

THE PRAIRIE FARM REHABILITATION ADMINISTRATION AND
THE COMMUNITY PASTURE PROGRAM, 1937-1947

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Abstract

In 1935, following years of drought, economic depression, and massive relief expenditures, the federal government of Canada passed the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act (PFR Act) to arrest soil drifting, improve cultivation techniques, and conserve moisture on the Canadian prairies. Activities under the act were to last no more than five years and cost no more than five million dollars. By 1937, the act was amended to remove unsuitable land from cultivation permanently, and develop federally controlled community pastures. Settlers on unsuitable land were relocated to reduce relief expenditures, and farmers on quality land could balance their operations by grazing livestock on nearby pastures.

The first ten years of the community pasture program (1937-1947) represented an important stage in the federal interpretation of the prairie region. For decades, Ottawa had administered the prairies with policies that reflected a sense of the region's uniformity and a faith in the power of dry farming techniques. The community pasture program acknowledged the ecological diversity of the prairies and the need for agricultural activities to suit the region's natural limitations. Efforts to develop community pastures were complicated however, by economic, political and social circumstances. By the five-year mark of the program, pasture development was at a virtual standstill. But as federal rehabilitation officials negotiated with prairie governments and private landowners for control of land in community pastures, the region was increasingly understood. In practice, the community pasture program reflected the understanding that broadly-based land use policy had to be flexible in order to accommodate the ecological and social diversity of the prairies.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PERMISSION TO USE	ii
ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS	v
1. Settlement and Land Use to the 1930s	1
2. Drought, Depression, and a New Plan for Prairie Agriculture	22
3. The Limits to Rehabilitation	39
4. The Community Pasture Plan in Action	70
5. Conclusion	93
APPENDIX 1 – MAPS	97

Chapter One

Settlement and Land Use to the 1930s

“the plough has killed the range - and the farmer is often hard up.”¹

Writing these words in 1913, rancher L.V. Kelly expressed the nature of the decades old debate over land use on the Canadian prairies. The prairies were initially considered little more than desert and possible pasture, but once Canada acquired the West in 1870, the region was increasingly seen as uniformly fit for rapid settlement and cereal crop production. Despite periods of drought and crop failure, farmers indiscriminately cultivated large areas of native grass using techniques unsuited to the climatic conditions of the region. Breaking up the land initiated a process of erosion, which left the soil especially vulnerable to the extended drought of the 1930s. In 1935, following years of massive relief expenditures, the federal government introduced the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act (PFR Act) to arrest soil drifting, improve cultivation techniques, and conserve water on the prairies. Two years later, the PFR Act was amended to remove unsuitable land permanently from cultivation and restore it to grass for use in community pastures.

The first decade of the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA) community pasture program represents an important stage in the process of federal interpretation and administration of the prairie area. For over fifty years Ottawa

¹ L.V. Kelly, *The Range Men* (Toronto 1980 [1913]), 57.

controlled the region, with policies that reflected a sense of regional uniformity and a belief that cultivation technique, not land selection, would overcome the region's climatic deficiencies. With the PFRA community pasture program, officials recognized that certain areas should never have been farmed and that these areas required permanent federal management to ensure the region's ecological and economic vitality. Efforts to apply the new land use policy were complicated by a variety of political and social circumstances, and the land use history of the region. In the process, rehabilitation officials gained an appreciation of the need to balance ecological, economic and community interests in land use policy. Viewed locally, the practical development and management of PFRA community pastures balanced federal and local interests with a sense for the region's ecological and social diversity.

The Canadian prairie region encompasses the interior portion of Canada, bounded to the east and north by the Precambrian Shield, the Rockies on the west, and the international border to the south. The prairie is comprised of three main regions: a dry mixed grass region, a mixed grass region, and parkland. Each region represents a specific relationship between climate, soils and vegetation. Relatively dark and moist parkland soils support a good cover of grasses, as well as clumps or groves of trees, which gradually subside as one enters the tall, thick grasses of the mixed grass area and the short grasses of the dry mixed area.² The dry mixed grass region has widely fluctuating climatic conditions characterized by cold winters and hot summers.³ Low precipitation and warm summer winds give much of the region's soils a light brown

² D.A. Rennie and J.G. Ellis, *The Shape of Saskatchewan* (Saskatoon), 8.

³ Extreme minimum winter temperatures in southwest Saskatchewan can reach -43C (-44F), and maximum summer temperatures can reach 38C (100F). See Barry Potyondi, *In Palliser's Triangle: Living in the Grasslands, 1850-1930* (Saskatoon 1995), 86.

colour, comparatively low in organic matter, resulting in a thin stand of native grass and few trees.⁴ Within this area, though, “an infinite variety of soils is scattered over a wide area, and even within rather small areas there [is] rich land and poor land.”⁵ (See Map 1, p. 97)

During the first half of the nineteenth century, the western interior of Canada, under the control of the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) and known as Rupert’s Land or the North-West, was seen as an uncivilized wilderness unable to support agricultural settlement. Fur traders and explorers traveling along its sub-Arctic river systems assessed the region according to its fur-bearing potential and cultivated little more than root crops at Company outposts. According to historian Doug Owsram, this “northern orientation” of trade and travel afforded scant attention to the southern prairie region of the North West. When mentioned, the prairie region was generally described as a remote desert in an uninhabitable sub-arctic wilderness.⁶

By the mid-nineteenth century, though, missionary concerns, as well as imperial and commercial interests in Britain and Canada, challenged HBC control of the North-West and prompted a re-evaluation of the interior. Missionaries argued that HBC administration exploited Indians and tied them to a spiritually void nomadic lifestyle.⁷ These criticisms were accompanied in the late 1840s by challenges to the HBC commercial monopoly in the North-West and the idea that the region could be bridged

⁴ In the Saskatchewan dry mixed grass area the average annual daily temperature is approximately 19C with an average January temperature of -12C. The average annual precipitation is approximately 350mm, with about 220mm of rainfall occurring from May to September. See D.F. Acton, G.A. Padbury, and C.T. Stushnoff, *The Ecoregions of Saskatchewan* (Regina 1998), 8.

⁵ James Gray, *Men Against the Desert* (Saskatoon 1996), 15.

⁶ Doug Owsram, *Promise of Eden: The Canadian Expansionist Movement and the Idea of the West, 1856-1900* (Toronto 1983), 12-14, 16. Owsram argues that the Selkirk settlement was considered ‘an oasis’ in the desert and so did not challenge the general assessment of the North-West.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

with a railway to the Pacific, thus providing access to Asian markets and securing the vitality of the British Empire. Canadian expansionist interest in the region soon followed, stimulated by the limited amount of land suitable for settlement in the United Province of Canada and the need to increase the flow of goods traveling through the St. Lawrence trade system.⁸

In 1857, the British and Canadian governments organized scientific expeditions, led by Captain John Palliser and Henry Youle Hind respectively, to examine the interior's potential for agriculture. The purpose behind their expeditions meant that they viewed the North-West differently than previous travellers. Whereas hunters and trappers had been influenced by an economy based on the northern fur trade, Palliser and Hind took a southern overland route and were influenced by the idea of a possible economy based on agriculture.⁹ They were also influenced by the prevailing notion of a vast desert in the trans-Mississippi West of the United States, and recently published scientific material that suggested warmer temperatures toward the western interior of the continent.¹⁰ The Palliser (1857-9) and Hind (1857-8) expeditions described the grassland interior as largely a dry, sterile plain bounded to the north and east by a well-wooded fertile arc of rich soils.¹¹ These broad generalizations, termed "Palliser's triangle" and the "fertile belt," marked an important turning point in the interpretation of the North West. "Palliser's triangle" was an accepted extension of the Great American Desert into the North West, but with definite limits. The "fertile belt", moreover, served to dissociate the

⁸ *Ibid.*, 38-49.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 65. O'Wram goes so far as to suggest that while fur traders and buffalo hunters had experienced the region for generations, the "purpose in going over these routes and their perspectives on the country around them made those who went west [in 1857] original observers of the land."

¹⁰ John Warkentin, "Steppe, Desert and Empire," in A.W. Rasporich and H.C. Klassen, eds, *Prairie Perspectives 2* (Toronto 1973), 116-8.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 116-9.

region from previous conceptions of a sub-arctic wilderness, thereby providing Canadian expansionists with a possible agricultural hinterland and path to the Pacific.¹²

With this modified image of the western interior, acquisition and settlement of the West became a dominant theme in Canadian political and financial circles. To expedite rapid, orderly settlement, a single survey system was applied to almost the entire area. The western interior was divided into square sections comprising 640 acres, further divided into quarter sections of 160 acres that would form the basic units of land ownership. Blocks of thirty-six sections formed townships, numbered westward and northward from the International boundary.¹³ The system was uniform and accurate, but also rigid and without regard for geographic and climatic variations. According to historian Chester Martin, “rapid and indiscriminate settlement rather than adjustment was the order of the day.”¹⁴

Federal land use policies spread control of prairie lands among a variety of interests.¹⁵ To encourage settlement, the even numbered sections in each township were opened for free homesteads. Settlers acquired title to a quarter section following a payment of ten dollars and a three-year period of residence on the desired parcel. To pay for railway construction, twenty-five-million acres of land ‘fairly fit for settlement’ was reserved for the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) on odd-numbered township sections, and other railways received about seven million acres of land. The transfer of Rupert’s Land to Canada in 1870 guaranteed the HBC one-twentieth of the fertile belt, or about six million acres, usually sections eight and three quarters of section twenty-six in each

¹² Owram, *Promise of Eden*, 69.

¹³ Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto 1987), 182-3.

¹⁴ Chester Martin, *Dominion Lands Policy* (Toronto 1973), 19.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 10-3.

township. Sections eleven and twenty-nine in each township were also reserved to support schools.¹⁶ To ensure the region was settled as planned, the federal government retained control over remaining lands and natural resources.

Since the notion of a desert in the North-West was still strong in the early 1870s, Canadian survey activity and the projected route of the railway were initially oriented northwest along the “fertile belt.” Growing expectations and experiences in the region, however, led to increasingly optimistic assessments of the nature and possibilities of the southern grasslands.¹⁷ Exploratory survey teams, authorized to report on flora and fauna, submitted consistently favourable reports as they moved beyond the fertile belt into the fringes of Palliser’s Triangle. In 1877 the Department of the Interior reported, “districts hitherto roughly classified as inferior, prove to be but partly so, and those defined as fertile areas, have their limits extended the fuller our information becomes.”¹⁸ The treeless and level prairie was increasingly seen as advantageous since it required no clearing and was well adapted to the use of modern farm machinery.¹⁹ And as surveyors reduced the perceived size of the dry area, George Dawson, a geologist with the 1873-4 International Boundary Commission, offered a new perspective on its qualities. Having examined the soils in Palliser’s Triangle, he suggested that the region was not necessarily good agricultural land, nor was much of the region a desert; rather it was, “well suited for pastoral occupation and stock farming.”²⁰ Dawson believed that settlement should follow

¹⁶ Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies*, 181-4.

¹⁷ Indeed, when the North-West was transferred to the Dominion of Canada in 1870, negotiators considered the grassland region as part of the ‘fertile belt’ despite a lack of new evidence since the Palliser and Hind assessments. See W.A. Waiser, *The Field Naturalist: John Macoun, the Geological Survey, and Natural Science* (Toronto 1989), 18.

¹⁸ Quoted in Owram, *Promise of Eden*, 151.

¹⁹ Owram, *Promise of Eden*, 110-2.

²⁰ Quoted in Owram, *Promise of Eden*, 152.

the wooded fertile belt, but by giving the southern grasslands a purpose he opened the door to even more favourable assessments of the region.

In 1878, the Macdonald Conservatives won the federal election on the strength of support for a “National Policy” that promised to link an agricultural western hinterland to eastern manufacturing interests by means of a national railway. Instead of building through the fertile belt, though, the federal government wanted a shorter route through the southern prairies that would capture all of the railway traffic north of the international boundary. Since western land grants were the chief means of compensating railway construction, the federal government needed a favourable assessment of the region to attract a private builder.²¹ John Macoun, a botanist responsible for examining the agricultural capabilities of the West during exploratory surveys of the early 1870s, was instrumental in this regard. Macoun was sent to investigate the southern prairies on three occasions from 1879-81, and except for the area immediately surrounding the Cypress Hills, he rejected all previous distinctions of land quality. At one point he publicly declared that, “there [is] no such thing as the fertile belt at all – it [is] all equally good land.”²²

Macoun’s assessment of the grasslands was used to justify the decision for a southern railway route and intensive settlement throughout the prairies.²³ His conclusions, though, had some serious shortcomings. Macoun’s enthusiasm led him to emphasize only the ideal aspects of the region. He based his conclusions, moreover, largely on vegetative cover, not soil type, and his investigations were conducted during

²¹ Waiser, *The Field Naturalist* (Toronto 1989), 38-9.

²² Quoted in Waiser, *The Field Naturalist*, 49.

²³ Waiser, *The Field Naturalist*, 16, 54. Macoun’s conclusions were incorporated into the 1880 annual report of the Department of the Interior. See Owram, *Promise of Eden*, 160.

an abnormally wet period in which he neglected to consider regional and annual variations in climate.²⁴ With adequate precipitation, portions of the southern prairies are suited for settlement and cultivation; however, they are interspersed with lesser quality areas best left as pasture. Following Macoun's reports, governments and railways eager to capitalize on the region paid little attention to these distinctions. Furthermore, his talents and inclination for publicity prompted immigration enthusiasts to portray the region in excessive terms, leading many homesteaders to approach the region with "a dangerous lack of understanding."²⁵

Large-scale settlement of the prairies was delayed for several decades as immigrants occupied vacant land in the United States. Small-scale stock growers, meanwhile, used the grasslands to raise cattle herds for sale to the North West Mounted Police and feed treaty Indians. Their success led to interest from English and eastern Canadian businessmen eager to capitalize on the live beef export trade. Many intending ranchers had powerful political connections in Ottawa and their interest in the region was reflected in strong, centrally administered land policies. Into the 1890s, generous grazing leases, stock-watering reserves, and anti-squatting legislation characterized federal administration of the grasslands.²⁶ These regulations favoured large-scale cattle operations and removed portions of the prairies from settlement.²⁷ Historian David Breen argues that this legislation was not merely designed to protect political allies and business

²⁴ Waiser, *The Field Naturalist*, 45.

²⁵ Owram, *Promise of Eden*, 165.

²⁶ At the heart of this administration was federal legislation allowing for twenty-one year leases of up to 100,000 acres at an annual rate of one cent per acre. See David Breen, *The Canadian Prairie West and the Ranching Frontier, 1874-1924* (Toronto 1983), 18-9.

²⁷ Small stock growers vied with politically connected large-scale ranchers for the selection of leases, and faced disproportionate management costs in the open range system. See Breen, *Ranching Frontier* (Toronto 1983), 20-1.

associates, but that ranchers and experienced officials in the Department of the Interior came to see the southwest as a “distinct region” best suited for grazing.²⁸

In the late 1890s, favourable weather, high grain prices, and the increasing scarcity of quality land in the United States led to a renewed emphasis on prairie settlement.²⁹ The ensuing tension between ranchers and intending settlers prompted new investigations into the agricultural suitability of the southern prairies. In 1901 Canadian Deputy Minister of the Interior J.S. Smart toured the grazing country of the southwest to assess personally the region. He described extensive areas best left to pasture and areas with the potential for grain crops, but his subsequent report recommended delaying permanent regulations until the two classes of land could be accurately defined.³⁰ Subsequently, only those areas declared unsuitable for agriculture by the federal Inspector of Ranges were to be reserved for grazing. Pressure to settle the prairies, however, meant this interpretation was subject to specific criteria. In 1905 the Minister of the Interior Frank Oliver informed the Inspector of Ranges that: “In inspecting and reporting upon applications for grazing leases you will hereafter not recognize climatic conditions as deciding whether or not the land is suitable for agricultural purposes. Only land that is too gravelly, sandy, or of too rough a surface for agriculture, is to be classed as not fit for that purpose, and as being suitable to be covered by grazing leases.”³¹ Under this direction all but extremely unsuitable areas were open to settlement.

This blanket approach to agricultural settlement derived partly from confidence in recent experimental research and developments in dry farming. In the 1880s, the

²⁸ Breen, *Ranching Frontier*, 81.

²⁹ D.M. Loveridge and Barry Potyondi, *From Wood Mountain to the Whitemud: A Historical Survey of the Grasslands National Park Area* (Hull 1983), 154.

³⁰ Breen, *Ranching Frontier*, 121-2.

Dominion government established the Indian Head experimental farm to study and demonstrate the agricultural potential and nature of the prairies. In the following decades, Indian Head staff studied land breaking and seed selection, and developed the technique of summer fallowing whereby soil was cultivated regularly but seeded only one or two years in succession. Summer fallowing was initially used to control weeds and enrich the soil, but was soon advised as a means to preserve soil moisture.³² Some agricultural experts advocated the American professor Hardy Campbell's method of dry farming, which involved subsurface packing to draw water up to the soil's surface, and surface cultivating to insulate against evaporation.³³ Other experts recommended deep plowing and regular cultivation to help rain penetrate the soil.³⁴ During the first decade of the twentieth century, generally wet conditions accompanied these moisture-saving strategies to reinforce the perception of a suitable agricultural climate in the southern prairies.³⁵

In 1908, the Dominion government passed the Dominion Lands Act to promote settlement in the southern prairies and pay for the Hudson's Bay Railway. The act was designed to encourage farming in dry areas through pre-emption privileges; in other words, settlers in the dry belt could expand their holdings from 160 acres to 320 acres or more.³⁶ The dry belt was defined as the area, "between Moose Jaw and Calgary, on the

³¹ Quoted in Breen, *Ranching Frontier*, 141.

