

Manitoba Important Bird Areas Program:
Summary of Southwestern Manitoba Landowner and Cattle
Producer Engagement Activities in 2019



Summary report by:

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About this summary report:

This summary report addresses the key findings taken from the author's full project report titled "Landowner & Cattle Producer Values Towards Grasslands and Avian Species at Risk in Southwestern Manitoba" (2020). The full report will be made available upon request.

Photo Credits:

Main Cover Photo:

Cow and calf pairs in a pasture near Melita, Manitoba

By Lynnea Parker

Bird Photos on Cover:

Top Row: Chestnut-collared Longspur, Grasshopper Sparrow, Baird's Sparrow

Bottom Row: Loggerhead Shrike, Sprague's Pipit, Ferruginous Hawk

By Dr. Christian Artuso

Introduction

In the fall of 2019 the Manitoba Important Bird Areas program participated in initiatives undertaken to learn about landowner and cattle producers' views towards conservation issues in southwestern Manitoba. An online survey was available from October to November and provided an opportunity for landowners and cattle producers to share information about their environmental values, views towards species at risk and grassland conservation, and preferences for conservation programs. The survey was successful in garnering the participation of 46 people who owned, leased, and/or managed grassland properties in southwestern Manitoba. In addition to the survey, five cattle producers were met in-person for discussions about the beef sector and how the state of their operations impacted their own ability to incorporate aspects of conservation into their land management practices. The meetings helped identify key themes in cattle producers' concerns for their industry, the future of their land, and their ability to incorporate conservation priorities into their current operations. The cattle producers who were interviewed for this project were located in the areas of Oak Lake, Pipestone, and Melita, MB.

Main Outcomes of Engagement

Results of the survey showed that 50% of the landowners and cattle producers who participated held pro-environmental values. These participants were found to be more willing to act in ways that would benefit species at risk and grassland conservation in cases where doing so was likely to impact them personally (socially and/or financially). 46% of the landowners and cattle producers who participated held values that reflected balanced views of environmental and social needs. Participants with more balanced views were found to be less willing to engage in a conservation activity if it was associated with social and/or financial risk. 2% of participants valued the needs of people above all environmental considerations and the remaining 2% held values that did not strongly align with the needs of people or the environment.

Landowners and cattle producers were found to have a low level of awareness regarding which grassland birds are designated as species at risk in Manitoba. Many participants indicated that they did not know what the habitat needs of species at risk are or how the presence of species at risk could affect their land use. Despite low levels of pre-existing awareness, 78% said that it was very important to moderately important that their land could support species at risk. There was a strong desire expressed by participants for more visible awareness and education about species at risk and their habitat requirements. While landowners and cattle producers expressed high levels of support for species at risk conservation, 47% would be unlikely to report sightings on their own properties to a conservation entity. Low levels of awareness regarding species at risk laws, concerns about privacy, and a lack of information on who to report sightings to are thought to explain why many participants would not want to report sightings.

Outcomes of both the survey and landowner meetings revealed that many landowners and cattle producers who hold pro-environmental values and beliefs do not necessarily possess the required awareness and knowledge to include species at risk conservation as a consideration in their land management activities. While these individuals are more likely to act in ways that can benefit species at risk conservation, they are largely unaware of what activities could, or are, helping and hindering species at risk and grassland conservation efforts. In terms of a landowner's level of engagement in conservation activities, those who seemed to recognize the conservation value of their own land were found to be more self-motivated to learn about

sustainable land management practices and engage in stewardship activities –even at their own expense. Landowners who did not seem to recognize the conservation value of their own land were found to be less engaged in stewardship, less aware of their environmental impact, and were less self-motivated to learn about sustainable land management practices.

Focusing in on participants' preferences for conservation programs, most were willing to consider participation in "annual payment for a habitat outcome", "voluntary carbon offset program", "cost assistance program with a grazing plan", and "bird-friendly beef certification label". Programs are defined in Table 1 of the Appendix. One thing that these programs all have in common is that they are voluntary, do not infringe upon personal property rights, are results driven, and have the potential to provide ongoing financial returns to landowners and beef producers. It was stated by more than one participant that beef producers in particular needed assistance with staying competitive so that they could continue supporting conservation objectives. This was also reflected by the fact that the two most important factors motivating participation in a conservation program was 1) financial compensation and 2) cattle operation assistance projects.

