

Twin River Heritage Rangeland Natural Area Proposed Designation and Expansion

Alberta Environment and Parks is proposing reclassification and expansion of the Twin River Heritage Rangeland Natural Area (Twin River HRNA). Twin River HRNA is located in southern Alberta, approximately 10 km west of the Town of Milk River and currently covers over 19,000 hectares (47,000 acres) of grassland within the Milk River Ridge. The proposal is to reclassify Twin River from a Natural Area to a Heritage Rangeland and also expand the boundary to include 3,173 hectares (7,840 acres) of Crown land under grazing disposition.

Heritage Rangelands Extended Tenure

Currently the Heritage Rangelands designation is a voluntary change on behalf of the grazing disposition holder. Alberta Grazing Leaseholders Association supports the leaseholder's right to ask for a Heritage Rangeland designation because it does provide the benefit of extended tenure on their leaseland. Leaseholders are long term managers of the landscape so a thirty-year tenure allows for better management decisions. We would like to see other options for extended tenure be available for leaseholders such a tenure for stewardship whereby leaseholders are rewarded for excellent stewardship and management with the ability to manage on a longer term.

Slippery slope?

A Heritage Rangeland designation currently supports the leaseholder in a primary manager role working in conjunction with the rangeland agrologist from Environment and Parks. The leaseholder is the best and most cost effective steward for protecting sensitive landscapes and the lease system has been very effective in doing so. If anything the rights of the leaseholder to protect these sensitive areas should be strengthened to give the steward more of a say when and where these developments happen.

There are some concerns with starting down this road of changing designations. Would the rules under the designation eventually change and whittle away the leaseholder's rights and ability to adaptively manage the landscape? In the future would the leaseholder be required to participate in programs like MULITSAR or other programs that claim their goal is conservation? This would be an undesirable cross-compliance situation that undermines the leaseholder's ability to adaptively manage and fails to keep the health of the ecosystem as the top priority.

Protection vs Control

The conversation talks about protection but is the concealed agenda really about control? The best decision maker for the stewardship of the land is the grazing disposition holder working with the rangeland agrologist within the department. This grazing lease system has 'protected' these lands for over 100 years and will continue to do so provided the system supports the leaseholder and the rangeland agrologist. Undermining the leaseholders' ability to make decisions to protect the grass resource by regulatory creep, changing policy and adding cross-compliance further complicates a system that is currently working. Complications mean decreased efficiency and increased cost, neither of which will benefit the health of the landscape.

Other Dispositions on Crown Land

The underlying debate on establishing designations is about balancing industry like oil and gas with the protection of the land. More careful consideration is warranted on the release of the sale of the resource rights so we don't have to end up worrying about extraction on environmentally sensitive lands. This is further compounded by the increasing problem of the lack of reclamation on industrial installations and the estimated 155,000 orphaned wells positioned to be a considerable problem for Albertans.