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Remembering Jenn

This past year, MULTISAR lost a cherished team member and a dear friend, Jennifer Richman. On June 7, 2013, several days after giving birth to a healthy baby boy named Kipp, Jenn passed away from complications. Having grown up on a ranch bordering the Oldman River, Jenn developed an early passion for the land and devoted her career to taking care of it. Jenn worked as a Rangeland Specialist with Public Lands (Alberta Environment and Sustainable Resource Development) in Lethbridge for many years and was an integral part of the MULTISAR team. As head of MULTISAR's range team, Jenn was a teacher and mentor to many of MULTISAR's staff (both past and present). She was also a member of MULTISAR's Steering Committee which oversees the development and management of the MULTISAR program. As a great supporter and advocate of the MULTISAR program and the support the program provides to landholders, Jenn championed MULTISAR within government to help ensure MULTISAR's continued support and funding. But above all else, Jenn was a dear friend. Her infectious smile and upbeat personality always made Jenn a pleasure to be around. She was exceptionally kind, and truly cared for and took interest in the lives of her friends and the landowners she worked with. The contributions that Jenn has made to the MULTISAR program are significant and will continue to shape the program as MULTISAR moves forward. Like her contributions, Jenn will always be remembered with great fondness and admiration and will never be forgotten.



MULTISAR: *What is it really?*

By François Blouin

The word is certainly starting to get around in the Alberta grasslands. But let's face it; the MULTISAR name sometimes makes more sense to those who came up with the clever acronym than it does to those living in the region. Those we have worked with may or may not know what the acronym refers to, but they do understand what MULTISAR is about and that's what is important.

Ok, I'll tell you what the acronym stands for, just in case you might want to file this newsletter in a secret location of your home and have it on hand the day someone ask you if you've ever heard of MULTISAR. It stands for MULTIPLE Species At Risk (note the upper case letters). Nothing to do with the "multi-stars" of Hollywood. That's it for the acronym.

However, what the words, once stretched out to their meaningful length, try to convey is that this program deals with wildlife; not just one species, but multiple species of them. Because wildlife species don't occur individually, outside the zoos of the world, but rather interact with one another and with their environment as part of an ecosystem.

Grazing is an integral part of the prairie ecosystem and wildlife depends on grazers to create the particular habitat structure or composition that they need. Nowadays, grazers are largely dominated by cattle. Therefore, without cattle grazing, we would lose many of these wildlife species that live on the prairie and that provide the life and the sounds of the spring and summer grasslands.

Because of their ties to, and their management of the land, ranchers are the core prairie conservationists. MULTISAR works with you, the land owner, lease holder or land manager, to support or tweak the management approach on the land in order to maintain or improve the quality of natural habitats and the wildlife populations they support, while promoting a sustainable ranching operation. MULTISAR understands that without a well-managed cattle operation, there wouldn't be the diversity of habitats required to support wild species. That's why MULTISAR has not only wildlife biologists on staff, but also range agrologists who understand ranching, grassland productivity and sustainability. Both disciplines are looked at collectively, so that management recommendations that come out of the process are actually compatible and desirable. So what's involved in the MULTISAR process?

The main goals of the MULTISAR process are to develop and help implement a customized plan for the management of the rangeland, the sustainability of the cattle operation and the benefit of wildlife. For the "plan" to be "implementable", it needs to work for you. That's why you're a critical part of the process right from the start. We meet with you, explain the process, learn about you and your family, the history of the land, the current management and your management objectives, and what you value. It's the basic principle of knowing and understanding one another from which a trusting relationship can be built upon.

The second aspect of the MULTISAR process is developing a list of what's on the ranch in terms of plants, fish, wildlife and their habitat and assessing the state of those habitats. This is done through fish and wildlife surveys, vegetation inventories and range and riparian health assessments. Once all is set and done, we get a good picture of what the ranch supports and how it is contributing to quality prairie habitat and to rangeland productivity and sustainability. We produce maps and tables that provide a good visual and set the grounds for a discussion with you on if and how things could be tweaked a bit to achieve your productivity, sustainability and conservation objectives. Your input in the plan is critical as it is your plan and it has to work for you. That's the only way that you will embrace it, implement it and that change can happen.

MULTISAR is not a "hit-and-run" type program and even after your plan is completed; you will not be alone in implementing it. In most cases, if there are any changes that you want to make, we will provide some of the material or cover some of the costs associated with purchasing equipment. MULTISAR will also monitor how the rangeland or wildlife respond to those improvements by revisiting some of these sites on an annual, biennial or triennial basis to see if there is a need to make adjustments. Five years after the start of implementation of the plan, we will return to evaluate the plan and reassess a subsample of the wildlife survey points, range and riparian health assessment sites and determine if the plan is progressing toward its objectives.

Now for the fine print: There are no obligations under the MULTISAR plan and it doesn't cost you anything to have one completed on your property. However, a substantial amount of resources go into producing and implementing a MULTISAR plan and much of these are paid primarily by your provincial and federal taxes and generous donations. Therefore we are interested in working with ranchers that have a serious interest in the development and implementation of a MULTISAR plan.

Also, because MULTISAR must deal with limited and often fluctuating resources annually, the program is currently restricted to the Milk River, St. Mary's River and Pakowki Lake basins in southern Alberta where large tracts of native grassland remain and many species at risk occur. It is therefore recommended to contact us if you are interested in a plan to see if we can develop one on your property.