³² David Spector, *Agriculture on the Prairies, 1870-1914* (Hull 1983), 118-9.

³³ David Jones, *We'll All Be Buried Down Here: The Prairie Dryland Disaster, 1917-1926* (Calgary 1986), lii-liii.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, liii.

³⁵ In 1905 the Commissioner of Immigration reported on the Medicine Hat district, "an abundance of moisture has continued the desirable change of making what was considered a grazing district admirably suited for farming operations." Quoted in Breen, *Ranching Frontier*, 129.

³⁶ Martin, *Dominion Lands Policy*, 163.

east and west, and Battleford and the International Boundary, on the north and south.”³⁷ The move toward larger acreages was meant to encourage farming in areas where summer-fallowing seemed to be a regular necessity and quarter sections were insufficient to maintain an adequate farm. This new approach was not scientifically based; rather it was assumed that with more land farmers would be able to overcome the natural deficits of the area.³⁸ As historians D.M. Loveridge and Barry Potyondi suggest, “there was a marked tendency to identify quantity with quality.”³⁹

Into the next decade, farmers settled southern Saskatchewan and Alberta and devoted large areas of sub-marginal land to wheat production. From 1906 to 1916, the population of southwest Saskatchewan increased from 46,500 to 178,200, and the area of cropland increased from about 0.5 million acres to 4.5 million acres.⁴⁰ During this period, agriculturalists, farm periodicals, and governments urged prairie farmers to diversify their operations, primarily as a means to offset dips in grain prices.⁴¹ Notably, the Saskatchewan government subsidized cattle and sheep production with the Livestock Purchase and Sale Act (1913) and sent Better Farming Trains with livestock displays and lecturers throughout the province.⁴² But the development of early maturing and high yielding Marquis wheat (1909), bumper crops in 1915 and 1916, and relatively high grain prices reinforced the trend toward large acreages devoted strictly to wheat production.⁴³ By 1919, wheat prices were three times higher than in 1913; by the late 1920s, returns

³⁷ Loveridge and Potyondi, *From Wood Mountain to the Whitemud*, 155.

³⁸ Minister of the Interior, Frank Oliver, admitted that, “this line is an arbitrary...and not a scientific one.”; in *Debates*, 1908, 11141; Quoted in Loveridge and Potyondi, *From Wood Mountain to the Whitemud*, 157.

³⁹ Loveridge and Potyondi, *From Wood Mountain to the Whitemud*, 157.

⁴⁰ Potyondi, *In Palliser's Triangle*, 84.

⁴¹ Spector, *Agriculture*, 14. Spector argues that diversification was urged for financial reasons, to offset dips in grain prices. Little emphasis was directed to appropriate and efficient land utilization.

⁴² Spector, *Agriculture*, 18-22.

⁴³ Loveridge and Potyondi, *From Wood Mountain to the Whitemud*, 177-81.

from wheat were two to four times greater than from cattle.⁴⁴ Forage crops, moreover, were costly to cultivate, matured slowly, and required land that otherwise might be seeded to grain.⁴⁵ Wheat was prosperous and few farmers saw the logic of investing in livestock.

From 1918 to 1920, drought afflicted southwest Saskatchewan and southeast Alberta, and the federal government advanced over \$800,000 in seed grain, fodder, and relief to farmers in the area.⁴⁶ When the drought began, many officials in government and agricultural colleges blamed farm failures on the ineptitude of settlers. For instance, in 1918, Saskatchewan Agriculture Minister W.R. Motherwell was reported to have said that drought or no drought, "success or non-success is chiefly, if not entirely due to straight good or bad farming."⁴⁷ Gradually, though, experts and officials came to the conclusion that the problem in the dry area lay not with inept farmers, but in the advice of dryland farming authorities. Summer fallowing and excessive cultivation were seen as problems since repeated tillage left the soil susceptible to drifting during dry periods.⁴⁸

The Saskatchewan government responded to the drought by organizing a conference at Swift Current in July 1920 to discuss farming problems in the dry area. At the meeting, expert agriculturalists, government officials, and practicing farmers discussed various aspects of agriculture in the southern prairies, including cereals and hay crops, experimental farms and the place of livestock in dry farming. Conference participants were particularly concerned with drifting soils, insufficient grazing land, and

⁴⁴ Spector, *Agriculture*, 5-6.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁴⁶ Quoted in David Jones, "The Prairie Dryland Disaster and the Reshaping of 'Expert' Farm Wisdom," 3.

⁴⁷ Quoted in David Jones, *We'll All Be Buried Down Here*, li-lii.

⁴⁸ Potyondi, *In Palliser's Triangle*, 91.

the level of farmer education.⁴⁹ In the conference report, Professor John Bracken of the Manitoba Agricultural College expressed the prevailing notion that, “We have the problem of placing our agriculture on a scientific foundation...We have been farming too much on faith and have not had enough facts.”⁵⁰ Subsequently, the provincial government appointed a royal commission to investigate the problem of farming the southern prairies. The Commission’s 1921 report recommended the establishment of regional agricultural substations to study local conditions with area farmers, a comprehensive soil survey for more scientific land use planning, and the development of public grazing tracts. Community grazing was seen as an economical use of inferior cropland and a way for dry area farmers to diversify their operations.⁵¹

Initially, these recommendations were well received by governments and the public. The federal government established the Swift Current Station to solve the problems of farming in the dry area and amended its grazing leasehold policy to give the province first right to renew expired leases for use in community pastures. Farmers sowed various crops and employed new techniques, like strip farming and plowless fallows, to counter the effect of soil drifting. Several associations were formed to make use of cooperative grazing tracts.⁵² These initiatives demonstrated an appreciation of the need to adapt agriculture to the natural conditions of the prairies, but they were somewhat short-lived. Steadily rising prices and favourable growing conditions through most of the

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁵⁰ Saskatchewan Archives Board (SAB), Department of Agriculture Papers (Ag.), General Office, file 8, Official Report of ‘Better Farming Conference,’ Swift Current, 6-8 July 1920, 20.

⁵¹ Potyondi, *In Palliser’s Triangle*, 103-7.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 107-9.

1920s led many prairie farmers to resume their previous devotion to wheat production.⁵³ Farms became larger, but with comparatively low beef prices, few farmers diversified their operations to accommodate cattle.⁵⁴ Instead of using sub-marginal land for pasture, they borrowed money to expand their cultivated acreage.

Beginning in 1929, drought and economic depression struck the prairies in unison, lasting through the next decade. Regular crop failures were accompanied by low prices for wheat, and the federal government routinely provided immense amounts of feed, seed, and financial relief to destitute prairie farmers. Excessive cultivation over the preceding decades had left the soil vulnerable to erosion, and dry windstorms throughout the 1930s turned much of the prairie landscape into black blizzards of dirt.

In 1935, the federal government passed the PFR Act to rehabilitate the drought and soil drifting areas in the Provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta.⁵⁵ Under the act, measures were introduced to improve cultivation practices and develop surface water resources throughout the southern prairies. Government and university scientists also conducted comprehensive soil surveys and economic land use investigations. These activities were initially meant to be temporary. But, as drought conditions worsened, especially in 1937, the PFR Act was amended to remove unsuitable land permanently from cultivation, resettle dry area farmers, and develop community pastures.

The community pasture idea had precedents on the prairies, notably in the recommendations of the 1920 Swift Current conference. But PFRA community pastures were unique in several aspects. Extremely dry conditions, crop failures, and feed

⁵³ A notable exception in this regard was the southeast portion of Alberta and that part of Saskatchewan generally west of Swift Current. In this area the drought lasted to 1926, causing large-scale farm abandonment and emigration; See Jones, *We'll All Be Buried*, xli-xlii.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

shortages in 1937 made the plan urgent. And unlike previous community grazing schemes, the federal government insisted on control over the land and operations in the PFRA pastures to ensure their permanence. Matters were complicated, however, by the nature of prairie land control in the 1930s. During the settlement process, land came under the control of municipalities, railways, mortgage companies, and individuals. In 1930, moreover, the federal government transferred control of natural resources to prairie provincial governments. To develop PFRA pastures, rehabilitation officials had to convince these various interests to surrender their lands to federal control. Often this approach involved locating suitable land for exchange or resettlement.

Historians have devoted considerable attention to the settlement and administration of the prairies, especially the era from the explorations of the 1850s through the settlement period to 1930. Little academic work, however, has concentrated on the period after 1930, when governments, scientists and farmers came to a new understanding of the region and tried to readjust land use to suit the regional climate better. Scholarship that mentions the activities of the PFRA and the community pasture program is scarce and generally treats rehabilitation as an epilogue to the settlement process.

Early historical works dealing with land use and settlement on the Canadian prairies emerged during the ecological and economic crises of the 1930s. In 1938, A.S. Morton of the University of Saskatchewan History Department wrote the History of Prairie Settlement. Describing the mindset behind prairie settlement, he emphasized that, “the early settlers came under the delusion that the whole prairie area, except perhaps the arid south, enjoyed what we may call a uniform wheat climate...no allowance was made

⁵⁵ *Report of Activities under the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act*, 15 November 1935, 1.

for the variations in rainfall, nor for occasional devastating droughts and frosts.”⁵⁶ With his study, Morton laid the foundation for subsequent studies of prairie land use; however, he only covered the period to the mid-1920s. The consequences of later settlement activity remained to be explored.

Morton’s work was accompanied by Chester Martin’s Dominion Lands Policy (1938), in which Martin examined the disposal and use of western lands within the context of the Dominion government’s purposes for the western interior. The Dominion government used western lands to build a Pacific railway and settle the region, and retained control over prairie resources until these goals were accomplished.⁵⁷ According to Martin, the 1930 transfer of natural resources to the provinces was a signal that the purposes of the Dominion had come to an end. He noted, however, “in another sense though, its real function had scarcely begun, for the ultimate purpose of all land policy was permanent and prosperous settlement.”⁵⁸ Farm failure and poverty in the 1930s clearly indicated that this purpose had not been achieved. Nonetheless, Martin’s discussion ended with the transfer of resources to the provinces, leaving untouched the topic of the federal government’s ‘real function’ of rehabilitating prairie agriculture to secure permanent and prosperous settlement.

In The Wheat Economy (1939), Saskatchewan political economist George Britnell devoted a chapter to a discussion of agricultural rehabilitation during the 1930s.⁵⁹ Britnell rooted the development and structure of prairie society within the context of wheat production, and his study is valuable for a background of the institutional obstacles

⁵⁶ A.S. Morton, *History of Prairie Settlement* (Toronto 1938), xviii.

⁵⁷ Martin, *Dominion Lands Policy*, 11-12.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁵⁹ G.E. Britnell, *The Wheat Economy* (Toronto 1939), 202-41.

faced by rehabilitation officials. Having described the provincial and municipal administration of the prairies, he suggested that, "correction of the most glaring mistakes in settlement and land utilization policies demands careful planning and constructive action on a fairly large scale by federal and provincial governments."⁶⁰ Britnell described the first years of the PFRA rehabilitation program and forecast ensuing problems and readjustments: "great administrative patience, tact, and skill must be exercised in securing removal of some of the present occupants, not to mention the difficulties to be faced in re-establishing them in another part of the country."⁶¹ Resettlement was a key issue faced by officials trying to implement the community pasture program, but since Britnell wrote in 1939, he was unable to explore the topic in much depth, especially the experiences of the early 1940s.

During the 1940s and 1950s, Vernon Fowke, another University of Saskatchewan political economist, touched briefly on the PFRA in two discussions of prairie agriculture.⁶² In Canadian Agricultural Policy: The Historical Perspective (1947), Fowke suggested that the administration of the PFR Act represented a reversal in federal interest in the prairie economy -- from a focus on expansion and settlement vital to national development to a focus on salvage and conservation.⁶³ In The National Policy and the Wheat Economy (1957), he expanded on the context of rehabilitation activities:

Available evidence, however, establishes the existence of one major failure in the over-all Dominion lands policy, the failure to base the settlement of the prairie on anything in the way of land or climatic surveys which would exclude from homestead entry those areas wholly unfitted to

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 226.

⁶² Vernon Fowke, *Canadian Agricultural Policy: The Historical Pattern* (Toronto 1947); Vernon Fowke, *The National Policy and the Wheat Economy* (Toronto 1957).

⁶³ Fowke, *Canadian Agricultural Policy*, 240.

cultivation....The [PFRA] has worked for twenty years....its efforts in substantial part devoted to correcting the mistakes of the homestead period.⁶⁴

Fowke provided background to PFRA activities during the late 1930s, but he mentioned rehabilitation only briefly, as an addendum to federal administration of the prairies through the settlement period. He paid little attention to the process of rehabilitation: how governments directed their efforts, where and why they succeeded, and what the activities of rehabilitation meant at the local level.

In 1967, prairie historian James Gray provided the most comprehensive treatment to date of the PFRA and the activities under its banner, specifically the community pasture program. Men Against the Desert is a valuable overview of the events leading to the formation of the PFRA, the key personalities involved in rehabilitation, and the nature of community pasture development during the first years of the program. Gray explored several themes including the rapprochement of scientists, governments and prairie farmers, the effect of drought and depression on interpretations of western agriculture, and the difficulty of applying policies designed to readjust prairie land use. Twenty years after it was published, historians called Men Against the Desert the best non-academic work of rural history in the Prairie West.⁶⁵ Gray's study, however, was primarily meant to introduce the PFRA: "the emphasis of this work is on beginnings, on getting things started rather than the glossing over of the start in pursuit of a climax."⁶⁶ He discussed the provincial, municipal, and local land control issues involved in the development of

⁶⁴ Fowke, *The National Policy*, 285-86.

⁶⁵ John Herd Thompson and Ian MacPherson, " 'How You Gonna Get 'Em Back to the Farm': Writing the Rural/Agricultural History of the Prairie West," *Western Canadian Studies Conference, 23 October 1987* (Saskatoon 1987), 8.

⁶⁶ Gray, *Men Against the Desert*, 4.

community pastures, but he covered only the first few years of the program and so missed the extent to which these issues disrupted rehabilitation.

For years, Men Against the Desert was perhaps the only work of prairie history to consider, let alone examine, the activities of the PFRA. In 1973, historian R.C. Brown said, “policies for lands of no or marginal agricultural value within the provinces, have been given scant attention by Canadian historians.”⁶⁷ This trend continued for the next decade. In 1983, however, D.M. Loveridge and Barry Potyondi added briefly to the historiography of the PFRA and the community pasture program in a study of the grasslands national park area of southern Saskatchewan. From Wood Mountain to the Whitemud includes a chapter on the depression, in which the authors described the PFR Act and the significance of its 1937 amendment to focus on resettlement and land utilization: “this belated recognition of the fact that an improper distribution of resources had as much to do with the calamity as climatic conditions was a tacit admission of the government’s partial responsibility for prevailing conditions.”⁶⁸ Like Fowke, Loveridge and Potyondi suggested that the community pasture program represented a federal attempt to rectify the mistakes made during the settlement process. Yet despite this important observation, the authors only devoted a few pages to the topic of the PFRA. Their discussion is confined to a small portion of the PFRA area, and they do not explore the issues surrounding the development of community pastures.

For geographic and political reasons, only a few PFRA pastures were developed in Manitoba and no pastures were developed in Alberta during the 1930s and 1940s. By

⁶⁷ R.C. Brown, “For the Purposes of the Dominion: A background Paper on the History of Federal Public Lands Policy Prior to 1930,” *Canadian Land Use in Perspective: Proceedings of a Symposium Sponsored by the Social Science Research Council of Canada, 25-27 October 1973* (Ottawa 1974), 12.

⁶⁸ Loveridge and Potyondi, *From Wood Mountain to the Whitemud*, 227.

acreage, nearly ninety-one percent of PFRA community pasture development occurred in Saskatchewan during the 1930s and 1940s.⁶⁹ This thesis consequently examines the first decade of the PFRA community pasture program (1937-1947) in Saskatchewan. It was during this period that the interests of the federal and provincial governments and prairie residents found clearest expression.

The general lack of scholarship dealing with the PFRA and the community pasture program meant consulting mostly primary material. PFRA records through the 1930s and 1940s provide the basic framework for discussion on rehabilitation activities. The Saskatchewan Archives Board papers of George Spence, director of the PFRA in the 1930s and 1940s, were invaluable throughout the study, particularly a file of correspondence from Spence to federal deputy minister of Agriculture, Dr. H. Barton. Spence's letters to Barton regularly describe obstacles encountered in the rehabilitation process. The papers of W.L. Jacobson, Secretary of the PFRA Advisory Committee on Land Utilization from 1935 to 1947, held by the Glenbow-Alberta Institute Archives, were the most comprehensive source of information on that division of the PFRA directly responsible for implementing the community pasture program. The House of Commons Debates were used to determine the federal position regarding rehabilitation and the development of community pastures. At least six departments of the Saskatchewan government were affected by pasture development, including the departments of Agriculture, Natural Resources, Municipal Affairs and Education. The records of these departments were important for an idea of the administrative complexities facing the pasture program. Newspapers and periodicals including The Medicine Hat News, The

⁶⁹ Of a total 1,337,320 acres in PFRA pastures by 1945, 1,218,380 acres were in Saskatchewan. See Saskatchewan, Department of Agriculture, Land Utilization Branch, *Report of the Land Utilization Branch*

Farm and Ranch Review, Western Producer, Maple Creek News, and Canadian Cattlemen were consulted to ascertain regional and occupational reactions to community pastures. To gain an intimate appreciation for the local impact of the community pasture program, a series of interviews was conducted with prairie residents employed on pastures or directly affected by their development during the early period of the program. This oral material, as well as reference to James Gray's taped interviews of PFRA officials, provided a candid picture of the PFRA pasture program generally lacking in official publications.