The programs with the highest overall level of interest were:

1. Voluntary carbon offset program
2. Annual payment for a habitat outcome
3. Mortgage assistance program
4. Bird-friendly beef certification label

The "mortgage assistance program" only ranked eight out of 12 for the number of participants who would be willing to consider participating. However, this same program type ranked third for overall level of interest. This shows that of the smaller number of participants who would be willing to consider this program, their level of interest was very high. This result can be explained by demographics, as those who preferred the "mortgage assistance program" had less than 20 years of farming/ranching experience. Because those with less experience were under-represented in the sample, it makes sense that fewer participants would be willing to consider participation. This result is important because it highlights how the needs of newer cattle producers entering the industry may be missed by conservation programs, industry representatives, and governments.

While there was an overall preference for non-restrictive incentive-based programs, those with pro-environmental values and those with a history of involvement in a conservation program were more inclined to participate in programs that would place restrictions on land, such as "easements in perpetuity with a one-time payment" and "easements in perpetuity with an annual payment".

Conclusions

With most of the remaining grassland in Manitoba being privately owned, conservationists and law makers tasked with protecting remnant native prairie and species at risk have been searching for constructive ways to partner with landowners and cattle producers. Understanding the environmental perspectives of those who own, lease, or otherwise influence the management of grassland properties is an essential first step in being able to identify opportunities for collaboration. Findings of this project indicate that landowners and cattle producers are an underutilized resource for conservationists to partner with for species at risk recovery and grassland conservation in Manitoba. While landowner and cattle producers' views towards conservation and

protection may be complex, the majority of participants were seen as wanting to help, they just need the right knowledge and supports to do so. The value of public outreach and education both to target audiences (landowners and beef producers) and non-target audiences (general public) should not be overlooked; There was a very strong desire among participants to see more visible education and awareness regarding species at risk and beneficial land management practices. Programs currently employed by large conservation organizations have tended to focus on targeted outreach, giving selected landowners one-on-one assistance through incentive-based projects in high priority areas. While this project has confirmed that these types of programs are desired, what seems to be lacking is the general outreach campaigns needed to engage landowners and beef producers on a much larger scale. Although this research was not conducted at a scale large enough to reflect the opinions of all landowners and cattle producers in southwestern Manitoba, results do suggest that there could be a large number of landowners and beef producers who would like to see conservation organizations have a stronger presence in the public sphere.

The lack of awareness for what species are designated as at-risk in Manitoba and associated laws meant to protect them should be a cause for concern. With landowners and beef producers playing a significant role in the fate of these imperiled species, they cannot be expected to conserve what that they are unaware of. Governments in particular have a duty to inform the public of species at risk laws and also enforce them. This research has shown very high levels of positive support for species at risk conservation among participants and this support should be fostered and utilized in ways that will benefit species at risk on the landscape.

Recommendations from the Full Report

For Conservation Organizations

Public Engagement

- Results from this study have shown that there is a desire for increased education and engagement with landowners and the general public. Conservation organizations should consider increasing their use of advertising (e.g., television commercials, radio messaging, newspaper articles, social media ads, attendance at community events) to increase the visibility of:
 - a. The large number of grassland species that are at-risk;
 - b. species at risk habitat requirements;
 - c. laws protecting species at risk;
 - d. grassland conservation issues;
 - e. what good grazing systems should look like in different contexts;
 - f. good examples of farmers in Manitoba who support species at risk;
 - g. and the role grasslands play in active carbon sequestration and storage.
- When asking landowners to report species at risk, addressing the uncertainties and/or negative assumptions about land use impacts could improve participation rates.
- Some of the cattle producers who were interviewed wanted to be contacted about program opportunities during the off-season (fall and winter) as opposed to the spring and summer.

