

# South Saskatchewan Regional Plan – RAC Advice

## Comments For Grasslands

Alberta contains the greatest percentage of **native Canadian grasslands** at 45%. The South Saskatchewan Region contains 25% of Alberta's rare vascular plants and provides primary habitat for a variety of wildlife, including several endangered and threatened species. A large majority of these native grasslands are encompassed in by the South Saskatchewan Region, making it *imperative* that they are conserved in the SSRP.

Grasslands are the **eco-region** most highly impacted by human development; **less than 20% of our province's native grasslands remain**. It is for this reason that they require particular attention in planning. We support recommendations to *limit the further conversion of native grasslands*.



### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE DRAFT PLAN:

As a member of the **Prairie Conservation Forum**, we would like to echo their recommendations for the SSRP.

- **Maintain large native prairie and parkland landscape** – These landscapes are not only an integral component of a much larger continental ecosystem, they are also critical to the provision of ecological goods and services for our human communities. These characteristics afford society a greater range of options to help us adapt to the impacts of climate change. This outcome can be achieved by: providing landowners with incentives to maintain patches of native prairie, ensuring the land use planning practices do not further fragment native grasslands, and preventing the conversion of any more of Alberta's native grasslands.
- **Conserve connecting corridors for biodiversity** – The RAC identified several areas that may act as connecting corridors throughout the SSR, many of which followed river valleys. In Alberta, most of our rivers flow west-east, thus only conserving river corridors will not effectively address connectivity north-south. Considering connectivity from the perspective of connecting large patches of native grasslands will help to

*ensure that planning decision increase connectivity in all directions*. This will require similar tactics as mentioned above, but within the context of examining the landscape for its connectivity potential. Planners can use the map found at:

<http://www.rockies.ca/maps/cpaws/maptool.php> that details patches of native grasslands and defined environmental significant areas to examine this landscape from a different perspective.

- **Protect isolated native habitats** – Small pockets of ecological *refugia* that are isolated from other habitat patches can play a significant role for species at risk and should be protected. Established *wetlands* and *ephemeral shoaling and loafing areas* that are used by resident and migrating waterfowl as examples of such areas. Areas such as these need to be protected either through protected area designations (for specifically identified geographical areas of significance) or through province-wide policies and regulations detailing development limitations associated with these areas of environmental significance.

## THE SOUTH SASKATCHEWAN CANYON

The South Saskatchewan Canyon, northeast of Medicine Hat, including Chappice and Sam Lakes is an area of native grasslands containing several *provincially-identified environmentally significant areas*. The RAC advice does delineate it as a **Conservation Management Area** to protect its ecological resources and significance. In the summer of 2011, CPAWS engaged in a social science study to meet with multiple land-owners, grazing lease holders, and other stakeholders to discuss the potential conservation of the South Saskatchewan Canyon. The complete study can be found here: <http://cpaws-southernalberta.org/campaigns/grasslands>.



The **main recommendations** stemming from this research were:

- Recognize that local landowners and grazing leaseholders are knowledgeable about the land and are *active stewards*;
- *Smarter planning* for oil and gas operations is required;
- Wind energy development should be managed to *minimize disturbance to native grassland and wildlife* through appropriate placement and other mitigation measures;
- Land zoning should make a *distinction between lands prioritized as rangeland and those prioritized for agriculture*;
- Improve the *authority and enforceability* of Protective Notations as a land-use management tool.
- Investigate the possibility of legislating the **South Saskatchewan Canyon** area as a **Heritage Rangeland**. Given the priorities of the stakeholders that we met with and their concerns for the landscape, this land-use designation will meet the ecological requirements of the SSC while meeting the needs of grazing lease holders and other stakeholders.