The first ten years of the PFRA community pasture program represented a new era in the history of human activity in the Canadian prairies. The program signalled a shift in official thought, from notions of a region uniformly suited to agriculture and a confidence in dry-farming techniques, to the idea that certain portions of the prairies should never have been farmed and that constant management was necessary to ensure the region's ecological and economic vitality. The program also illustrated the difficulty of applying broadly based policy to a region characterized by a variety of social and ecological circumstances. By the five-year mark of the program, PFRA pasture development was virtually halted as officials grappled with various prairie interests to secure control of land for pasture and resettlement purposes. Yet, while the limits to pasture development qualified the achievements of the PFRA program, the local application of the program represented a greater understanding of the prairies. Through a balance of central and local control, the practical development and administration of the pastures indicated a sense for the region's social and ecological diversity.

of the Department of Agriculture, 1945, 181; PFRA Annual Report, 1959-60, 83.

Chapter Two

Drought, Depression, and a New Plan for Prairie Agriculture

In the mid-1930s, following years of drought, depressed commodity prices, and massive relief expenditures, the federal government devised a plan to rehabilitate prairie agriculture. The 1935 Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act was short-term experimental legislation to improve cultivation and water conservation in the southern prairies. The act indicated the federal view that problems facing prairie farmers were temporary and would be solved given the right moisture-saving techniques. Two years later, as the drought worsened and information from land use and soil surveys became available, the rehabilitation act was amended to take unsuitable land out of cultivation and develop community pastures. According to the Medicine Hat News, this adjustment “represent[ed] one of the first steps toward a rational utilization of land according to its natural qualities.”¹ Settlers on unsuitable land were relocated to reduce relief expenditures, while farmers on quality land could balance their operations by grazing livestock on nearby pastures. In 1939 the act was further amended, to make rehabilitation activities a permanent function of the federal government. In the depths of drought and depression, the federal government officially recognized that certain areas of the prairies should never have been farmed and that constant management was necessary to ensure the region’s ecological and economic vitality.

¹ *Medicine Hat News*, 6 January 1938, 4.

On 17 April 1935, the R.B. Bennett Government passed the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act “to provide for the rehabilitation of the drought and soil drifting areas in the Provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta.”² The organization was to find a way to conserve water and prevent the spring run-off of snow and rainfall, as well as reclaim lands that were drifting and blowing away. To this end, the federal government allocated \$750,000 for the 1935-36 fiscal year and a maximum of \$1,000,000 in each of the four succeeding years. Administration of the act was vested in the federal minister of Agriculture, who was assisted by an appointed advisory committee comprised of “representatives of farming, ranching, financial, and railway interests in the affected areas, as well as officials of Governments of the Dominion and Provinces concerned.”³ This committee was formed to develop and promote systems of farm practice, tree culture, and water supply for greater economic security within the drought and soil drifting areas.⁴

The area coming under the provisions of the act extended along the international boundary from the Red River in Manitoba to the Rocky Mountains, south of a line which generally followed the southern edge of the tree belt across the three prairie provinces. This northern boundary ran from Winnipeg northwest to the point where the Battle River crosses the border of Saskatchewan and Alberta, then southwest to a point just north of Calgary, and from there directly west to the Alberta-British Columbia border.⁵ (See Map 2, p.97) This boundary encompassed approximately 105,000,000 acres, including an area of drought and soil drifting covering almost 60,000,000 acres in south-western

² *Statutes of Canada*, 25-26 George V, 1935, ch. 23, 7.

³ *Report of Work Conducted Under the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration, 1935-36*, p.1

⁴ *Statutes of Canada*, 25-26 George V, 1935, ch. 23, 7.

⁵ *Report of Activities Under the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act, 1939*, p.1.

Saskatchewan and south-eastern Alberta.⁶ The drought area was not static; it had been steadily growing to its current size over the previous five years, leading one member of the House of Commons to describe it as “a mighty octopus which is constantly pushing its tentacles into new territory.”⁷

On an immediate level, the act was introduced within the context of an impending dry season for 1935 following low levels of precipitation over the previous winter.⁸ On a longer term, the act was a response to the climatic and economic conditions that had plagued the prairies since 1929. During the five-year period from 1929–1934, a prolonged drought reduced many areas to “a veritable desert...of black blizzards.”⁹ In the most severely affected areas, the average wheat yield declined from 16.0 bushels per acre during the period 1921-1929 to 8.6 bushels per acre during the period 1930-1937.¹⁰ Compounding the problem was an economic depression resulting in lower prices for the agricultural products of the region. During the period 1930-1935, the average price of wheat in the prairies dropped to forty-eight cents per bushel from an average of more than a dollar per bushel for the preceding six years.¹¹ As a result, average farm income among drought-area farmers was seventy percent lower during the 1930-1937 period than it had been in the 1920s.¹²

The combined impact of drought and depression devastated the local population. Community services, construction, and retail industries were all heavily hit by the lack of

⁶ *Report of Activities, 1939, 2.*

⁷ *Canada, House of Commons Debates, 10 April 1935, 2606.*

⁸ *Ibid., 9 February 1937, 723.*

⁹ *Ibid., 11 February 1937, 783.*

¹⁰ *Report of Activities, 1939, 2.*

¹¹ *Report of Activities, 1938, 2.*

¹² *Report of Activities, 1940, 3.*

purchasing power.¹³ More fundamentally, the lack of water meant the loss of cattle, hogs, and poultry, as well as vegetable gardens, leaving farmers dependent on outside help for everyday food. Describing the situation in the House of Commons, Saskatchewan MP T.C. Douglas said, “the vitality of our people has been slowly sapped; their health has suffered; the social life of the drought area population has been seriously impaired, with disastrous results to the mental and physical condition of our people.”¹⁴

Humanitarian concerns were accompanied by a practical desire to get the area’s residents off the relief rolls and once again paying taxes. The economic structure of the dry area was jeopardized by farm debt and unpaid interest and taxes. Where 1,304 Saskatchewan farmers had paid income tax for 1929-30, only thirty-eight paid income tax for 1934-35.¹⁵ The reverse side of the problem was ballooning relief costs. Out of a total of \$158,330,228.04 expended by the federal government for relief in Saskatchewan over the period 1907-1939, a whopping \$145,234,237.84 had been spent since 1929.¹⁶ Heavy relief expenses, accompanied by the reduced purchasing power of drought area residents, diminished commerce and industry throughout the country, leading officials to claim “the problem of rehabilitation is one of national importance.”¹⁷

The rehabilitation bill received little opposition in the House of Commons during its reading. Most participants in the discussion expressed sympathy and recognized the need to deal with the situation.¹⁸ Central to this consensus was the notion that new

¹³ Canada, Department of Agriculture, *Report on Rural Relief Due to Drought Conditions and Crop Failures in Western Canada, 1930-1937* (Ottawa 1939), 26.

¹⁴ *Debates*, 11 February 1937, 783.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 783.

¹⁶ *Minutes and Report of Meeting of P.F.R.A. Advisory Committee on Land Utilization, 17-18 February 1943*, appendix, 3.

¹⁷ *Report of Activities, 1938*, 2.

¹⁸ *Debates*, 11 April 1935, 2635. W.R. Motherwell, the most outspoken critic of the Conservative government during readings of the bill, criticized Bennett for not having introduced the legislation sooner.

cultivation techniques and more information on local conditions were urgently needed to solve the problems facing prairie agriculture. This attitude had been previously expressed at the 1920 Swift Current Conference, but had been displaced by the subsequent return of favorable conditions. Dry conditions and poor prices during the 1930s revived this view, expressed most recently in a 1934 plan by Manitoba Premier John Bracken. Bracken's rehabilitation scheme involved three aspects: the accumulation and organization of regional climatic information through the services of technical experts; financing and coordination from the dominion government; and the active cooperation of individuals, communities and governments to solve drought area agricultural problems.¹⁹

Activities under the rehabilitation act were designed to encourage farmers "to solve their own drought and soil drifting problems by community cooperative action, with a minimum of material and financial assistance from governmental sources."²⁰ In part, this reliance on the initiative of the farm community reflected the financial crisis afflicting the entire nation during the 1930s. But this approach also belied respect for the experience of local farmers. According to one prairie newspaper: "In any [rehabilitation] program undertaken it will not be forgotten that the farmer or rancher on the land has a wealth of experience and knowledge that will be invaluable to this program therefore it is not so much a case of demonstrating to him what can be done but working with him."²¹ The experimental nature of the act was also significant. Prime Minister R.B. Bennett described the purpose of the federal government's part in the undertaking as largely an

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 19 April 1935,

²⁰ *Report of Work, 1935-36*, 2.

²¹ *Medicine Hat News*, 23 May 1935, 1.

investigation of the best way to approach the problem.²² In 1939, George Spence, Director of Rehabilitation, emphasized that the broad wording and brevity of the act allowed for flexibility in the activities carried out under its provisions.²³ More candidly, in a 1966 interview with historian James Gray, Spence said, “When they [PFRA] started up you see, nobody knew what to do...This was a general act: soil conservation, water conservation. And you had to find the methods of doing it. They didn’t specify how to do it in the act. Nobody knew. And for that reason, everything we did was an experiment...”²⁴

The PFRA program initially had two objectives: cultural and water development. Under the supervision of the Dominion Experimental Farms, the cultural program was designed to arrest soil drifting through improved cultivation techniques. Badly drifting areas were to be re-grassed with drought resistant species, trees planted, and soil qualities tested.²⁵ Through experimental sub-stations and agricultural improvement associations (AIAs), the rehabilitation program covered a variety of soil zones and established a forum for the exchange of agricultural ideas and experiences. Underlying this approach was the principle that, “before valid agricultural recommendations can be made it is advisable to try suggested procedure on as many soil types and under as many different conditions as possible.”²⁶ The process also bridged a communication gap between agricultural scientists and prairie farmers.²⁷

The water development phase of the program was intended to stabilize livestock production in the drought area and took the form of financial and engineering assistance

²² *Debates*, 11 April 1935, 2638.

²³ *Meeting of P.F.R.A. Advisory Committee on Land Utilization*, 29 May 1939, 2.

²⁴ Saskatchewan Archives Board (SAB), James Gray interview with George Spence, 1966.

²⁵ *Report of Work, 1935-36*, 2.

to farmers and ranchers for stock-watering, irrigation, and domestic watering schemes.²⁸ Dugouts, stock-watering dams, and small individual irrigation projects were designed to impound run-off and surface water supplies and also provide for reserve supplies of forage to be grown under irrigation. Spread out on the range, they also helped to prevent over-grazing around a few select water sources.²⁹ Many of these projects had been applied by ranchers and settlers in the foothills country of Alberta and the Cypress Hills, and then abandoned with the increase in wheat farming.³⁰ Under the PFRA these systems were copied and organized.³¹

Soil survey work, begun by the provinces in the early 1920s but largely discontinued because of the economic depression of the 1930s, was also an integral component of the PFRA program. This work involved the cooperation of the soils departments of prairie universities and the Dominion Experimental Farms. The purpose of the surveys was "to determine the nature, extent, and location of various types of soil, with reference to their crop producing capacities."³² By 1939 reconnaissance soil surveys at one-mile intervals had been made of approximately ninety percent of the area coming under the operations of the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act.³³

²⁶ *Report of Activities, 1940*, 20.

²⁷ Gray, *Men Against the Desert*, 93-95.

²⁸ *Report of Activities, 15 November 1935*, 15.

²⁹ Anonymous, *Canadian Cattlemen*, June 1938, 25.

³⁰ W.L. Jacobson, "Progress of Small Water Development Projects," *C.S.T.A. Review*, no. 23 (December 1939), 59.

³¹ SAB, James Gray interview with George Spence, 1966.

³² *Report of Work, 1935-36*, 16.

³³ *Report on Activities, 1939*, 21. Broadly, the PFRA undertook three different surveys, distinguished by the degree of detail they entailed. In addition to reconnaissance surveys, detailed reconnaissance surveys were conducted from quarter to half-mile allowances along roads and within fields. Even more precise, detailed surveys involved close examination of soil boundaries throughout fields. By 1939, detailed surveys had been made of 1,500 acres in Manitoba, 123,700 acres in Saskatchewan, and 2,800 acres in Alberta. See, *Report on Activities, 1941*, 49.

The rehabilitation program also included a land utilization study involving the Economics Branch of the Department of Agriculture, the University of Saskatchewan Department of Farm Management and the Alberta provincial Department of Agriculture.³⁴ Described as the first of its kind in Canada, the study correlated soil survey information with economic data on farm sizes, cropping practices and yields, livestock production and carrying capacity, financial history, settlement patterns, and farm abandonment.³⁵ Land was classified according to the minimum acreage necessary to support a family based on its suitability for wheat production.³⁶ By 1939, nearly eight million acres had been classified in central and southern Saskatchewan. Nearly forty percent of this area was considered sub-marginal for wheat production. And almost half of this sub-marginal land was privately owned.³⁷

As the PFRA matured into its second year of operation, circumstances in Saskatchewan and Alberta reinforced the evidence from soil and economic surveys about the need to re-evaluate land use in the dry area. A long, cold winter over 1935-36 forced many ranchers to feed all of their stock during January and February and even into March in some cases. According to S.E. Clarke of the Range Experimental Station at Manyberries, many of the southern Alberta and southwestern Saskatchewan stock growers went into the winter with a poor growth of grass on their winter pastures and only sufficient hay and feed grain to carry them through an average winter. Owing to the

³⁴ *Report of Activities, 15 November 1935*, 12.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁶ J. Coke, "Economic Research in the Drought Area in Western Canada," *C.S.T.A. Review*, no. 23 (December 1939), 15. This data was supported with information on the condition of buildings, abandonment, tax delinquency, and indebtedness and relief payments. Land that could not be expected to yield a net return over expenses of production was termed non-arable, while productive land was classified according to the return it would provide. Land classes ranged from class I, considered sub-marginal and capable of producing less than 350 bushels per quarter section, to land class V, considered excellent for cultivation and capable of producing over 900 bushels per quarter section.

dry conditions and over-grazed pastures, moreover, many of the cattle coming off grass in the fall of 1935 were not in sufficient shape to withstand a harsh winter. The result was a high death toll among the dry-area livestock population. Cattle brought through the winter survived only at great expense to their owners, leaving Clarke to query, “We will have such severe winters again, and the question is, ‘How can we prevent such heavy losses in the future?’”³⁸

In March 1937, under the direction of the new federal minister of Agriculture, J.G. Gardiner, the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act was amended to broaden the scope of rehabilitation by including land utilization and land settlement as additional objectives to improved cultivation and water development, and to make it possible for Parliament to vote more than \$1,000,000 a year for rehabilitation.³⁹ The 1937 amendment reorganized administration of the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act into three major branches: a soil and soil drifting committee (cultural); a water development committee; and a land utilization committee. The land utilization committee was composed of businessmen, agricultural and irrigation specialists, as well as experienced stockmen and farmers. According to the committee’s secretary, W.L. Jacobson, its purpose was, “to advise the Minister with respect to the policy in dealing with the non-arable areas under the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Program involving the withdrawal of these lands from cultivation,

³⁷ *Report on Activities, 1939*, 23.

³⁸ *Medicine Hat News*, 26 March 1936, 2.

³⁹ *Statutes of Canada*, 1 George VI, 1937, ch.14. For some members of Parliament this fiscal relaxation was too modest. Comparing the situation in Canada to that south of the international border, T.C. Douglas said, “In an area slightly smaller than our drought area the United States is spending \$500,000,000 over a period of ten years. This means \$50,000,000 a year. Compare this with the situation in Canada, where we have spent \$850,000 in two years rehabilitating the drought area...if rehabilitation is to be anything more than a mere gesture, we must be prepared to spend at least \$5,000,000 per year over a ten year period in order to produce any serious effect in retarding the ravages of the present drought...” –*Debates*, 11 February 1937, 784.

removal of settlers, re-grassing, water development and the establishment of community or reserve pastures...”⁴⁰

A clear response to the recent feed crises, reserve pastures were designed to take overgrazed grasslands out of production and provide a source of feed in times of emergency. Similarly, community pastures were areas of badly drifting soil that were fenced, grassed, and made available to surrounding settlers to supplement livestock feeding. Removing sub-marginal areas from grain production for use in the form of public ranches was seen to offer the two-fold benefit of arresting soil drifting and stabilizing the economies of the dry area.⁴¹ Community pastures would relieve farmers from the burden of having to carry and maintain the lands necessary to support livestock in the dry area, and at the same time, help keep the area’s residents off relief rolls. They would also complement PFRA irrigation projects by allowing for the local and economical processing of the products of irrigated land. Forage grown on irrigated land would be marketed in the form of livestock grazed on community pastures.⁴² As James Gray put it, “the end objective was to convert the Palliser Triangle from a predominantly grain growing economy to a cattle plus grain economy through irrigation.”⁴³ According to W.L. Jacobson the development of community pastures meant “using the lands for the only purpose for which they are suited.”⁴⁴

While officials devised a procedure to develop community pastures, climatic and crop conditions on the prairies deteriorated to their lowest point in the decade. Low soil

⁴⁰ Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration Library (PFRA), W.L. Jacobson, *Prairie Relief and Rehabilitation* (Regina 1938), 5.

⁴¹ *Debates*, 11 February 1937, 778-79.

