



THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY

Canadian Section

Tel: (301) 897-9770 • Fax: (301) 530-2471

E-mail: twswildlife.org

The Honourable Mel Knight
Minister of Sustainable Resource Development
#404 Legislature Building
10800 97 Avenue
Edmonton, AB T5K 2B6

Dear Minister Knight,

I am writing to you to express the serious concern of the Canadian Section of The Wildlife Society regarding the potential sale and cultivation of more than 21.25 sections (13,600 acres) of native prairie in the Bow Island region of southern Alberta. Permanent habitat conversion is equivalent to habitat loss for many wildlife species, and is one of the leading causes of species endangerment in Canada and the U.S.^{1,2}, particularly if the conversion is followed by long-term agricultural use.³ Further losses of native grasslands, such as the one proposed, would be a significant loss to Alberta's natural heritage.

Habitat conversion at the proposed scale could pose a serious threat to the conservation of several legally protected Species At Risk, including Ferruginous Hawks, Sprague's Pipits, Burrowing Owls and others. The proposed habitat conversion could pose a significant threat to these and other native grassland species, exacerbating their population declines. The Government of Alberta's own Habitat Suitability Model Search Tool indicates that the area in question is highly suitable for Long-billed Curlew (threatened), Prairie Falcon, Sharp-tailed Grouse, Ferruginous Hawk (threatened), Burrowing Owl (endangered), and Sprague's Pipit (threatened); it is also suitable for the plains spadefoot toad (Alberta's "Blue" list).

Sprague's Pipit - The Federal Sprague's Pipit recovery team has demonstrated that the areas proposed for conversion are hotspots for the occurrence of this federally protected, threatened songbird⁴. Sprague's Pipits are dependent on grasslands. It is certain that the population size of this species will decline further if more native prairie is converted to cropland. Further, because Sprague's Pipits have lower densities within 900 m of cropland, the proposed habitat conversion will lower habitat suitability for this species in at least 7,700 acres more of the landscape than is actually converted⁵. The Sprague's Pipit is federally listed as threatened and "Blue"-listed in Alberta.

¹ Venter, O., N.N. Brodeur, L. Nemiroff, B. Belland, I.J. Dolinsek, & J.W.A. Grant (2006) Threats to endangered species in Canada. *BioScience* **56**, pp. 1-8

² Wilcove, D.S., D. Rothstein, J. Dubow, A. Phillips and E. Losos (1998). Quantifying threats to imperiled species in the United States. *BioScience* 48(8):607-615.

³ Gibbs, K.E., R.L. Mackey, & D.J. Currie (2009) Human land use, agriculture, pesticides and losses of imperiled species. *Diversity and Distributions* **15**, pp. 242-253

⁴ Environment Canada. 2008. Recovery Strategy for the Sprague's Pipit (*Anthus spragueii*) in Canada. *Species at Risk Act* Recovery Strategy Series. Environment Canada, Ottawa. v + 29 pp.

⁵ Koper, N., D.J. Walker and J. Champagne. 2009. Nonlinear effects of distance to habitat edge on Sprague's Pipits in southern Alberta, Canada. *Landscape Ecology* 24(10): 1287-1297.

Ferruginous Hawk – The Ferruginous Hawk is found primarily on natural grasslands in southern Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Between 1992 and 2005 the species suffered a 64% decline, primarily due to the loss and degradation of its native grassland habitat⁶. The Ferruginous Hawk is federally listed as threatened and is a species of special concern in Alberta.

Burrowing Owl – This diminutive owl is a native grassland species and declined across its Canadian range by 90% during the 1990s. Its current population is estimated to be only 795 known individuals (2004), 288 of which make their home in Alberta. Historically, the ultimate factor responsible for the decline in population viability of Burrowing Owls in Canada is thought to have been conversion of grassland to cropland, as well as the fragmentation and degradation of remaining grasslands⁷. It is federally listed as endangered, and is listed as threatened in Alberta.

Native grasslands are a natural habitat of ecological significance to these and many other species. Alberta has lost approximately 70% of the native prairie grassland that it had historically, and now only 5% of Alberta's land base consists of native prairie. As such we urge the Government of Alberta to strongly consider the long-term ramifications of permanent loss of these important ecosystems within your jurisdiction. We urge you to consult with conservation scientists, wildlife managers, ranchers, the public, and other stakeholders in Alberta before deciding to take action that may push these and other native grassland species closer to extirpation or extinction, and lessen the value of Alberta wilderness for all.

We have provided a number of references in this letter that you may find useful. Should you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,

Dr. Nicola Koper
Vice President,
Canadian Section of The Wildlife Society

Dr. Darren Sleep
Chair, Conservation Affairs Committee
Canadian Section of The Wildlife Society

cc: Premier Ed Stelmach
cc: David Swann, MLA, Leader Alberta Liberal Party
cc: Brian Mason, MLA, Leader New Democrat Party
cc: Danielle Smith, MLA, Wild Rose Alliance
cc: Alberta Wilderness Association
cc: Alberta Fish and Game Association
cc: Bow Island Grazing Association

⁶ COSEWIC. 2008. COSEWIC assessment and update status report on the Ferruginous Hawk *Buteo regalis* in Canada. Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada. Ottawa. vii + 24 pp. (www.sararegistry.gc.ca/status/status_e.cfm).

⁷ COSEWIC 2006. COSEWIC assessment and update status report on the Burrowing Owl *Athene cunicularia* in Canada. Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada. Ottawa. vii + 31 pp. (www.sararegistry.gc.ca/status/status_e.cfm).