strategic recommendations are technically sound and comprehensive.
4. Determine an action plan for Stage 3 of this project.
5. Expand the Project Advisory Committee to ensure appropriate representation and expertise in accordance with priority focus areas of Phase Two.
6. Produce a special issue of BC Grasslands magazine focussed entirely on the Fragmentation and Development issue. (Note: BC Grasslands is the bi-annual 28-page publication of the GCC. This issue will be the 9th issue of the magazine.)

Stage Three objectives

1. Establish a clear communication plan for communicating strategic recommendations to policy makers and land use planners.
2. Establish a strategy for implementing the strategic recommendations determined through the problem analysis.
3. Implement the strategic recommendations and action plan determined through the problem analysis process.
4. Provide the impetus for effective, collaborative action in land use planning and decision making that will minimize the fragmentation and development of grasslands and promote stewardship and conservation values through a provincial symposium.
5. Raise the profile of grasslands by informing planners and decision makers at all levels of government and the general public on the importance of the fragmentation and development issue.

VIII. TASKS AND ACTIVITIES

1. Tasks & Activities 2003-2004 (Year One of Three)

- a. Establish a technical advisory committee with broad representation to oversee the problem analysis. **(completed – January 2004)**
- b. Develop Terms of Reference for consultant team. **(completed – February 2004)**
- c. Hire a consultant that will work with the GCC and the Technical Advisory Committee to plan and organize a workshop for stakeholders. **(completed – February 2004)**

2. Tasks & Activities 2004-2005 (Year Two of Three)

- a. Facilitate workshop for stakeholders: building a solid foundation and clear priorities for the provincial analysis and strategy **(completed – May 2004)**
- b. Produce workshop summary report **(completed – June 2004)**
- c. Produce workshop “Strategic Planning Tool” with identified priorities for technical consultation process and strategy document **(completed July 2004)**
- d. Hire a consultant to:
 - i. Complete further research, literature review, and targeted consultations focused on key priorities (September 2004),
 - ii. Produce the Mitigating Fragmentation and Development Problem Analysis with recommendations for action (March 2005).
- e. Initiate planning for Phase three of this process (provincial symposium or regional workshops – to be determined (December 2004).
- f. Produce a special issue of BC Grasslands magazine focusing on: Mitigating Fragmentation and Development: Forging A Provincial Strategy (March 2005).

3. Tasks & Activities April 2005-March 2006 (Year Three of Three)

- a. Plan, organize, and host a provincial conference or regional workshops focusing on the findings of the problem analysis.
- b. Develop conference/workshop proceedings and a clear provincial strategy and action plan in collaboration with non-government organizations, private landowners, and government.
- c. Facilitate and implement a communication and extension strategy in order to maintain a high level of awareness beyond Phase three

IX. BENEFITS

This project will:

1. Assist in establishing new partnerships and opportunities for more effective conservation of grasslands;
2. Assist in preventing fragmentation and development of grasslands, and help to keep "working ranches working";
3. Help to ensure economic vitality in rural communities.
4. Mitigate economic stress on municipalities by curtailing urban sprawl and promoting smart growth.
5. Help incorporate grassland land use values into Regional Growth Strategies and Official Community Plans.
6. Allow for more informed planning and decision-making, as well as more informed policy and management initiatives at all levels of government;
7. Improve and facilitate communication between land developers, the ranching industry, government organizations (federal, provincial, municipal & regional districts), environmental organizations, First Nations, academic institutions and other groups about grassland conservation tools and policies;
8. Raise the profile of the importance of grasslands and rural communities to the economic and social health of rural communities; and
9. Provide a strategic tool and process for application to other ecosystem types facing similar pressures.