⁴² Glenbow Alberta Institute Archives (GAIA), Irrigation Research Project – W.L. Jacobson Collection (M3761), box 38, file 352 ‘Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act, 1937-1940,’ Mark Mann, “The Development of Irrigation in Relation to Community Pastures,” transcript of radio broadcast, 28 February 1939, 3.

⁴³ Gray, *Men Against the Desert*, 209.

moisture reserves in the spring of 1937 and extremely dry weather from April to June resulted in widespread crop failure in much of Saskatchewan and parts of eastern Alberta. Saskatchewan was particularly hard hit, as evidenced by the comparative average wheat yields for the prairie provinces over the year. From 1910 to 1936, average wheat yields for Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta were 16, 14.9, and 17.7 bushels respectively. For 1937, the figures were 16.7, 2.7, and 9.4 bushels respectively.⁴⁵ Feed supplies were similarly affected. In the southern prairies, "hords of cattle were reported to be stripping the leaves of shrubs and trees, and horses were foraging for straw among the manure piles of stable yards."⁴⁶ Describing the situation in a radio broadcast, J.G. Taggart, Saskatchewan Minister of Agriculture, called 1937, "the greatest disaster in the agricultural history of Saskatchewan."⁴⁷ Figures on relief expenditures reinforced his claim. During the eight-year period from September 1929 to August 1937, over \$110,000,000 was expended on all forms of relief in Saskatchewan. Almost half this amount (\$45,000,000) was spent in the single year ending 31 August 1938.⁴⁸

The federal government responded to the calamity with several emergency measures. During June and July 1937, the government implemented a program of feed and fodder relief, a feeder freight policy to ship cattle to areas with sufficient grass, and an optional marketing plan to reduce pressure on prices.⁴⁹ During the fall of 1937 a

⁴⁴ Jacobson, *Prairie Relief*, 5.

⁴⁵ *Report of Proceedings Under the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act for the Fiscal Year Ending 31 March, 1939*, 3.

⁴⁶ *Medicine Hat News*, 17 June 1937, 1; See also, *Western Producer*, 24 June 1937, 24.

⁴⁷ SAB, George Spence Papers (GR 80), Political and Ministerial Files (V), file 30(i) 'Speeches', J.G. Taggart, "The Feed and Fodder Situation," 20 January 1938, 2.

⁴⁸ Jacobson, *Prairie Relief*, 2.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 3. Through the feeder freight policy, the government paid the price for farmers to ship their cattle out of the drought area to and from feeding fields in Manitoba and Alberta. Under the optional marketing plan, 90,000 head of cattle were purchased by the federal government and shipped to a central Manitoba pasture for grading and private sale or auction. In addition to relieving the feed crisis, the optional

federal warrant in the amount of \$6,850,000 was issued for the purchase and shipment of 500,000 tons of fodder into the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan from points as distant as Quebec, British Columbia, and the United States.⁵⁰ This aid was an extension of a one-year federal agreement to provide \$4,700,000 for the purchase and distribution of feed and fodder for certain drought stricken areas of the prairies.⁵¹ Additionally, in September 1937, the Dominion announced that it would provide direct relief to 45,000 families in Saskatchewan over the winter of 1937-38.⁵² It became increasingly clear that new systems were urgently needed for land use in the dry area. According to George Spence: "The serious drought of 1937 presented further complex problems...It was necessary to take immediate action in the movement of settlers, more definite agreements on land policy were entered into with the provinces, and extensive resettlement became an emergent need."⁵³

Establishing PFRA community pastures began with an application by interested parties through their municipal council outlining where they wanted a pasture.⁵⁴ Provincial and federal representatives then surveyed the area to determine whether the land was sub-marginal and accessible for long-term control. If the area was found suitable, the province acquired control of the land through tax sales, exchanges for Crown lands, and the relocation of settlers. Land in the pasture was then transferred to the control of the federal government and the PFR Branch constructed fences and corrals, re-

marketing plan served to stabilize livestock prices by preventing a rush of unfinished cattle to market in the fall of 1937.

⁵⁰ *Debates*, 3 February 1937, 157.

⁵¹ *Report of Proceedings, 1937*, 34.

⁵² *Medicine Hat News*, 23 September 1937, 1.

⁵³ G. Spence and J. Vallance, "Organization of the PFRA for Water Conservation," *C.S.T.A. Review*, no. 23 (December 1939), 29.

⁵⁴ A. Stewart, "The Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Programme," *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, vol. V (August 1939), 318.

grassed drifting areas, and developed water facilities.⁵⁵ Dominion Experimental Farm Staff performed grazing surveys to provide information on the carrying capacity of different areas, the distribution, palatability and nutritive value of herbage, and the distribution of water supplies.⁵⁶

A committee representing government, scientists and practical stock-growers worked out the rules and regulations that would govern the operation of the pastures.⁵⁷ Once a pasture was established and its capacity determined, grazing rights were extended to stock-growers in the area. Pasture patrons formed a grazing association and elected a five-member advisory council. This council decided the number of animals each patron was permitted to place on the pasture and cooperated with a federally appointed pasture manager in its operation. Pasture managers enforced a federally determined carrying capacity for each pasture.

The federal plan to develop and control PFRA community pastures reflected a new sensibility regarding the function of community grazing and a desire to avoid the issues that accompanied locally operated pastures through the 1920s and 1930s. Following the 1920 Swift Current Conference, community pastures were authorized by the federal government but were neither encouraged at the federal, or the provincial levels. For instance, in May 1922, the Saskatchewan Cooperation and Markets Commissioner asked F.H. Auld to send a representative to assist with the organization of

⁵⁵ E.E. Eisenhauer, "Land Utilization in Saskatchewan," *C.S.T.A. Review*, no. 23 (December 1939), 25.

⁵⁶ *Report on the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Program*, (March 1938), 11.

⁵⁷ GAIA, M3761, box 42, file 367 'Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act Advisory Committee, 1936-1937,' *Report of Advisory Committee on Land Utilization, 3-4 August 1937*, 21.

community grazing associations in southwest Saskatchewan.⁵⁸ Several weeks later Auld responded:

I do not consider it advisable to organize a series of meetings. It is one thing for us to go out to address meetings when invited it is another thing to organize them and promote them from here. The latter I do not consider desirable in this instance as there is bound to be considerable delay and possibly disappointment to these people in getting the grazing lands which they desire. To encourage them in their organization is liable to impose responsibility upon us which it is not desirable or necessary for us to bear...⁵⁹

Without a concrete plan or legislation to take lands out of cultivation and develop pastures in the 1920s, officials adopted a passive policy of waiting for leases to expire and become available.⁶⁰ Officials were also unwilling to extend financial assistance. In one instance, Auld advised the Grazing Commissioner that a certain grazing association should provide its own capital to fence and manage a proposed pasture.⁶¹

Without encouragement and financial assistance, many associations incorporated in the 1920s were plagued by confusion and debt. Patrons also lacked a sense of responsibility for maintaining pastures. Touring southwest Saskatchewan in 1936, Oscar Dechief, a field officer with the Saskatchewan Department of Natural Resources, wrote, "Community leases seem to be a sound method of utilizing these public lands but administered at present they are destined to become a source of worry to the Department. No one has more than a \$25.00 or \$50.00 interest and is therefore leaving the anxiety to a

⁵⁸ SAB, Department of Agriculture, Cooperation and Markets Branch (Ag. 8), file 39 'Deputy Minister of Agriculture of Agriculture, 1920-24,' Booth to F.H. Auld, 9 May 1922.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, F.H. Auld to Booth, 30 May 1922.

⁶⁰ SAB, Ag. 8, file 1 'Commissioner, 1919-1924,' Auld to Booth, 16 May 1922. Auld wrote, "I would like you to be in a position to advise community grazing associations or live stock associations that neither their wish nor ours is sufficient to acquire grazing lands until they become available for rental, and that in many cases they may have to wait some time for the lands which they desire to rent..."

committee of embarrassed neighbors who find that collections are difficult.”⁶² Putting the matter bluntly, George Spence said “we found in the provincial field of community pastures, what was everybody’s business was nobody’s business.”⁶³

Improved wheat growing conditions in the late 1920s also threatened community pastures, as farmers re-occupied many lands previously abandoned due to drought and soil drifting. The papers of a community grazing lease established in the mid-1920s, and located in R.M. 228 and R.M. 259, illustrate the threat.⁶⁴ In July 1925, an individual in the vicinity of the proposed lease wrote to the Department of Agriculture: “I own 22 head of cattle and 15 head of horses. I must obtain lease or go out of mixed farming. There is talk of a community pasture which is out of the question... Why not give me this lease so that I may continue along this line...”⁶⁵ In December 1926, F.H. Auld received a petition signed by thirty-six settlers requesting that a quarter section of land be withdrawn from the grazing lease and given to an individual for homestead purposes.⁶⁶ The pasture was barely able to withstand these challenges, bordering on a state of bankruptcy and the cancellation of its lease from its formation in 1925 through the 1930s.

Federal control of the PFRA community pastures was meant to ensure their stability and permanence. On 5 April 1939, the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act was amended further to make administration of the cultural, water development, and land utilization branches a permanent function of the federal government.⁶⁷ The amendment

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, F.H. Auld to Waldron, 13 February 1923.

⁶² SAB, GR 80, V, file 8(g) ‘Drought: Relief and Rehabilitation,’ Oscar Dechief Report to Minister of Natural Resources, 20 June 1936, 4.

⁶³ SAB, James Gray interview with George Spence, 1966.

⁶⁴ SAB, Department of Natural Resources, Provincial Lands Branch (N.R. 4), file 7 ‘Correspondence re. Community Grazing Tract, W.7, 1923-1947’.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, E. Helm to Department of Agriculture, 31 July 1925.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, G. Pereira to Department of Agriculture, 10 December 1926.

⁶⁷ *Statutes of Canada*, 1 George VI, 1939, ch. 14,

was part of the growing realization that prairie agriculture needed long-term rather than short-term solutions. In a 1936 paper to the Turgeon Grain Enquiry Commission, Dr. William Allan, University of Saskatchewan professor of Farm Management, observed:

During the relatively brief period of Saskatchewan farming, problems of production and marketing have been frequent and serious...recovery has more often resulted because [of] favorable weather...and occurred when economic conditions were also opportune, than from any well considered and effective planning of farming operations or agricultural policy...

...Unless we are to regard our agriculture as a 'series of emergencies,' as it was described a short time ago by one of our leaders in an important committee, we must work towards the development of a policy that may reasonably be expected to contain the elements of permanence.⁶⁸

This same point of view lay at the heart of the PFRA community pasture program. At a May 1937 meeting to decide how the pastures should operate, Saskatchewan Minister of Agriculture J.G. Taggart urged "the need of laying down a long-time policy and that this be adhered to for a length of time to give the people opportunity to re-establish themselves and to live permanently and satisfactorily in this country."⁶⁹ Federal control of PFRA community pastures was meant to ensure their stability and permanence.

During the late 1930s, the federal interpretation of the prairies was transformed. The social and financial costs of sustained drought and economic depression prompted a new assessment of prairie resources. Information from soils and land classification studies convinced officials that extensive portions of the prairies should not have been homesteaded and that only permanent management of the region would reverse the

⁶⁸ SAB, Department of Agriculture, General Office (Ag.), file 5, Dr. Wm. Allan, 'Economic Problems of Saskatchewan Farmers' – a paper submitted to the Turgeon Grain Enquiry Commission, December 1936, 3.

current calamity. Prairie rehabilitation shifted from short-term cultivation and moisture saving strategies to a permanent plan whereby unsuitable farms would be restored to grass for community grazing purposes. The community pasture idea was not new, but its application in the 1930s was unique. Unlike previous pastures, PFRA pastures meant relocating farmers from unsuitable soil -- permanently. To this end, the plan incorporated an element of strong federal control over management and land in PFRA community pastures. But as P.S. Lovejoy, a Michigan land use theorist had said in the 1920s,

Land inventory is one thing, that classification and planning for use is another thing, and that putting the plans into practice - the political science or engineering of land utilization - is still a different thing.⁷⁰

Over the next ten years, rehabilitation officials experienced the limits to how fast and how far they could apply the PFRA community pasture program.

⁶⁹ GAIA, M3761, box 42, file 367, *Report and Minutes of Conference on Land Utilization under P.F.R. Act, 6 May 1937*, 14.

⁷⁰ Quoted in Albert Z. Guttenberg, "The Land Utilization Movement of the 1920s," *Agricultural History*, vol. 50, no. 3 (July 1976), 483.

Chapter Three

The Limits to Rehabilitation

In a 1939 radio broadcast George Spence, Director of Rehabilitation, commented on the PFRA objectives:

In short, the plan is to determine the best economic use to which each class of land can be put and to effect, with as little disturbance to human relations as possible, transition from wanton exploitation of our greatest heritage to a policy of intelligent conservation.

The program calls for close-knit cooperative effort between Provincial and Municipal Governments, as well as with individuals who hold title or have substantial interests in submarginal or non-arable lands. Only in this way can endless disputes and vexatious delays be avoided in getting 'land control.'¹

It was an astute description of the challenges facing PFRA rehabilitation officials in the late 1930s. The federal government had recently transferred control over land and natural resources to Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta, and these governments were eager to exercise this power on their own terms. Prairie lands were controlled by interests ranging from individual settlers to land holding companies and crown corporations, and were taxed to provide revenue for municipalities and schools. Developing federal community pastures meant convincing these various interests to surrender control over land in proposed pasture areas, and finding suitable lands for exchange or resettlement. The process was complicated by land shortages, debt, and a fundamental lack of coordination

among land use administrators. By the five-year mark of the program, PFRA community pasture development was at a virtual standstill.

In 1930, the federal government transferred control of lands and natural resources to the prairie provincial governments. According to a federally commissioned report on the transfer, “the purposes for which the Dominion retained the agricultural lands of the province[s] have now been achieved; the railways have been built and the lands settled.”² Federal administration of prairie lands had been costly to the prairie provinces. Manitoba had struggled financially since 1870, and Alberta lost vast prospective revenues from minerals and other resources.³ By 1928, moreover, the Dominion government had disposed of almost ninety percent of the surveyed land in the prairies.⁴ Historian Chester Martin elaborated on the implication of this policy for the future management of prairie lands:

...so far as governments in the first instance can direct land utilization by its administration of Crown lands, this function has now been practically completed by the Dominion...more than 88 per cent of the surveyed land area of the Prairie Provinces has been ‘administered by the Government of Canada’ past the stage where the government is any longer a prime factor in determining in the first instance its utilization or control.⁵

In Saskatchewan more than ninety-five percent of the surveyed land was disposed, making adjustments even more difficult.⁶

¹ Glenbow-Alberta Institute Archives (GAIA), Irrigation Research Project- W.L. Jacobson Collection (M3761), box 38, file 352, Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act, 1937-1940, George Spence, “Review of the Policies and Objectives of the P.F.R.A.,” radio broadcast, 25 April 1939, 2.

² Quoted in Chester Martin, *Dominion Lands Policy* (Toronto 1973), 12-13.

³ Martin, *Dominion Lands Policy*, 223.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 227-28. According to Martin the area undisposed in Saskatchewan was “3,532,000 out of 76,701,301 acres, or 4.6 per cent.”

With the drought underway, the government of Saskatchewan was almost immediately involved in plans to revise land use in the province. From 1931 to 1934 the provincial government helped resettle thousands of families migrating from abandoned homesteads in southern and central Saskatchewan to the northern fringe of the prairies.⁷ But, with little quality land to choose from, many of these families resettled on land unsuitable for agriculture and became dependent on public assistance.

In 1935, the Saskatchewan government passed the Land Utilization Act to remove unsuitable land from cultivation and control grazing. The act provided for the appointment of a Land Utilization Board (LUB) consisting of the provincial deputy ministers of Agriculture, Municipal Affairs and Natural Resources, University of Saskatchewan professors of Soils and Farm Management, and representatives of rural municipalities.⁸ The LUB was to acquire control of sub-marginal lands through tax-sale proceedings, purchase, lease or exchange, or through transfer of title from owners wishing to be relieved of outstanding tax liabilities. But as University of Saskatchewan Professor G.E. Britnell noted in 1939, “great administrative patience, tact, and skill must be exercised in securing removal of some of the present occupants, not to mention the difficulties to be faced in reestablishing them.”⁹ Even with the LUB in place, provincial officials were unsure exactly how to apply its mandate.

In August 1937, as the details of the PFRA community pasture program were being developed, W.J. Patterson, the new Premier of Saskatchewan, suggested to J.G. Gardiner, federal Minister of Agriculture, that the federal government handle the

⁷ George Britnell, *The Wheat Economy* (Toronto 1939), 206.

⁸ Saskatchewan Archives Board (SAB), George Spence Papers (GR80), Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Files (VI), file 25(c) ‘Land Utilization,’ Undated Memorandum written by the Land Utilization Board entitled ‘Land Utilization Legislation and the Land Utilization Board,’ 1.

negotiations and compensation necessary for land transfers and resettlement.¹⁰ Uncertain about the procedure to follow, Patterson wrote: “We realize that unexpected difficulties are bound to arise, but we also realize that this should not stop governments from making a start, and that, as you proceed in actual practice to put the policy into effect, a solution to the problem will naturally evolve.”¹¹ Though determined to acquire federal control of the pastures, Gardiner, a former Saskatchewan premier, was unwilling to accept responsibility for negotiating land control in proposed pasture areas. He responded that the province should acquire control of lands intended for community pasture use before making proposals to the Dominion government, and that the Dominion government would proceed with expenditures only on those proposals that met with its approval.¹²

When the Dominion government and the province of Saskatchewan signed an agreement to develop PFRA community pastures on 5 January 1938 officials were still uncertain about how to acquire control of land in proposed pasture areas.¹³ The agreement stipulated that the province propose pasture locations and lease or transfer to the Dominion all lands titled to the province within those areas. The Dominion would develop and control the pastures. The agreement was less precise in outlining a procedure to secure land beyond Crown control. Land ownership in proposed pasture areas was often spread among resident and non-resident farmers, mortgage and land holding companies, rural municipalities, and the Crown.¹⁴ According to the agreement, the province was to do “everything in its power” to transfer settlers from privately-held

⁹ Britnell, *The Wheat Economy*, 226.

