

GRASSLANDS CONSERVATION COUNCIL OF BC award, BEYOND BAFFLING

In July 2014 the GCC made an award to Doug & Erika Fossen for "demonstrated excellence in grassland stewardship" <http://lifeonabccattleranch.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/grasslands.pdf>

In August 2014 visiting biologists John and Mary Theberge of Oliver BC who have studied grasslands throughout North America described the degraded weed infested grasslands portion of the Johnstone Creek Range Unit (AKA the Spring Pasture) as amongst the worst they had seen. I recommend their recent book, *The Ptarmigan's Dilemma*, in whole and Chapter 10 in particular, the chapter on grasslands.

The GCC which is supposedly dedicated to the protection and enhancement of native grasslands has put its credibility at stake with the above award.

We note that the current chair of the GCC (as has been the case in recent years) is a rancher and also a past president of BC Cattlemen's Association. Ms Jackson and another former GCC director were quoted last year as follows: "to feed one cow for a month costs \$125.00, and the answer is a longer grazing season."

We presume their proposal is to extend grazing on already damaged grasslands while paying approx..\$2.00 per month for an AUM (animal unit month usually a cow & calf pair) while the other costs are externalized to public cost. To give some comparison, rancher provided figures for grazing on private land are between \$15 to \$30 per month (AUM). It would cost the rest of us more than \$ 2.00 per month to feed a pet rodent.

The Fossen Ranch's grazing tenure, attached to the home ranch, is a public land area covering much of the Johnstone Creek drainage near Rock Creek. A 171 hectare portion of the tenure, known as "the spring pasture" abuts Highway 3 and is uphill and upstream from the Johnstone Creek Provincial Campsite. Approximately half of that pasture is or once was native bunchgrass dominated south facing grassland, recognized as critical habitat for wildlife populations. That area is now dominated by cheat grass and knapweed.

In Feb 2013 work began on a so-called Ecosystem Restoration (the project) of the Spring Pasture under the direction of Range Branch and the Ministry of Forests, Lands & Natural Resources (MFLNRO) on an Ecosystem Restoration Prescription plan prepared by outside consultants.

The so called Ecosystem Restoration will be the subject of an upcoming article and blog that will challenge the effectiveness and public cost of these activities.

To briefly describe the process, logging, thinning and burning has been employed at great public expense to supposedly improve forage for range cows and wildlife. We expect to show in upcoming articles that these publicly funded interventions have, as in Johnstone Creek, detrimentally affected attributes beneficial to wildlife. Protective snow cover, thermal cover, security cover and winter feed all reduced, in an important wintering area and wildlife corridor.

A grass for cows project masquerading as one for the benefit of wildlife.

The project has spent several hundred thousand dollars sourcing a variety of public funds, to primarily benefit range cattle grazing on public land where the annual rental fee has been around \$160.00 or less.

The usual justification for these projects is the suggestion by ranchers that forest ingrowth has reduced forage growth. This notion has been embraced by Government and Range Managers

who chose to avoid discussion of the direct role of cattle grazing in largely creating the problems they want public funding to rectify.

In the Johnstone Creek Range Unit and in particular the Spring Pasture it is clear that the great majority of forage loss is due to the invasive weed and cheat grass populations which have outcompeted native grasses. This is an outcome that is a direct result of cattle grazing. The loss of cryptogamic (biological soils) that offered protection against establishment of weed or tree seeds. The reduction and compaction of protective duff that serve a similar purpose.

Cattle use provides a delivery system for the weeds and invasive grasses and any comparison with nearby lands that have not been exposed to regular use by domestic grazers makes that point clear.

So called Ecosystem Restoration Plans that ignore the primary causes of ecological degradation are not only dishonest, they will fail to correct and prevent the problems they are supposedly addressing.

The Governments own guidelines for Ecosystem Restoration state the obvious: "most commonly, an ecosystem can be restored solely through focussed management practices that reduce or remove a damaging agent." Clearly that would include removal of the cow.

The restoration plan for Johnstone Creek initially called for burning of the grassland portion to "treat" the invasive plant problem. MFLNRO has belatedly recognized that burning of degraded areas can result in an increase in invasives and didn't burn the grasslands portion here. There is no good solution to restore such areas except time and removal of the prime cause.

Misuse of the BC Habitat Conservation Fund: While Government claims that this project is primarily to benefit wildlife and obtained the majority of funding from the BC Habitat Conservation Fund, the reality is a project of primary benefit to cattle grazing which doesn't meet the mandate of HCF or the expectations of the hunter/fishers whose fees on licences, form the bulk of HCF funding.

The JC project was originally initiated at the behest of the grazing tenure holders about 12 to 14 years ago but didn't proceed at the time as the Forest Tenure holder was not then interested in logging the area. The grazing tenure holders did not have benefits to wildlife as a priority and the recent Ecosystem Restoration plan reflected that by ranking "Range" as the number one priority and "Wildlife Habitat" well down the list.

Wildlife and benefits to wildlife are far from the interest of the Tenure holder as is evident in Doug Fossen's comments to the Western Producer where he complains of competition from exploding populations of deer and elk and suggests that declining forage has forced wildlife to move more into grasslands and riparian areas. Mr Fossen complains that lessees cannot turn cattle out until the grass is ready and that it is difficult for ranchers to assess when the grass is ready when wildlife are grazing it down.

Any non-rancher in this area (except some town dwellers and a few ranchers, but there's another story there that doesn't reflect well on cattle grazing) would know that wildlife populations have declined over the past 20 years and more, and blaming wildlife for delaying grass readiness for cattle, is an absurdity. Many factors affect grass emergence in spring but the primarily natural ones are the variables of moisture and temperature. It is evident that private ungrazed lands adjacent to the Range Unit show significantly better growth and variety of desirable plant communities, than the range area. These contrasts are evident before the annual arrival of range cows. Clearly soil compaction, overgrazing, poor grazing timing, poor oversight or some combination of these factors is making the difference between range and private land.

It is more than unfortunate and a great cost to the public, that ranchers complaints about declining forage and wildlife effects, are accepted as guiding principles by MFLNRO while the primary causal effects of cow grazing on the degraded resource are largely ignored.



Figure 1 & 2

knapweed & cheat grass dominated 'grassland'

The public costs of Range Use and the so called 'Ecosystem Restoration' will be the subject of upcoming articles and blogs

A short version of this article can be seen on our companion blog:

DRY ROT JOURNAL

[here](#)