



## [Heed the locals on land issues](#)

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In the late 19th century, William Pearce, an Alberta-based civil servant and long-time surveyor in the Dominion government's Department of the Interior, became increasingly concerned about the tendency of politicians, academics and others to "pitch" southern Alberta and Saskatchewan as suitable for farming.

Pearce, along with others familiar with the southern Prairies, knew that much of it, the Palliser Triangle, was a dry belt. They knew that attempts to settle more and more farmers there would lead to overtasking the fragile landscape, and that financial disaster would eventually befall immigrant farmers who, sooner or later, would find the soil unproductive.

In short, those closest to the land knew what it could - and could not - provide. They knew from close observation, from empirical reality, how best to manage the natural environment.

Over the next few decades, their advice was ignored until, literally, 1920s-era dry-belt conditions broke many farming families and finally restored southern Prairie land to more sustainable uses.

The story of Pearce is relevant today. With Alberta's census population of more than 3.6 million in 2011 (or about 50 times the 73,022 people that inhabited pre-provincial geographic boundaries in 1901), modern-day conflict over the land base has multiplied.

From energy extraction to transportation and personal travel, from off-road vehicles to the desire to farm and ranch, to reasonable calls to conserve and enjoy Alberta's natural surroundings, there are no shortages of potential land-use skirmishes.

So a useful question to ask is how to manage conflicts? Here, one must sort through the various types of land ownership for possible remedies.

Private property is easy to manage. Property owners, whether of a condominium in the city or a farm in the country, have established rights even if occasionally infringed; there are (albeit with exceptions) limits to how others can use such property - usually only with permission.

In contrast, disputes are sharpest where property ownership is "common" (i.e., on Crown land). This is why farmers, ranchers and conservationists might square off with off-road recreational vehicles (or even and unintentionally, hikers like me). The boundaries of public use on public land, and what constitutes sensible and sensitive use of land, are often disputed.

One option for dealing with conflict is to convert Crown land into fee-simple private property to make land-use decisions more straightforward.

Saskatchewan did this over a six-year period, converting almost 500,000 Crown acres (200,000 hectares), mostly leased by ranchers and farmers who were given first-refusal rights, into private property. In the process, the province garnered \$157 million for government coffers.

Some object to private ownership of land for ideological or even conservation concerns, but most of Alberta's agricultural land (not the entire land base but ranching and farm land) is already private property.

Is private land ownership superior, in many cases, to political tussles over Crown land?

Where land is already occupied (I am not referencing mountain parks), it would appear so, including for conservation efforts.

Consider what British professor Ken Atkinson wrote in a 2009 journal article on preserving grassland in southern Saskatchewan: "The Prairies provide an example of how tensions between conservationists and other land-users can be healed and need not be permanent."

Atkinson pointed out that some conservationists accuse ranchers of overgrazing - accurate in some cases - but how ranchers (and, I would argue, farmers) are stewards of the land. Atkinson noted how an open range "gives native flora and fauna some chance of survival" and that the "understanding between ranchers and conservationists has improved enormously."

Atkinson thus hinted at what can occasionally be forgotten in policy disputes: Those closest to a problem have the best chance of solving it. Thus, any evidence-based discussions should always start there.

It's an approach that a 19th-century civil servant would understand, and applaud.

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