¹⁰ GAIA, M3761, box 42, file 367 ‘P.F.R.A. Advisory Committee, 1937-38,’ J.G. Patterson to J.G. Gardiner, 3 August 1937, 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹² GAIA, M3761, box 42, file 367, J.G. Gardiner to J.G. Patterson 22 September 1937, 2-3.

¹³ SAB, GR80, V, file 25(a), Dominion-Saskatchewan Agreement 5 January 1938.

¹⁴ PFRA, *PFRA Land Utilization Branch Fieldmen’s Conference, November 1941*, 11-12.

lands in proposed pasture areas to lands more suitable for cultivation, but the agreement made no specific mention of what those powers were.¹⁵ In cases where the development of community pastures meant disorganizing school districts or other municipal bodies, or affected creditors whose revenues were based on land taxes, the agreement was even more vague; it simply stipulated that the province and the Dominion were to, “settle such claims by mutual agreement between the parties involved...”¹⁶

To implement the agreement to develop PFRA community pastures, provincial legislation was either amended or introduced and the LUB engaged to acquire control of lands in community pastures.¹⁷ Additionally, George Spence, Saskatchewan Minister of Public Works, was appointed to act as a liaison officer between various provincial departments and the federal government. Pasture development affected six departments of the provincial government, including the departments of Agriculture, Natural Resources, Municipal Affairs and Education.¹⁸ Spence’s duties were to, “iron out difficulties where they [arose] in the different departments and otherwise act on all matters with respect to rehabilitation irrespective of the Provincial Department concerned.”¹⁹ He was considered a suitable choice in this regard because of his administrative and political background, and his practical farming experience in the drought area.²⁰ Seven months later, Spence was made the Director of the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Programme.²¹

¹⁵ SAB, GR80, V25(a), Dominion-Saskatchewan Agreement 5 January 1938, 3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁸ The provincial departments of Highways and Public Works were also affected.

¹⁹ Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration Library (PFRA), George Spence, “Explanatory Statement on Rehabilitation to the Royal Commission on Dominion-Provincial Relations,” c.1937, 2.

²⁰ *Leader*, 23 August 1937, 4.

²¹ *Maple Creek News*, 24 March 1938, 1.

In Manitoba, the drought area and the extent of settlement on unsuitable land were substantially smaller than in Saskatchewan. These factors reduced the urgency of community pasture development, but also delayed an agreement with the federal government since no significant legislation had been put in place enabling the province to acquire control and title of sub-marginal lands.²² Thus, the November 1939 Dominion-Manitoba agreement was different from its Saskatchewan predecessor. If the province of Manitoba was unable to secure title to privately held lands, it could lease those lands from their owners, paying rent and taxes, and then transfer those leases to the Dominion. The Dominion-Manitoba agreement also included a disclaimer absolving the federal government for responsibility in the disorganization of school districts, telephone companies or other municipal bodies.²³

For various reasons, including land use history, geography and politics, the federal government was unable to implement PFRA community pastures in Alberta. During a severe drought in the 1920s, the Alberta government had introduced the Special Areas Act (1927) to consolidate dry area municipalities and school boards, prevent cultivation of dry area lands, relocate settlers, and operate communal grazing tracts.²⁴ By the late 1930s, the Alberta Special Areas comprised approximately 365 townships covering almost nine million acres of land, and its population had been reduced from 40,647 to about 29,500.²⁵

²² GAIA, M3761, box 42, file 369 'Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act Advisory Committee, 1939,' *Meeting of the Advisory Committee on Land Utilization 29 May 1939*, 12. At the meeting, D.L. Campbell, Manitoba Minister of Agriculture said, "...the main difficulty...was that the Province of Manitoba did not have control of lands and were [sic] therefore not in a position to agree to the original proposal of either leasing or transferring lands for community pasture purposes to the Dominion Government."

²³ SAB, Saskatchewan Department of Natural Resources, Deputy Minister's Files, 1936-1947' (NR 1/2), file 172 'Lands, 1940-1946,' Dominion-Manitoba Agreement 15 November 1939.

²⁴ O.S. Longman, "Land Utilization in Alberta," *C.S.T.A. Review*, No. 23 (December 1939), 22.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

Alberta officials were enthusiastic about PFRA activities, but wanted to administer community pastures through the existing provincial system. In August 1937 D.B. Mullen, Alberta's Minister of Agriculture, assured J.G. Gardiner that he considered PFRA rehabilitation work, "a very commendable activity, and one which is much needed in this Province,"²⁶ but soon suggested that, "the proposed community pastures could be effectively administered through the extension and possible modification of our present policy."²⁷ The following year, Premier William Aberhart elaborated on the position of the Alberta government. Having reviewed the recent Dominion-Saskatchewan agreement, Aberhart wrote to Gardiner:

...We approved the principle of the agreement, with the exception of the requirement to transfer land and its administration to the Dominion Government.

We wish to assure you that we are in full accord with this principle, in fact so much so that we have made provision by enactment and through administration to take such lands out of cultivation and to declare them unfit for agricultural settlement.

We, therefore, wish to advise that we do not look with favour upon the transfer of our land resources to the Dominion Government, but we are, however, prepared to enter into an agreement which would guarantee to the satisfaction of the Dominion Government that all lands included in community pastures or reserve pastures established by virtue of the P.F.R. Act would not in future be used for farming purposes.²⁸

Gardiner remained adamant that the federal government should control the land in community pastures and by 1939, an agreement with Alberta had not been reached.

²⁶ GAIA, M3761, box 42, file 367, D.B. Mullen to J.G. Gardiner 12 August 1937, 1.

²⁷ GAIA, M3761, box 42, file 367, D.B. Mullen to J.G. Gardiner 31 August 1937, 1.

²⁸ GAIA, M3761, box 42, file 369, *Meeting of Advisory Committee on Land Utilization*, 29 May 1939, 14-15.

In March 1939, Gardiner explained the federal position in the House of Commons. Forced to respond to the suggestion that he did not trust Alberta to keep the land in community pastures from re-settlement during wetter years, Gardiner replied:

it is not a matter of not trusting the province...While we might trust the government of Alberta to do just exactly what we might expect them to do, we do not know, of course, what government is going to be in Alberta or in any other province in the future. For that reason, we feel that if anyone is going to undo the work it should be the government which spent the money in the first place – not necessarily the government in office at the moment, but the government which represents all the people of Canada and which collected money from all the taxpayers of Canada in order that it should carry on the work.²⁹

As long as Dominion money was invested in the program, Gardiner was not prepared to relinquish administrative control of the pastures. The Dominion, however, offered the Alberta government the option to take over administration of the pastures at the end of three years if the province would reimburse the Dominion the cost of its expenditures.³⁰

Despite the offer, the Alberta government continued to decline an agreement with the Dominion. In Men Against the Desert, James Gray explained this refusal as a reaction to federal disallowance of provincial Social Credit legislation, and the absence of individuals like Gordon Taggart, the Saskatchewan Minister of Agriculture, in the Alberta government.³¹ The Social Credit pursuit of decentralized federal authority may have contributed to the Alberta decision not to participate in a plan to develop pastures

²⁹ *Debates*, 20 March 1939, 2084.

³⁰ GAIA, M3761, box 42, file 369, *Meeting of PFRA Advisory Committee on Land Utilization*, 29 May 1939, 14.

³¹ James Gray, *Men Against the Desert* (Saskatoon 1996), 169, 224.

controlled by Ottawa.³² The cooperation of Saskatchewan officials, moreover, was likely strengthened by their previous association with J.G. Gardiner in the provincial government. Gardiner was premier of Saskatchewan before his selection as federal Minister of Agriculture and responsibility for administering the PFR Act in the Liberal cabinet of W.L. Mackenzie King. Naturally, the Liberals still governing Saskatchewan were apt to cooperate with the federal government. The Alberta decision, however, should also be placed within the historical land use context, apparent in the correspondence of Alberta officials. At the formation of the PFRA program, the province of Alberta had thinned its population in the dry area significantly, reducing the urgency of the drought situation in the 1930s. The necessary land use adjustments had largely been made and the priority among Alberta officials was to develop large irrigation projects and capture water flowing from the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains. The value of irrigation had already been demonstrated during the feed crisis of 1936-37, when less than \$800,000 was expended for feed and fodder relief in Alberta.³³

Land use adjustments in Alberta during the 1920s offered valuable perspective for the PFRA community pasture program. Indeed, Alberta officials had already dealt with several problem areas: deeded land encumbered by debt beyond its value for grazing purposes; acquiring title to land from interests who simply allowed their equity to lapse by not paying taxes; the urgent need for legislation permitting the Dominion to cancel

³² *Medicine Hat News*, 20 January 1938, D.B. Mullen, Alberta Minister of Agriculture was quoted as saying, "The Alberta government will never let these lands go under Federal control...E.L. Gray, leader of the Provincial Liberal party, can holler his head off about his great irrigation projects, putting in dams and dugouts, but Alberta will put in her own dams and dugouts."

³³ Jacobson, "Prairie Relief and Rehabilitation," 7.

liens registered against certain properties; and the problem of relocating dry area farmers.³⁴ In 1924, J.S. Tempest, Alberta Commissioner of Irrigation, wrote,

This country [east-central Alberta] has been well settled and the bulk of the land outside of leased areas is still owned by the farmers, resident and non-resident, or by the mortgage companies and banks, and the difficulty of working out a plan that will satisfy the various interests involved is simply stupendous...Any assistance, financial or otherwise, that might encourage the farmer to continue his labour, or the capitalist to throw good money after bad in keeping his holdings in good standing would only help to perpetuate a situation that should not exist. The remedy proposed of bringing the area back to ranch lands will necessarily be a gradual process. To attempt to unduly hasten, let alone force matters, would undoubtedly give rise to wild expectations and preposterous claims from those interested...³⁵

The PFRA program faced similar challenges in Saskatchewan during the 1930s. In some areas of the province, almost sixty percent of the sub-marginal land was beyond Crown control.³⁶ In the rush to develop community pastures, PFRA officials encountered obstacles with respect to municipalities, land holding companies, school districts, and individual residents. These problems were compounded by legislation that contradicted the development of community pastures, by encouraging farmers to keep sub-marginal land in cultivation.

In the formation of PFRA community pastures, rural municipalities agreed to turn over to the LUB all land they owned and any tax sale certificates they held on lands within proposed pasture areas. They also made municipal land outside the pasture area

³⁴ David Jones, *'We'll All Be Buried Down Here': The Prairie Dryland Disaster, 1917-1926* (Calgary 1986), 153-5, 173.

³⁵ Quoted in Jones, *'We'll All Be Buried'*, 153.

³⁶ C.C. Spence and E.C. Hope, *An Economic Classification of Land in Fifty-Six Municipal Divisions, South Central Saskatchewan*, (Ottawa 1941) 27.

available to exchange for privately held land in the proposed pasture.³⁷ Many municipal councils, however, needed to be persuaded that the community pasture program was viable. Their concerns involved the threat of reduced revenues from the transfer of taxable properties to federal control and the municipal role as trustee for lands within its jurisdiction.

Initially, many prairie municipal councils were reluctant to transfer sub-marginal lands to the federal government since the move would reduce municipal tax revenues on privately owned land and the accompanying decline in population would make it difficult to provide social services for remaining families.³⁸ They were also concerned that sub-marginal lands allocated for community pastures might simply lie neglected as in previous federal land use schemes.³⁹ Several sources argued to convince municipalities otherwise. J.G. Knox, representing the Rural Municipal Association of Saskatchewan, confirmed that revenues from taxes on sub-marginal lands were negligible, even before the 1930s.⁴⁰ O. Freer, PFRA Superintendent of Land Utilization, added that the odd quarter sections of quality land interspersed among sub-marginal lands were generally held by absentee owners and would also soon cease to produce revenue.⁴¹ Expanding on

³⁷ Saskatchewan, *Department of Agriculture Annual Report, Report of the Land Utilization Branch 1938*, 196.

³⁸ Gray, *Men Against the Desert*, 128, 143. As Gray put it, "The more land the municipality owned the less money would be collectible to pay for community services...[also] the schools, roads, and hospitals rudimentary as they were, could not be adequately maintained by a steadily declining population."

³⁹ GA M3761, box 42, file 367, *Report and Minutes of Meeting of P.F.R.A. Advisory Committee on Land Utilization, 3-4 August 1937*, 24. At the meeting, J.J. McGurran, Secretary of the Rural Municipal Association of Saskatchewan, referred to a federal government plan to make land available for Soldier Settlement purposes. Over fifty percent of the allocated land was not used for that purpose, yet for fifteen years all of it had been exempt from taxation, increasing the municipal burden to provide social services. He urged the government to go slowly in bringing about another scheme to take large areas of land out of cultivation.

⁴⁰ GAIA, M3761, box 42, file 367, *Report and Minutes of Conference on Land Utilization under P.F.R. Act, 6 May 1937*, 15.

⁴¹ GAIA, M3761, box 42, file 353 'Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act, 1935, 1939-40, 1946,' O. Freer, *Land Utilization Problems Submitted to the Dominion-Provincial Seminar, 12 January 1940*, 7-8. Here Freer

these points, Gordon Taggart, Saskatchewan Minister of Agriculture, convinced reluctant municipalities that withdrawing sub-marginal land from cultivation and establishing community pastures would put the remaining population in a more secure position to support community services.⁴² Any sub-marginal lands not incorporated into community pastures were also to be strictly controlled by the LUB to ensure their appropriate use for grazing.⁴³

A more fundamental problem involved the municipal responsibility as trustee of lands under its jurisdiction. By exchanging lands outside pastures for tax-encumbered lands inside pastures, municipalities were open to suit for depriving the province of public revenues.⁴⁴ Under provincial policy, arrears of taxes owing on lands since January 1935 had to be paid before exchanges could be made.⁴⁵ Referring specifically to the situation in Local Improvement Districts, K.L. McDowell of the Saskatchewan department of Municipal Affairs said, "when land is acquired in L.I.D.s through tax enforcement proceedings title passes subject to Dominion Liens which must be discharged from the proceeds of the sale of the land...Where land is surrendered for

said, "In so far as any loss to the municipality is concerned, a careful survey indicates that this is confined only to the taxes that are paid on a few odd quarter sections, mostly by absentee owners or some investment company who are living in the hopes of eventually being able to dispose of the property. Those of us who live in the drought area know how little chance there is of accomplishing this under changed climatic conditions so that it is reasonable to expect that in a short time even these odd quarter sections will cease to be tax revenue producing."

⁴² SAB, James Gray interview with J.G. Taggart, May 1966. Taggart said, "My purpose...was to gain support for withdrawing this land from the tax roll to the municipalities. They resisted this a bit because they said, 'We'll lose taxes.' And I said, 'You're not getting any taxes anyway out of most of this land. And secondly, if we get it re-grassed and put into community pastures, your people will get direct benefits and they'll be able to pay the taxes on the land on which they're now operating and which should continue to operate'...And that argument sold it for quite a few of the municipalities."

⁴³ Saskatchewan, Department of Agriculture, *Report of the Land Utilization Branch, 1939*, 163.

⁴⁴ GAIA, M3761, box 39, file 354 'Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act, 1935-1946,' *Minutes of PFRA Land Utilization Branch Staff Conference, 4-5 April 1940*, 4.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, appendix, 3.

exchange purposes in most cases there will be no funds for this purpose.”⁴⁶ He argued that the power to transfer lands to the LUB, “should be exercised by the Minister [of Municipal Affairs], having in mind not only the aims of the Land Utilization Act, but more particularly his position as trustee for the local improvement district, so that he must not sacrifice any asset of the district by giving away land of value or which may be of value to the district.”⁴⁷ The role of municipal councils and the aim of PFRA resettlement plans were thus at odds for, as McDowell pointed out, Hon. J.G. Gardiner had previously stated that, “unless the land upon which the person is to be re-established is better than the land from which he is moved there is no object in making the exchange.”⁴⁸

These problems led to recommendations for amendments to the Municipal Districts Act and the Local Improvement Districts Act to give the Minister of Municipal Affairs discretionary powers to dispose of lands for community pastures and remove the liability that would accompany exchanges of tax-encumbered sub-marginal land.⁴⁹ These amendments do not appear to have been made, though, and by 1941, the situation was not resolved. At that point, the LUB suggested to municipal councils that they accept title and simply cancel arrears of taxes from any owner in the sub-marginal block willing to transfer title.⁵⁰

The matter of outstanding taxes and statutory obligations also complicated negotiations with mortgage and land holding companies. Initially, land holding

⁴⁶ GAIA, M3761, box 38, file 353, Paper by K.L. McDowell of the Department of Municipal Affairs presented at the Dominion-Provincial Seminar, 26 January 1940, 3.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴⁹ GAIA, M3761, box 38, file 353, *Recommendations of Dominion-Provincial Seminar Respecting P.F.R.A. Land Utilization*, 3.

companies were offered tax exemptions on proposed pasture land transferred or leased to the LUB for twenty-one years. Many companies, however, were prevented from granting longer than ten-year leases because of provisions in their charters.⁵¹ Others did not want land tied up for more than ten years since it would leave them vulnerable if sued for back taxes on those lands.⁵² Where their demands were not met, companies simply stopped cooperating with the program. For instance, by 1939, the Hudson's Bay Company had stopped offering land for lease or exchange because for two years it had neither received lease forms nor the cancellation of taxes against land surrendered for pasture purposes.⁵³ As a solution to the problem, D.J. Thom, Solicitor of the Land Association of Saskatchewan, suggested that adequate financial compensation would enable companies to dispose of their lands. J.G. Gardiner reluctantly accepted short-term leases for lands in pastures, but refused to supply federal money for compensation purposes.⁵⁴ He considered the matter of cleaning up past taxes and debentures a provincial responsibility, to be carried out before the federal government entered the picture.⁵⁵

With respect to Crown corporation land in proposed community pasture areas, the LUB was less willing to negotiate land exchanges and leases. In May 1941, the LUB

⁵⁰ SAB, NR1/2, file 177 'Land Utilization 1938-1947,' *Minutes of the Land Utilization Board*, 19 May 1941, 7.