Programming Methods

- Invest in the employment of staff and/or the recruitment of volunteers who have a background in land ownership and/or cattle ranching and can assist with bridging the social gaps that exist between agriculture and conservation in program delivery.
- Invest in the retention of staff and/or volunteers who have demonstrated an aptitude for developing valuable working relationships with landowners and cattle producers in program delivery.

Program Concepts

- The development of a consultation program or service for landowners who would like to have their land assessed for its current conservation value (e.g., ability to support biodiversity) and be subsequently provided with the knowledge of how to achieve improved conservation outcomes.
- Development of a marketing initiative that is aimed at raising the visibility of local cattle producers who own profitable businesses and have successfully integrated conservation priorities into their land management activities.
- Consider making landowner engagement opportunities available for those who want to become involved and have previously been turned away/discouraged because they either have land located outside priority zones or the land is deemed to currently have less conservation value.

For Agricultural Organizations

- There was a strong desire among survey participants and those interviewed to see the beef sector partner with conservation groups to:
 - a. Highlight the positive environmental aspects of cattle ranching;
 - b. Promote more sustainable land management practices;
- Cattle producers who were interviewed indicated that they would like to see programs designed to help with:
 - a. financial planning;
 - b. finding new/aspiring farmers to mentor and gradually transition ownership of their operations;
 - c. enabling young producers to enter the industry and be competitive;

For Governments

- Governments should seek to raise the visibility of species at risk and legal protections through public education efforts.
- Governments should be proactive in partnering with rural municipalities to address concerns regarding species at risk recovery and legal protections.
- Landowners should be notified if species at risk are known to occur on their properties and be informed of their legal requirements.
- Critical habitat should be defined for species at risk in Manitoba's mixed-grass prairie region to facilitate enforcement of species at risk laws.

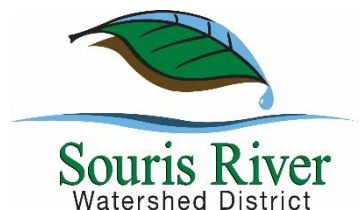
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Project Funders



Project Supporters



Appendix

Table 1: 12 different types of land conservation programs that could be implemented by conservation organizations or governments in southwestern Manitoba.

| Conservation Program | Description |
|--|---|
| Easements in perpetuity with one-time payment | A permanent easement that places specific restrictions on the use of land and is applicable to current and future owners. |
| Easements in perpetuity with an annual payment for a prescribed period | A permanent easement that places certain restrictions on the use of land and is applicable to current and future owners. |
| Term agreements (10, 20, or more years) with one-time payment | An agreement that places specific conditions on how land can be used for a specified period of years. |
| Operational costs assistance program with a grazing plan | A conservation group provides financial assistance to landowners/producers to complete projects (e.g., installation of watering systems, upgraded fencing) with the creation of a grazing plan. |
| Annual payment program for a habitat outcome | A conservation organization will set a framework for ideal habitat/conservation outcomes. Landowners/producers who achieve outcomes would be eligible for annual compensation payments. |
| Minimal grazing leases on lands owned by a conservation group | Availability of low-cost (minimal) grazing leases on lands owned by a conservation group. |
| Land purchased by conservation group with a minimal grazing lease | Landowner receives first right of refusal for a minimal grazing lease (low-cost lease) on any lands previously owned and sold to the conservation group. |
| Land purchased by conservation group with a “grass-banking” approach | Landowner sells land to a conservation group and receives grazing rights in return for commitments to accommodate conservation priorities (e.g., practicing specific grazing regimes to meet conservation needs). |
| Mortgage assistance program | Financial assistance meant to enable livestock producers to purchase and retain grassland properties. |
| Grazing co-op approach | A conservation organization assists with the purchase of land in combination with other landowners/producers. |
| Bird-friendly beef certification label | A label that would allow consumers to identify products that come from operations that adopt approved conservation practices, as defined by a conservation organization or consortium. |
| Voluntary carbon offset program | An opportunity for grassland property owners meeting specific carbon criteria to access carbon credit markets. |