Oh and one last thing, what does "at risk" really mean in "species at risk"? I usually like to use the analogy of a canoe trip on a river... with a very tall waterfall downstream. The further you are from that waterfall, the safer you are; pretty reasonable so far? The closer you get to it, the greater the chance that your canoe will be taken into the fall, and... good luck with the rest!

Wild species have different levels of specialization and adaptation. The more specialized and less adaptable they are, the more they will be impacted by changes in their environment. A good example of this is the greater sage-grouse in southeastern Alberta; a species at the northern extent of its range and is highly susceptible to disturbance. It is currently the species most "at risk of disappearing" from Alberta.

At the other extreme, there are species that we call "generalists" in their behaviour and are highly adaptable. A good example of that is the coyote that has actually benefited from the human presence on the prairies. MULTISAR does put more emphasis on species at risk, just like you would throw a rope to the canoe that is on its way over the big waterfall.

But MULTISAR is not a regulatory or a law enforcement body and is not there to remove you from your land. Instead, it is there to find solutions so that both you and wildlife species, including species at risk, can actually coexist in harmony. And developing a MULTISAR plan actually demonstrates due diligence toward just that.

"...ranchers are the core prairie conservationists."

Harvesting Silver Sagebrush Seed

By Brad Downey

The sun rises along the South Saskatchewan River valley near Medicine Hat, warming the native grass and forbs that grow there, waking a herd of 20 pronghorn who have set up camp amongst the silver sagebrush that line the valley floor. For some, this scene and the smell of sagebrush triggers memories of being out on their family ranch when they were young...basically, silver sagebrush is one of those symbols for our native grasslands in Alberta, cattle ranching, and our prairie history.

This day is no different as you breathe in the fresh morning air and get started with the day's work. Harvesting silver sagebrush seed is very relaxing as you are drawn back to those days as a kid exploring the grasslands and wetlands and simply enjoying the natural environment. Humans have harvested fruit and seeds for centuries for food and to grow crops. More recently, we've taken to harvesting seed from plants, like grasses and forbs, in order to create habitat and grazing opportunities on ground that has been altered through various land uses. Silver sagebrush is a native perennial shrub that occurs in moist to moderately drained soils and provides wildlife with nesting sites, food, and protection from the elements.

To harvest on public land, one needs authorization from the area Range-land Agrologist and to be in contact with the leaseholder. Harvesters simply go out in early to mid-November, depending on the year, and strip the seed from the shrubs with their hands into plastic buckets, ensuring that they leave at least 50% on the shrub to provide seed for future silver sagebrush growth in the area.



Just like grazing, where you want to manage for next year's forage, the same applies to wild harvesting native seed as you want to ensure you will be able to harvest again in the future. Seeding sagebrush involves scattering the silver sagebrush seed overtop of the snow in late November and December. This provides for optimal growing conditions and simulates what already occurs naturally.

Seed collected locally, meaning within the same Eco-region and as close to the site as possible, have the highest chance of success as they developed under the same conditions. The seed collected today will be scattered onto native grassland restoration sites being implemented through the MULTISAR Program in SE Alberta, to try and reestablish and increase native grasslands that wildlife and ranchers depend on, as well as to maintain part of our prairie history.

For the full version of this article please see the upcoming edition of ACA's Conservation Magazine.





Show me the money!



Shining the spotlight on financial incentives for environmental projects on agricultural land

In the Spotlight: Growing Forward 2

Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada and Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development (ARD) are offering agricultural producers financial assistance (33-75% of the cost) through 25 different programs. Many of them require you to have an Environmental Farm Plan (EFP) before you apply but the EFP process has been simplified to make this step easier. Two programs that are especially relevant to ranchers are summarized below:

On-Farm Stewardship Program

Eligible projects include riparian area fencing and management, watering systems, portable shelters and windbreaks, wetland restoration, wintering site relocation, fuel storage and pesticide management, among others. You can begin work once you have applied but there is no guarantee you will be reimbursed.

On-Farm Water Management Program

First you have to develop an approved Long-Term Water Management Plan with an ARD Water Specialist (no cost) that will identify water sources and other opportunities such as water meters, well decommissioning, well pit conversions and water well depth measuring equipment. Then you can complete your project and apply for reimbursement of funds (33-50% of costs).

For more details visit:

www.growingforward.alberta.ca/GF2Search/index.htm?role=Farmer-Rancher-Producer

Thank-You to All of Our Supporters in 2013!

In 2013, MULTISAR's found itself in a dire situation due to a lack of funding commitment from the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Resource Development (ESRD). Many of MULTISAR's supporters, including cooperating ranchers, organizations such as the Southern Alberta Group for the Environment and the Alberta Beef Producers, made phone calls and wrote letters and emails to the Minister of ESRD and/or their local MLA advocating continued funding for MULTISAR.

MULTISAR survived in a reduced state through much of 2013, but these letters and phone calls, along with the work of many individuals within ESRD, resulted in the Prairie Conservation Forum receiving a full grant from ESRD in support of MULTISAR for the remainder of the 2013-2014 fiscal year. MULTISAR was also placed on the Ministry's list of core grants, which will be reviewed annually. We would like to convey our sincere appreciation to those who took the time to write or call their political leaders in support of this much needed project in Alberta's Grassland Region. This is proof that by joining forces, we can make things happen!



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