⁵¹ SAB, GR80 (VI), file 13(a) 'Correspondence: Barton, Dr. H., 1938-1947,' Spence to Barton, 8 November 1938, 1.

⁵² GAIA, M3761, box 42, file 369, *Meeting of Advisory Committee on Land Utilization*, 29 May 1939, 14-15. Cancellation of outstanding taxes was part of the agreement in the transfer, but not cancellation of outstanding tax arrears at the time of the transfer.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 14-16.

⁵⁴ SAB, NR1/2, file 177, *Minutes of the PFRA Land Utilization Branch Fieldmen's Conference*, 29-30 December 1942, 19-20. The point was raised that, "in four or five years these owners of land that is now under lease, will either want land in exchange or want their own land fenced out. Some will probably sign another lease for a further term but I think we have had all we want of leases – it only prolongs the day of reckoning... When we started building pastures, we did, as a temporary measure, take quite a number of leases, but the time is now coming when these leases will expire and we want to get title to the land so that our Community Pastures will be permanent."

resolved that, “publicly owned corporations should contribute for pasture development, free and continuous use of lands owned within community pastures.”⁵⁶ The resolution was followed by a letter from PFRA Director George Spence to Dr. H. Barton, federal deputy minister of Agriculture, describing 154 quarter sections of Canadian National Railway (CNR) land and twenty-seven quarters of its subsidiary, the Transcontinental Townsite Company, that lay vacant in proposed community pastures sites. Spence believed that since those lands already belonged to the Dominion, they should be permanently included in community pastures without an exchange for other Crown lands.⁵⁷ CNR officials maintained that such lands were assets of the company and could not be transferred to the LUB unless exchanged for similar lands.⁵⁸ The situation reached a stalemate and in March 1942, Spence wrote to Barton, “it seems to be a matter which it is impossible to reach an agreement on with the local CNR officials, it would seem that it would have to be decided by some superior authority, perhaps the Ministers concerned...”⁵⁹ By March 1945 the matter was still unresolved, and G.G. Baird, CNR Land Commissioner, requested that lease agreements be signed and returned to the company.⁶⁰

The organization and indebtedness of dry-area schools was a further obstacle to the development of community pastures. Rural schools were financed by land taxes in

⁵⁵ GAIA, M3761 box 42, file 369, *Meeting of Advisory Committee on Land Utilization*, 29 May 1939, 15-16.

⁵⁶ SAB, GR80, VI, file 25(b) ‘Land Utilization,’ *Minutes of the Meeting of the Land Utilization Board*, 19 May 1941,

⁵⁷ SAB, GR80, VI, file 13(a), Spence to Barton, 27 May 1941, 1; and Spence to Barton, 2 September 1941, 1.

⁵⁸ SAB, GR80, VI, file 25(b), *Minutes of Meeting of the Land Utilization Board*, 7 November 1941,

⁵⁹ SAB, GR80, VI, file 13(a), Spence to Barton, 12 March 1942, 1.

⁶⁰ SAB, NR1/2, file172, Baird to Auld, 29 March 1945, 1.

corresponding school districts and a small grant from the provincial government.⁶¹ Often the area selected for a community pasture included part of an existing school district. Depending on the extent to which a proposed pasture occupied a school district, the district was either reorganized to provide educational facilities for the remaining population, or was disorganized leaving the matter of outstanding school debts to be resolved. Most school districts in the 1930s had liabilities exceeding their assets, making readjustment a serious challenge. And school district land transferred to the Crown for community pasture purposes provided no revenue to support the payment of outstanding school district debts, including teachers' salaries, fuel and supply bills, and government loans.⁶² By 1938, existing or proposed pastures affected about 225 school districts with arrears of teachers' salaries alone amounting to \$105,600.00.⁶³ Like municipal lands burdened by unpaid taxes, moreover, J.G. Gardiner insisted the Dominion would not assume any of the indebtedness accrued on school district lands intended for pasture purposes.⁶⁴

Reorganizing school districts to accommodate community pasture development required various approaches and was complicated by the interests of neighboring school districts. A pasture in R.M. #439, for example, separated the northern and southern portions of the Triple Lake School District. The area became a conveying district, with taxes on remaining land in the district used to transport children to other schools.⁶⁵ Another pasture, in the Kerrobert area, included almost an entire school district save for a

⁶¹ Britnell, *The Wheat Economy*, 101-2.

⁶² GAIA, M3761, box 38, file 353, N.L. Reid, "Community Pastures and School Districts," Paper presented to the Dominion-Provincial Seminar, 26 January 1940, 6.

⁶³ Reid, "Community Pastures and School Districts," 5. While total outstanding debts at that time were unknown, a survey of thirty-one school districts had shown five with outstanding debts amounting to about \$14,500.00.

⁶⁴ SAB, GR80, VI, 25(b), *Minutes of Meeting of Land Utilization Board, 27 July 1939*,

few parcels of land. Since two sections of land were insufficient to maintain a school for the remaining children in the district, their families were to be moved elsewhere and those sections of land added to another school district.⁶⁶ Combining remnants of adjoining school districts was controversial, though, especially when a district was unwilling to assume the burden of another district's debts.⁶⁷ The situation became increasingly complicated where proposed pastures included portions of several school districts.⁶⁸

Officials were hard-pressed to rapidly and equitably resolve the problem of outstanding debts in disorganized school districts. To merely liquidate the assets of disorganized school districts would leave the burden on creditors expecting payment of claims through tax revenues. Officials also feared that to increase taxes would generate opposition to the pasture from ratepayers living elsewhere in the municipality.⁶⁹ To compound the problem, Gardiner was adamant that no federal money was available for school taxes or debentures and had written PFRA officials in Regina not to form pastures until financial problems were resolved. O. Freer expressed the growing frustration

⁶⁵ Reid, "Community Pastures and School Districts," 1-2.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶⁷ SAB, Department of Education (Ed.), file 38(h) 'Miscellaneous Administration,' 'Community Pastures and the School District, 1939-1944,' undated internal memorandum, 1. According to the memorandum, a pasture in R.M. #320 would have absorbed much of the land in the Somme school district. Officials suggested adding the remaining portion of the Somme school district to the adjoining Nichol school district; however, the plan was complicated by the existing debt of the Somme district. While the trustees of both districts were interested in amalgamation, the Nichol district did not feel it should be responsible for the Somme district's debts.

⁶⁸ SAB, GR80, VI, file 13(a), Spence to Barton, 30 May 1938, 1. Describing a pasture in the R.M. of Progress, No. 351, Spence wrote, "The Provincial Government of Saskatchewan have drawn to my attention that this pasture includes portions of five different school districts. Each of these districts has a considerable amount of indebtedness which has been charged up to the land, namely a total of \$3,470.00, of which \$1,095.00 is the proportionate share against the land included in the community pasture."

⁶⁹ GAIA, M3761, box 42, file 369, *Meeting of the Advisory Committee on Land Utilization, 29 May 1939*, 41.

among PFRA officials by stating: “if the PFRA must wait for an ‘all clear signal’ before forming a pasture, very few would be formed.”⁷⁰

In July 1939, the provincial departments of Education and Agriculture conducted a joint investigation to solve these problems. In their report of the same year, E.M. Grantham, Inspector of Schools, and J.B. Durrant, Agricultural Representative, rooted the school district debt problem in indiscriminate patterns of settlement. They also described, “many legal points...in our survey, which we have not been able to fathom,”⁷¹ chiefly the issue of disorganizing school districts without the written consent of debenture holders. To circumvent the problem, Grantham and Durrant recommended that Local Government Boards reduce debts through long-term repayment schedules, with the Dominion and Province to jointly assume payments where necessary. They also recommended paying debts with a provincial government trust established through the sale of school assets, yearly rental fees for pasture users, and land purchases by the Dominion government.⁷²

The matter remained unresolved and in January 1940, N.L. Reid of the Department of Education reiterated the suggestion that federal authorities reconsider their refusal to acknowledge responsibility for school district debts and that pasture revenues be used to carry a portion of the liabilities. Where it was not possible to obtain funds for

⁷⁰ Reid, “Community Pastures and School Districts,” 4-6. Reid quoted Freer in his paper. To an extent, the PFRA proceeded despite Gardiner, and even provincial law. A 1943 letter from G. Spence to Dr. H. Barton indicates that in 1943 when lands for exchange purposes became increasingly scarce, school lands were being used in community pastures even though the Dominion did not have title to those lands. The practice was discontinued, because it contravened the legal use of school lands as a trust to support education in the province. See GR80, VI, file 13(a), Spence to Barton, 17 March 1943, 1.

⁷¹ SAB, Ed., file 38(h), Grantham and Durrant to Deputy Minister of Education and Deputy Minister of Agriculture, 27 July 1939, 2. They wrote, “land classification and its adaptability to produce revenue sufficient for the establishment of a home has in the past not been given sufficient consideration. The result has been that schools were established in areas which were totally unfit for the type of farming which was practiced...”

⁷² *Ibid.*, 2.

outstanding liabilities, he suggested arbitrarily writing down the debts of each district, with creditors taking the loss.⁷³ Since the federal government would not provide money to settle debts, and since it was considered detrimental to tax pastures during their formative stages, officials opted for the latter alternative.⁷⁴ At the end of 1940, Local Government Boards were to be made responsible for selling and distributing the assets of disorganized and insolvent school districts according to usual bankruptcy procedures.⁷⁵

The plan to adjust prairie land use through the development of federally operated community pastures had thus been complicated by provincial, corporate and municipal administrations. Applying the plan equitably was not always possible and many outstanding debts were left unpaid. Another element of prairie society complicated the efforts of PFRA officials still further. As O. Freer wrote in 1938, "within every pasture area it becomes necessary to move anywhere from 10 to 20 families."⁷⁶ To successfully implement the community pasture program, PFR officials had to convince these farmers to relinquish control of their property and locate suitable land for resettlement purposes.

The PFRA resettlement plan took several forms. Broadly, residents located on sub-marginal land within proposed pastures were given assistance to move to better land in the vicinity of the pasture, to other suitable land within the province, or to irrigation

⁷³ Reid, "Community Pastures and School Districts," 5-6. This recommendation had previously appeared in a letter from the Department of Education to the Local Government Board to the effect that the Local Government Board perform the, "rather difficult and unpleasant task," of reducing the School District's liabilities so that they might be covered by the assets and the district might then be reorganized by the Minister of Education.

⁷⁴ GAIA, M3761, box 38, file 353, *Recommendations of Dominion-Provincial Seminar Respecting Land Utilization*, 2. The 1940 report of the PFRA Land Utilization Department reads, "the question may be asked as to the prospects of increasing the present schedule of community pasture fees. To do so would be to defeat the object of these community pastures which is first of all the rehabilitation of those people still residing in these sub-marginal areas." See *Annual Report of the Land Utilization Department of the P.F.R.A.*, 31 March 1940, 21.

⁷⁵ SAB, GR80, VI, file 13(a), Spence to Barton, 31 December 1940, 1.

⁷⁶ O. Freer, "Development of Community Pastures in Saskatchewan Under PFRA," *Canadian Cattlemen*, (September 1938), 89.

projects established under the PFRA. Re-settlement within the same municipality or adjacent to a community pasture, known as “short moves”, required that the soil of the new farm be better than the old one and that the farmer be situated to make use of the pasture.⁷⁷ “Long moves” involved transferring farmers beyond their current municipality to vacant Crown land or lands held by mortgage companies, railways, or the Hudson’s Bay Company. Following a favorable report from a PFRA officer, residents were taken to view the location and agricultural possibilities of the new area and allowed three, free freight cars to move livestock and equipment. The Saskatchewan government guaranteed direct relief for up to one year if necessary, and loaned farmers seed, feed and fuel to seed 100 acres of crop, plus \$2.50 per acre for breaking land on the new farm.⁷⁸

Additional “long move” options included PFRA irrigation projects in southwest Saskatchewan and southeast Alberta. Foremost among these projects was a block of 30,000 acres near Brooks, Alberta, known as the Rolling Hills project. Here, settlers were given two-year leases, with options to purchase irrigated land at eight dollars an acre and dry land at one dollar an acre. An experienced irrigator was located on the fourth quarter of each section to help newcomers. Smaller irrigation projects from 5,000 to 10,000 acres were established in the Frenchman River Valley east of the Cypress Hills, at Eastend, Val Marie, and Maple Creek.⁷⁹

Resettlement under the PFRA program was voluntary. Farmers were not forced to relocate and, availability permitting, could select the resettlement program of their choice. Those unwilling to participate in the program could remain in their present

⁷⁷ PFRA, *PFR Land Utilization Branch Community Pasture Managers’ Conference, 26-27 March 1941*, 23.

⁷⁸ O. Freer and M. Mann, “Establishment of Community Pastures and Policies of Resettlement,” *C.S.T.A. Review* (December 1939), 41-2.

location.⁸⁰ Relocating attached and aged farmers was a challenge, though -- made more difficult by the financial implications of relocation and the rigors of irrigated farming. Compounding the problem was the shortage of available lands on which to relocate willing participants.

By 1939, the second year of the Rolling Hills project, officials reported difficulties and slow progress in resettlement. In a July 1939 letter to Dr. H. Barton, George Spence wrote,

[we] are doing little more than taking people for a trip to Rolling Hills and bringing them back again...many of the people we are dealing with are entirely out of funds, and more or less down and out...these people are ready and willing to accept our policy but unfortunately they are now advanced in years -- long years of toil and disappointments -- and a piece of bald, raw prairie at Rolling Hills or anywhere else has no longer any appeal to their imagination.⁸¹

Even where they expressed interest, officials were wary of resettling dry-land farmers on irrigated land because many were inexperienced irrigators and prone to abandon the

⁷⁹ PFRA, *PFR Land Utilization Branch Community Pasture Managers' Conference, 26-27 March 1941*, 25-7.

⁸⁰ GAIA, M3761, box 38, file 352, George Will, "Community Pastures -- Their Development, Construction and Possibilities," transcript of radio broadcast, 7 March 1939, 2.

⁸¹ SAB, GR80, VI, file 13(a), Spence to Barton, 8 July 1939, 1.

project.⁸² Two-year lease provisions were consequently used to avoid tying up irrigated lands with farmers unable to make the project work.⁸³

Despite reservations regarding the suitability of dry-land farmers for irrigation projects, most of the relocated settlers successfully made the transition and the limited quantity of irrigation lands were soon filled. By 1941, the Rolling Hills project had reached its capacity of 150 families. Another 200 families had been relocated to lands belonging to rural municipalities and the Crown.⁸⁴ Several hundred families still lived in proposed pasture areas however, and the problem facing PFRA officials was to find quality land for relocation purposes.⁸⁵

Where they were interested in exchanging their lands, many individuals held out for the best deal possible, frustrating officials and delaying pasture development.⁸⁶ On 25 June 1941, F.H. Auld, Saskatchewan Deputy Minister of Agriculture, wrote to P.W. Doake, Saskatchewan Deputy Minister of Natural Resources, "I should like to see a

⁸² SAB, GR80, VI, file 49 'Speeches and Articles,' George Spence, "Irrigation and Rehabilitation of Drought Areas," Speech delivered in the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan, 17 February 1938, 3. Spence said, "generally speaking, the so-called dry-land farmer does not take readily to a pair of rubber boots and a long-handled shovel." In September 1938, E.L. Gray, Manager of the Eastern Irrigation District (Rolling Hills), wrote to George Spence, "We have on our files here several hundred applications, and I frankly believe that we have applications from every 'deadbeat' in the two provinces...It may be necessary to have an arrangement with [PFRA] by which, if a settler is hopeless, the \$2.00 credit of Federal funds on land payment may be applied on any other debt owing the District by the settler at the end of the first year." See SAB, GR80, VI, file 13(d) 'Correspondence: Gray, E.L.,' E.L. Gray to G. Spence 15 September 1938, 1.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁸⁴ PFRA, *PFRA Land Utilization Branch Fieldmens' Conference, November 1941*, 2.

⁸⁵ GAIA, M3761, box 38, file 353, O. Freer, *Land Utilization Problems Submitted to the Dominion-Provincial Seminar, 12 January 1940*, 10. According to Freer, once the lands at Brooks had filled up, 350 additional families still residing in proposed community pasture areas would have to be accommodated.

⁸⁶ *Debates*, 20 March 1939, 2072-73. Describing the situation, Gardiner said, "Some of those [lands] that have been cleared by tax sale, to the extent that the individual has gone, have not yet been placed in a position where any one else can claim title to them, and immediately the government comes along with a sum of money...there are always individuals who come back into the picture with some idea that they can collect. Our difficulty was this – and it did not make any difference what province we were in – that sometimes a dozen or more individuals would not enter the picture until they actually saw the money. The province would get options from them, discuss the matter with them and would then come back to the federal government...but by the time we got into a position to supply the money the individual had raised

practical way to overcome the difficulties that appear to crop up continually in carrying out the P.F.R.A. programme, when exchanges of land are involved.”⁸⁷ L.H. Kerr, Saskatchewan Minister of Natural Resources, replied that problems arose when individuals or companies owning land in community pasture areas held out for particular holdings under the assumption they would automatically receive the desired parcel. Kerr did not object to providing better quality lands for those surrendered by residents in proposed pasture areas; he was reluctant, however, to accede to unreasonable requests from non-resident individuals and companies.⁸⁸

The limited financial assistance made available for resettlement also delayed pasture development. In September 1938, George Spence urged Dr. Barton to consider spending more money for resettlement. According to Spence, the land departments of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), the Canadian National Railway (CNR), and the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) had offered to make available a list of improved and unimproved properties at adjusted prices, but were concerned that the current basis of government assistance was insufficient to guarantee successful resettlement. These companies recommended a minimum assistance of six hundred dollars per family to offset their risk of land sales to newly resettled families.⁸⁹ Prospective settlers too were reluctant to relocate without sufficient compensation. In April 1939, Spence urged Barton to reconsider the level of federal assistance. Spence described thirty parcels of land reserved by the CPR for resettlement purposes, to which only one settler had relocated. According to Spence,

the price or had taken some other attitude which we were not prepared to meet, with the result that we were not getting anywhere...”

⁸⁷ SAB, NR1/2, file 177, Auld to Doake, 25 June 1941, 1.

⁸⁸ SAB, NR1/2, file 177, Kerr to Auld, 14 July 1941, 1.

Our inability to interest more settlers in the area is largely due to the fact that the assistance which we are extending under P.F.R.A. is not considered adequate by these settlers...I am very reluctant to give up this block of land owing to the fact that we are at our wits end to find locations for the farmers we are moving from community pasture areas.⁹⁰

Despite Spence's urgent tone, Gardiner refused additional resettlement assistance on the basis that farmers not prepared to establish their own home in the new location would likely not succeed in making the adjustment.⁹¹

Obstacles to resettlement and land control in proposed community pastures soon became the major concern of PFRA officials. In 1940, O. Freer, PFRA Superintendent of Land Utilization, wrote: "Our two major problems in connection with the whole of this rehabilitation effort consist of finding suitable agricultural lands within the Province to which to move and rehabilitate those families now living in the sub-marginal pasture area, and on relief, and the securing of land control within the pasture area by exchange or otherwise for other lands within the municipality or the Province."⁹² A variety of factors combined to make it gradually more difficult for PFRA officials to secure land control for pasture and relocation purposes. The early stages of community pasture development work were concentrated in the worst sub-marginal areas where the bulk of the land was already under the control of municipalities and the Crown. As officials moved beyond these areas, they encountered more privately owned or leased land and more settlers residing in pasture areas. Negotiating exchanges for these lands and relocating settlers was slowed up by the decreasing availability of good quality vacant

⁸⁹ SAB, GR80, VI, file 13(a), Spence to Barton, 8 September 1938, 1.

⁹⁰ SAB, GR80, VI, file 13(a), Spence to Barton, 13 April 1939, 1-2.

⁹¹ GAIA, M3761, box 42, file 369, *Meeting of PFRA Advisory Committee on Land Utilization, 29 May 1939*, 13.

municipal or Crown land.⁹³ By 1942, PFRA officials reported, “the point has now been reached where it is almost impossible to extend the scope of community pasture development because of the inability to secure suitable Crown or Municipal lands for exchange purposes or to which settlers may be moved.”⁹⁴

At the May 1942 Conference of the PFRA, Dr. E.C. Hope, University of Saskatchewan Professor of Farm Management, discussed the nature of PFRA land acquisition and fundamental contradictions in federal policy regarding the dry area. Hope emphasized that after five years only about 300,000 of the 1,100,000 acres in community pastures had previously been cultivated.⁹⁵ Most of the land in pastures to that point was virgin Crown land.⁹⁶ To Hope, PFRA policies of exchanging and leasing lands for pasture purposes were inadequate and new methods were required to induce land owners to surrender sub-marginal lands under cultivation. Part of the problem lay in the 1939 Prairie Farm Assistance Act (PFAA), federal legislation that subsidized farmers in the event of crop failure.⁹⁷ Hope stressed the conflict of policy between the PFR Act, designed to remove unsuitable land from cultivation, and the PFAA that encouraged farmers to continue cultivating unsuitable lands. To coordinate this legislation and

⁹² O. Freer, *Land Utilization Problems Submitted to the Dominion-Provincial Seminar, 12 January 1940*, 10.

⁹³ *Annual Report for PFRA Land Utilization Department for the Year Ending 31 March 1939*, 13-14.

⁹⁴ *Minutes and Report of Advisory Committee on Land Utilization and P.F.R.A. Conference, 23-25 May 1939*, xii.

⁹⁵ E.C. Hope, “Coordination of Activities and Policies of the Various Agencies Assisting Agriculture in the Prairie Provinces,” *Minutes and Report of the Meeting of the Advisory Committee on Land Utilization and PFRA Conference, 23-25 May 1942*, 69-70.

⁹⁶ Actually the number of previously cultivated acres in pasture was much lower. In April 1942, 1,148,780 acres were in community pastures. Of this total, 672,000 acres were Crown land and only 238,000 acres had previously been cultivated; see Saskatchewan, Department of Agriculture, *Report of the Land Utilization Branch of the Department of Agriculture, 1942*, 112-113.

⁹⁷ M.E. Andal, “Some Economic Aspects of the Prairie Farm Assistance Act,” *Economic Annalist*, (February 1954), 12. The average yield of wheat in a block or township was the basis of payment, with a maximum payment of \$2.50 per acre for yields ranging from zero to four bushels per acre.

appropriately compensate owners of sub-marginal lands, he suggested the federal government adopt an open policy of sub-marginal land purchase through the PFRA.⁹⁸

Following Hope's paper, the PFRA Advisory Committee on Land Utilization recommended that each prairie provincial government prepare a brief outlining the agricultural situation in its province and its views regarding future community pasture development. Saskatchewan appears to have been the only province to comply, and its brief was ready by the end of the year. Not surprisingly, it echoed many of Hope's points. The brief confirmed that the first community pastures were established with comparative ease because they comprised mostly uncultivated Crown lands.⁹⁹ The community pasture plan, however, was not removing as much unsuitable land from cultivation as had been originally intended. Acquiring privately owned and occupied farm land and providing alternative lands for exchange and relocation purposes were major obstacles. The brief suggested that perhaps the main reason for retaining sub-marginal lands in arable use was that resident farmers on sub-marginal lands had little choice in alternative locations.

The brief also suggested that many farmers still looked upon Saskatchewan as "next-year country": "it is to be remembered that the foregoing [land classification] conclusions were based on long-term production and sale of wheat, and that exceptional circumstances such as yield, demand and price affect farming results in individual cases

⁹⁸ E.C. Hope, "Coordination of Activities and Policies of the Various Agencies Assisting Agriculture in the Prairie Provinces," *Minutes and Report of the Meeting of the Advisory Committee on Land Utilization and PFRA Conference, 23-25 May 1942*, 70. Hope said, "Poor areas should be declared sub-marginal and the dominion government should have a standing offer to buy or exchange lands in these blocks. As long as we give relief or PFAA assistance and offer no compensation for the acquisition of sub-marginal lands we shall be making but small progress towards the solution of the relief problem of the prairie provinces."

⁹⁹ *Minutes and Report of Meeting of the PFRA Advisory Committee on Land Utilization, Regina, 17-18 February 1943*, Appendix, 'Memorandum from the Saskatchewan Land Utilization Board to the Director of Prairie Farm Rehabilitation regarding pasture development and land settlement, 29 December 1942,' 10.

or for whole districts in occasional years or over comparatively short periods...”¹⁰⁰ Many landowners were reluctant to transfer land to the LUB because they considered it valuable.¹⁰¹ Abnormally wet conditions and good crops in the early 1940s reinforced this optimistic attitude, and many landowners paid outstanding tax arrears on lands in proposed community pasture areas.¹⁰² Furthermore, some municipalities were withholding assignments to the LUB because it was proving profitable to sell titles to the land.¹⁰³ The problem of optimistic landowners was compounded by fundamental contradictions in the federal approach to rehabilitating prairie agriculture. Like Hope, the brief suggested that, “the stabilizing effect of [PFAA] will definitely retard and limit future development unless existing policies are modified.”¹⁰⁴

The recommendations coming out of the 1942 brief underlined the need to coordinate rehabilitation activities. Specifically, it was suggested that where soils liable to wind erosion were used for arable agriculture, that the benefits of the PFAA should be conditional upon a minimum use of forage crops to improve the soil and that cultivated sub-marginal lands should be purchased by the Dominion.¹⁰⁵

The need for more effective land use disposition and coordination was a broad concern during the period. In 1939, O.S. Longman, Chairman of the Alberta Special

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁰¹ GAIA, M3761, box 42, file 369, *Meeting of the Advisory Committee on Land Utilization, 29 May 1939*, 40.

¹⁰² *Minutes and Report of Meeting of the PFRA Advisory Committee on Land Utilization, Regina, 17-18 February, 1943*, 30.

¹⁰³ Saskatchewan, Department of Agriculture, *Annual Report of the Land Utilization Branch, 1945*, 181. According to the Report, the Chairman of the LUB wrote to municipalities, “and pointed out that while the disposition of sub-marginal land might not be receiving the same concern as formerly because of improved crop and financial conditions, this matter still required the same considerate attention as in periods of drought and depression.”

¹⁰⁴ *Minutes and Report of Meeting of the PFRA Advisory Committee on Land Utilization, Regina, 17-18 February 1943*, Appendix, ‘Memorandum from the Saskatchewan Land Utilization Board to the Director of Prairie Farm Rehabilitation regarding pasture development and land settlement, 29 December 1942,’ 7.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

Areas Board, urged reconsideration of the current administration of agricultural lands, whereby government departments charged with disposing and collecting revenue from certain lands were often not primarily responsible for land utilization, conservation, and management. Referring specifically to the case of municipal lands, Longman argued that the taxing authority controlled land but was not primarily designed for or concerned with its proper management and utilization. This type of situation had complicated PFRA pasture development in the summer of 1937. As James Gray put it,

Unhappily, the PFRA had no authority to negotiate for community pastures. That had to be done with the provincial authorities, up through the Department of Agriculture to the Land Utilization Boards. And in Saskatchewan, the latter body was still not equipped to do anything except acquire title to the land. The run-around was maze-like in a labyrinth.¹⁰⁶

Longman argued that the administration of land should be more closely associated with the departments of agriculture, experimental farms, faculties of agriculture, and other agencies established for the purpose of promoting more efficient utilization of agricultural land.¹⁰⁷ He emphasized that, “cooperation can never be an effective substitute for logical coordination.”¹⁰⁸

A. Stewart, University of Alberta Assistant Professor of Political Economy and Agricultural Economics, made a similar point in a 1939 discussion of the difficulties of securing the appropriate use of resources. According to Stewart, “these difficulties result

¹⁰⁶ Gray, *Men Against the Desert*, 148.

¹⁰⁷ O.S. Longman, “Establishing an Agricultural Land Policy,” *C.S.T.A. Review*, (March 1939), 437-38. Longman wrote, “We have the administrative anomaly of land in its original or unalienated state...being in the control of administrative authorities not primarily designed to deal with its proper utilization or management. Departments of Agriculture have no administrative authority with respect to the basis of agriculture, namely land. This is a situation that might be likened to a railway company endeavoring to operate its system without its management having any control or supervision with respect to the construction and maintenance of its roadbed.”

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 438-39.

from the distribution of powers between various governmental units, from the departmentalization of governmental activities, from the growth of specialization, and from the tendency to approach a complex situation in parts.”¹⁰⁹ Thus, the lack of an agreement between the Dominion government and the province of Alberta illustrated a condition of uncoordinated action that delayed and reduced the effectiveness of adjustments.

Despite new suggestions on how to approach dry area rehabilitation, the acute shortage of available lands for exchange purposes by early 1943, led E.E. Kerr, Saskatchewan Minister of Natural Resources, to write J.G. Gardiner expressing the need to discontinue the 1938 agreement between the Dominion and the Province. By that point the government of Saskatchewan had a backlog of thousands of acres owed to private individuals and companies for lands held within approved pasture areas. Kerr wrote, “the government is of course, ready and willing to transfer Crown lands held in the right of Province situated within any proposed area, to the Dominion, but it now finds it impossible to offset School lands within approved areas, and also provide for necessary exchanges for privately owned lands.”¹¹⁰ Through the first half of 1943, the correspondence between Kerr and Gardiner, and between the provincial Department of Agriculture and the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Branch, focused on possible changes to the Dominion-Provincial community pasture agreement. In 1945, the province called for an agreement similar to that between the Dominion and the Province of Manitoba, whereby the province would transfer land to the Dominion on a long-term basis, but would retain title to lands used for pastures. The province also wanted the right to assume

¹⁰⁹ A. Stewart, “The Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Programme,” *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, (August 1939), 322.

responsibility for the administration of the pastures after three years by reimbursing the Dominion for the cost of erecting the pastures.¹¹¹ Urging the federal deputy minister of Agriculture to consider the proposal, George Spence wrote,

[PFRA] have ninety applications and requests, fifty percent of which we think are definite possibilities if the matter of land policy and land control can be satisfactorily solved....I trust I have made the matter clear and would appreciate direction in the matter as soon as possible in view of the fact that the whole matter of large pasture development is at standstill. We even hesitate to employ our field staff on investigational work until a land control policy has been described.¹¹²

During the first five years of the community pasture program, from 1937 to 1942, sixty-four pastures comprising approximately 1,148,780 acres were completed.¹¹³ In 1947, just over seventy community pastures occupied approximately 1,257,540 acres.¹¹⁴ (See Maps 4 and 5, pp.100, 101) By these figures, pasture development by acreage from 1943 to 1947 was less than ten percent of what it had been during the preceding five years.

Ten years after the initial federal plan to develop community pastures, the plan was still beset with problems. In February 1947, the PFRA Advisory Committee on Land Utilization recommended:

Since it is understood that there are over one hundred Municipalities and Local Improvement Districts in Saskatchewan and Alberta, requesting the development and construction of both large and small community pastures;

And since at the present time there is not a pasture construction agreement between the Dominion

¹¹⁰ SAB, NR1/2, file 177, E.E. Kerr to Gardiner 17 February 1943, 1.

¹¹¹ SAB, GR80, VI, file 13(a), Spence to Barton 6 February 1945, 1.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 1.

¹¹³ SAB, NR1/2, file 177, *Minutes of the PFRA Land Utilization Branch Fieldmen's Conference, 29-30 December 1942*, 19-20.

¹¹⁴ SAB, GR80, VI, file 25(a), *Annual Report of the Land Utilization Division of the PFRA for the Year Ending 31 March 1947*, 63.

Government, and the Governments of Saskatchewan and Alberta;

The Advisory Committee of the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration recommends that this situation be brought to the personal attention of the Dominion and the Provincial Ministers of Agriculture, in the hope that whatever barriers are standing in the way be speedily removed, in order that a greater programme of reclamation and rehabilitation may be undertaken in the Provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta.¹¹⁵

The first decade of the community pasture program illustrated that readjusting agricultural land use to better suit the prairie environment would be neither a quick nor easy procedure. The land use history of the region, its social organization, and the variety of prairie landowners complicated plans to acquire long-term or permanent federal control of sub-marginal land for pasture purposes. A shortage of suitable Crown land for exchange and resettlement purposes, and federal legislation that contradicted the program's central aim to remove unsuitable land from cultivation, made the task more difficult for rehabilitation officials. Yet while the federal government maintained a rigid stance regarding finances and land control in pastures, rehabilitation officials working among the local communities of the prairies adopted a flexible approach that demonstrated a greater appreciation for the ecological and social diversity of the region. This mindset was the essence of prairie rehabilitation, and it was reflected in the local development and operation of the community pastures.

¹¹⁵ SAB, GR80, VI, file 25(f) 'Land Utilization,' *Minutes of Meeting of the PFRA Advisory Committee on Land Utilization, February 1947*, 4-5.

Chapter Four

The Community Pasture Plan in Action

In 1940, as the issues respecting pasture development became increasingly difficult to resolve, J.H. McKechnie, Saskatchewan deputy minister of Education wrote to J.W. Estey, Saskatchewan minister of Education: “one difficulty in attempting to set up a general policy...is that there are no two cases just alike.”¹ McKechnie was referring to the financial situation of various school districts, but his comments were equally applicable to the local impact and operation of PFRA community pastures. The community pasture program was not uniformly appreciated, or understood; in some cases the program seemed too broad and in others too narrow to satisfy the range of circumstances on the prairies. But in applying the program locally, rehabilitation officials adopted a flexibility that contrasted the rigid federal position on land control and finances. At the local level, the development, operation and management of community pastures reflected a respect for prairie society and a sense for the region’s ecological diversity.

Some dry area farmers continued to believe that dry-farming techniques would solve the agricultural problems of the drought area. On 15 November 1937, The Saskatchewan Farmer printed a letter from Allan Hudson, a Parkbey area farmer, who argued that, “for the bulk of the country, we have to go forward and solve our problems

¹ Saskatchewan Archives Board (SAB), Department of Education (Ed), file 38(h), ‘Miscellaneous Administration’, J.H. McKechnie to J.W. Estey, 9 October 1940, 1.

on the basis that the land must be farmed and more effective dry farming methods of handling the land be developed.”² Hudson’s point of view was not unique. C.W. Peterson, editor of the Farm and Ranch Review, was skeptical of dry area rehabilitation activities. From 1935 to 1944, the Calgary-based newspaper largely ignored the PFRA and most references to rehabilitation came through summaries of Western Stock Growers’ Association conventions. From September 1937 to March 1938, Peterson contributed three editorials on rehabilitation activities in the dry area, not once mentioning the PFRA. The editorials emphasized the favorable long-term capability of the area to produce high quality wheat, the shortage of adequate information with which to formulate long-range policies in the area, and the need to guard against the ‘hysterical’ wholesale abandonment of dry area land.³

During the hard times of the 1930s, a large segment of the agricultural public saw the development of community pastures within the narrow context of the depression and missed the essence of the permanent land use adjustment underlying PFRA activities. O. Freer suggested that, “P.F.R.A. community pastures were more or less a nebulous idea in the minds of the Western Canadian Agricultural public and was [sic] probably welcomed primarily by them as a works-with-wages programme or a method whereby farm income...might be augmented.”⁴ Wilf Foster was employed on a fence-building crew for the Mariposa pasture in the late 1930s. Asked whether he had considered the permanent

² *Saskatchewan Farmer*, 15 November 1937, 8.

³ *Farm and Ranch Review*, September 1937, 6; February 1938, 5-6; March 1938, 5. In the February issue, Peterson wrote, “we must move with circumspection in respect to the proposed abandonment of land to grazing in any wholesale way.”

⁴ O. Freer, “The Operation and Management of P.F.R.A. Community Pastures,” *Canadian Cattlemen*, (March 1945), 141.

nature of the pasture, Foster replied, "Well of course in those days, this was a relief job. Everybody was trying to survive."⁵

PFRA activities provided local employment and business for local merchants, but where the public did not clearly understand the function of the program, the PFRA could be seen in a negative light.⁶ In 1939, the secretary of the Glidden board of trade wrote J.G. Taggart, the Saskatchewan minister of Agriculture,

...We have tried at different times to find out who is at the head of the P.F.R.A. in so far as the community pasture is concerned. We have written to several and they 'pass the buck'...we can get no cooperation from the authorities. Several men have tried to get work; they were told to see the Municipal Council, this body referred them to the government man and so on...we would like this matter looked into immediately to our satisfaction.⁷

An open letter to George Spence in the Western Producer, in June 1938, criticized the length of time required for PFRA survey work and the inefficient treatment of rehabilitation laborers.⁸ Spence replied, "The Prairie Farm Rehabilitation program is not considered a relief undertaking. It is primarily for rehabilitation and because of the magnitude of the task...[and] since the program covers an [extended] area...you will appreciate the difficulty in dealing promptly with all applications..."⁹

Despite the extensive range of its activities, the scope of the community pasture program could seem decidedly narrow. In 1938, a distressed widow living near Meyronne, Saskatchewan appealed to J.G. Gardiner,

⁵ Personal interview with Wilf Foster, 2 September 2000. Foster qualified the comment by stressing that he was a teenager during the depression, and was concerned primarily about short-term personal finances.

⁶ *Saskatchewan Farmer*, 15 September 1938,

⁷ SAB, George Spence Papers (GR80), Prairie Farmers Rehabilitation Files (VI), file 12(m)

'Correspondence: Miscellaneous, 1939,' I.O. Lake to George Spence, 13 June 1939, 1.

⁸ *Western Producer*, 9 June 1938, 24.

This home has been my farm for about 21 years...It used to be good land, however, for 9 years no rain has made the greatest part of my land...absolutely unfit for farming...

As I have no money to buy another place, and no other home I have to stay here. I pray however daily that soon the Government may find ways to rehabilitate me and to compensate me for the loss through this dreadful fate which nature has bestowed upon me...¹⁰

Gardiner forwarded the letter to PFRA Director, George Spence, who replied to Hettinger,

...I regret there is no policy under P.F.R.A. which will enable us to help you. The policy in regard to rehabilitation is limited to specific areas which are going to be converted into community pastures...We have no application from your municipality for a community pasture in that area, consequently there is nothing I can do.¹¹

This type of situation led to suggestions that the terms of the Rehabilitation Act neglected other avenues of opportunity and thus limited its overall effectiveness.

In 1939, A. Stewart, of the University of Alberta, argued that the operational boundaries of the PFR Act prevented the discovery of other, more profitable opportunities for the investment of capital. According to Stewart, the expenditures on reclamation, water development and community pastures might have been more fruitfully applied elsewhere for other uses, such as the development of production on northern

⁹ SAB, GR80, VI, file 12(o) 'Correspondence: Miscellaneous, 1938-1947,' Spence to F.E. Cursons, 15 June 1938, 2.

¹⁰ SAB, GR80, VI, file 13(t) 'Taggart, J.G.,' Frieda Hettinger to J.G. Gardiner, 26 June 1938, 1.

¹¹ SAB, GR80, VI, file 13(t), Spence to Hettinger, 7 July 1938, 1. On 7 July 1938, Spence also sent Taggart a confidential memorandum reading, "I am passing the matter on to you in the hope that perhaps a larger area of this country could be definitely as submarginal and utilized for the only purpose which God intended it to be used for, namely pasture..." see above file.

soils.¹² Along similar lines, M.J. McPhail, superintendent of the Melfort Experimental Station, urged a northward extension of PFRA boundaries. Emphasizing areas of low precipitation and soil erosion in northern Saskatchewan, McPhail stressed, “no line can be drawn from east to west across the province that will make a fair division so that it can be said that P.F.R.A. assistance to the south is needed and in the whole area to the north it is not.”¹³ Other sources suggested that park belt farmers experienced as much trouble as open plains farmers securing domestic water supplies, and that many northern districts contained extensive sub-marginal areas suitable for community pasture development. By 1943, resolutions requesting an enlarged PFRA boundary had been made by the Saskatchewan Legislature, the Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities, the Saskatchewan Forage Crop Growers’ Cooperative Association, and the Saskatchewan Land Utilization Board.¹⁴

As these sources pushed for expanded geographic boundaries, PFRA officials grappled with the social boundaries of rehabilitation. Early in 1940, George Spence sent H. Barton a memorandum urging some means whereby women would become more involved in rehabilitation work. According to Spence, “The senior officers of our field staff, with whom I have discussed the matter, share the view that the weak link in our ‘follow up’ work is that no special effort has been made to interest the woman on the farm, either in the general work of the P.F.R.A. or any special branch of it...”¹⁵ Farm women with sentimental attachments to their homesteads were considered a key obstacle

¹² A. Stewart, “The Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Programme,” *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, (August 1939), 322-23.

¹³ *Minutes and Report of Meeting of Advisory Committee on Land Utilization and PFRA Conference, Regina, 23-25 May 1942*, 66.

¹⁴ Saskatchewan, Department of Agriculture, *Annual Report of the Land Utilization Branch of the Department of Agriculture*, 1943, 161.

¹⁵ SAB, GR80, VI, file 13(a), Spence to Barton 26 January 1940, 2.

to PFRA resettlement schemes. Referring to the Rolling Hills project, Spence said, “we’d take them up there and show them what was being accomplished with irrigation...And quite often, we’d get the man thoroughly satisfied...but his wife said, ‘no dad, we raised our family here and I’m not going to leave.’”¹⁶ To remedy the situation, Spence suggested that a woman be appointed to publicly promote and assist P.F.R.A. domestic water schemes and resettlement activities.¹⁷ Whether or not this recommendation was followed, the social side to rehabilitation remained difficult to resolve. In January 1942, Spence told the convention of the Saskatchewan Field Husbandry Association,

In addition to its physical aspects, the [rehabilitation] problem is rendered more complex and difficult because of its human or social side...Unfortunately, so far no formula has been found for the human equation. A farmer may readily give his consent to being moved, but his wife may have entirely different ideas or vice versa.¹⁸

Yet, while they complicated PFRA activities, the ‘human equation’ and the variety of prairie personalities and situations encouraged a sense of flexibility among rehabilitation officials. In May 1942, Spence suggested that the only formula for dealing with the complexities of the prairies,

was on an individual basis – handling each case on its merits. This calls for the greatest degree of flexibility as, obviously, no two cases are alike. Then too it calls for a minimum of regulation and regimentation...in order to give accommodation to individual preference and the needs of specific areas...

¹⁶ SAB, George Spence interview with James Gray, May 1966.

¹⁷ SAB, GR80, VI, file 13(a), Spence to Barton 26 January 1940, 2.

¹⁸ SAB, Saskatchewan Field Husbandry Association (GS23), file 1 ‘Minutes, 1921-1966,’ George Spence speech to 21st Annual Saskatchewan Field Husbandry Association, 14 January 1942, 9.

There is no good reason...why the governing principle in matters of this kind, should not be human welfare rather than a matter of mere geography.¹⁹

To an extent, PFRA officials pursued the policy where possible. On 26 October 1938, Erle Eisenhauer, LUB Secretary, sent a letter to J.G. Taggart, Saskatchewan Minister of Agriculture, describing the case of an individual near Scotsguard who had developed a ranch to carry 350 head of stock, but whose lease was due to expire and the land to be incorporated into a community pasture. Eisenhauer suggested that the rancher should not be forced to dispose of his stock and his son forced to start over somewhere else.²⁰

Taggart forwarded the letter to George Spence with the following comment:

The case is typical of several which have come to my attention. The question at issue, it seems to me, is the wisdom of cleaning out a small rancher who has an economic unit, in order to incorporate his lands in a community pasture. My own view is that the small self-sustaining rancher should not be disturbed unless it is absolutely necessary in the interest of some major project which may offer the hope of providing for a number of families.²¹

This approach was generally adopted, and by 1942, PFRA fieldmen were encouraged to use their own judgment to resolve various land control difficulties hampering pasture construction.²²

PFRA policy reflected concern for prairie residents, and the PFRA resettlement program displayed a relatively high regard for the welfare of its participants. In the mid-

¹⁹ *Minutes and Report of Meeting of Advisory Committee on Land Utilization and P.F.R.A. Conference, Regina, 23-25 May 1942*, 63.

²⁰ SAB, GR80, VI, file 13(t), E. Eisenhauer to J.G. Taggart, 26 October 1938, 1.

²¹ SAB, GR80, VI, file 13(t), Taggart to Spence, 1 November 1938, 1.

²² SAB, GR80, VI, file 13(a), Spence to Barton 16 March 1942, 1. Spence wrote, "where they get into land control difficulties, we have encouraged them (being on the ground) to use their own judgement which means, in nine cases out of ten, that the common sense solution was found."

1960s, Jane Abramson studied farm families displaced in 1962 to establish two community pastures under the Agricultural Rehabilitation and Development Administration (ARDA). Farmers displaced in the 1960s received little compensation beyond the cost of moving. Of the eighteen farmers displaced in 1962, eight considered themselves worse off after relocation, and only five felt their situation had improved.²³

Abramson compared resettlement during the 1930s and the 1960s:

In the economic crisis of the late thirties and the general concern with social welfare which accompanied it, extreme measures were taken to protect the interests of farmers who were displaced by community pastures...Over the years, however, conditions have apparently changed in such a way as to give a lower priority to the resettlement of farmers who are displaced by pasture projects...²⁴

Under the PFRA program, even some settlers that refused to relocate from proposed pasture areas considered themselves well treated by the PFRA. During the late 1930s, Ephraim Read was settled in the proposed Mariposa pasture and refused to move until the PFRA gave him an acceptable alternative piece of property. During the two years that he and his family were fenced into the pasture, he was permitted to herd cattle on the pasture as long as they were kept separate from other patrons' cattle. Eventually, he was offered a suitable alternative piece of property. When asked whether he was satisfied with his treatment at the hands of the PFRA, Read's daughter, Eva Thun, replied, "Yes I think he was. They said they would move your buildings out...The neighbors were pretty upset

²³ Jane Abramson, *A Study of the Effects of Displacement on Farmers Whose Land Was Purchased For Two Community Pastures in Saskatchewan*, (Saskatoon 1965), 62.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 3-5.

that they had to move...they were all upset. But at the same time, there was nothing there to hold them...there was nothing, it was just sand, sand.”²⁵

Farm agencies and organizations were generally positive about the PFRA and the community pasture program. In some cases, they had previously advocated this approach. In 1935, two years before the PFRA pasture program was implemented, the Saskatchewan Department of Agriculture’s Committee on Livestock and Dairying recommended that pastures be established on lands not suited to the production of grain and that community breeding be developed to offset the disproportionate cost of providing sires.²⁶ The Saskatchewan Field Husbandry Association (SFHA) also supported the pasture program. Agricultural students, professors, scientists, and politicians had formed the SFHA in 1921 to improve seed varieties and crop growing techniques. Describing the PFRA on 13 January 1937, the SFHA president said, “I believe Community Pastures which are included in this scheme would create more immediate benefit than any other thing without [which] we must know that the drought areas cannot be relieved into prosperity and happiness and contentment.”²⁷ In fact, as James Gray has argued, the high number of applications for dugouts, stockwatering dams, and resettlement indicates the positive reception of the program among individual farmers.²⁸

²⁵ Personal interview with Eva Thun, 18 October 2000.

²⁶ SAB, Livestock Branch (Ag. 3), Sec. II, file 49 ‘Livestock Board – General 1928, 1933-39,’ *Report of the Committee on Livestock and Dairying, 18 February 1935*, 1-2.

²⁷ SAB, GS23, file 1 ‘Minutes, 1935-1937,’ *Annual Convention of the Saskatchewan Field Husbandry Association, 13 January 1937*, 2.

²⁸ James Gray, *Men Against the Desert*, (Saskatoon 1996) 183-4. Gray wrote, “As for the farmers themselves, the best indication of their attitude was in the statistics. At the tail end of [1937] the PFRA had 1,000 applications from farmers who wanted help to be resettled elsewhere, and 5,000 applications from farmers who wanted dugouts or stock-watering dams built on their farms.”

The ranching community was also relatively receptive to the PFRA community pasture program. Traditionally, stock growers were reluctant to support community pastures because they feared any threat to their leasehold tenure and the vitality of their herds. This attitude was manifested in the Saskatchewan Stock Growers' Association (SSGA) reaction to recommendations for community pastures in the 1920s. On 22 June 1922, the SSGA had resolved,

that the [SSGA] express its approval of the most economical use being made of our grazing lands and that we are not hostile to the idea of groups of farmers acquiring such crown lands for grazing provided that stockmen who are dependent upon the use of such crown lands for grazing and are complying with grazing regulations are not thereby deprived of their right of renewing their leases when they expire.²⁹

Alberta-based ranchers had opposed community grazing on similar grounds during the early 1920s, arguing that inferior farm bulls grazing in proximity to their cattle would degenerate breeds and harm the export industry.³⁰

Some ranchers were sceptical of the PFRA program. In January 1937, George Ross, President of the Short Grass Stock Growers' Association (SGSGA), based in eastern Alberta, was reported to have said, "herds could not be kept clean if they were pastured on community leases...This form of grazing held the danger of spreading disease among the cattle."³¹ In 1938, Harry Otterson, an Eastend, Saskatchewan rancher suggested that some ranchers would avoid pastures out of a traditional sense of

²⁹ SAB, Records of the Saskatchewan Stock Growers' Association (R-162), file BR SA78St, Minutes of the Convention of the Saskatchewan Stock Growers' Association, 22 June 1922, 2.

³⁰ David Breen, *The Canadian Prairie West and the Ranching Frontier, 1874-1924*, (Toronto 1983), 234.

³¹ *Medicine Hat News*, 21 January 1937, 2.

independence and self-control.³² The official view of the SSGA is difficult to ascertain, but editorials in southwest Saskatchewan newspapers were generally supportive of the program.³³ The Saskatchewan Farmer, once the official voice of the SSGA,³⁴ called community pastures a “sound project,” adding that, “properly managed and supervised, these community pastures...should prove to be a sound method of raising the quality of beef production.”³⁵ This type of response was partly due to recent grass shortages that reinforced the need for a source of supplementary feed. In 1937, Saskatchewan ranchers were less likely to challenge land use legislation because they had recently acquired reductions to grazing lease rates and concessions on outstanding arrears of rentals.³⁶ More significantly, ranchers were assured that the development of community pastures would not threaten their existing leases.³⁷ In 1940, O. Freer, Superintendent of PFRA Land Utilization Branch, confirmed that, “[w]here the Municipality through the Provincial Government (LUB) request the P.F.R.A. to investigate an area and upon doing so we find it contains a number of ‘self-sustaining’ ranchers...paying their way and building up a good herd, we report the actual condition and immediately abandon the application.”³⁸

³² Harry Otterson, “The Southwestern Saskatchewan Range Industry,” *Canadian Cattlemen*, (September 1938), 98. Otterson wrote, “what of the individual rancher, will he take to the community pasture? No doubt many will do so, but some, especially the old timers will not. They rely upon their choice of breeding, their system and that very individualism which has done so much to develop this western country.”

³³ SAB holdings of the records of the SSGA are missing the period of the late 1930s and early 1940s.

³⁴ John Archer, “The Saskatchewan Stock Growers’ Association,” *Saskatchewan History*, (Spring 1959), 46.

³⁵ *Saskatchewan Farmer*, 2 May 1938, 2.

³⁶ *Leader Post*, 4 June 1937, 2.

³⁷ Edward Evans, “The Saskatchewan Stock Growers Association,” *Canadian Cattlemen*, (December 1938), 119. At the December meeting of the Association, SSGA Board members Jack Byers and Olaf Olafson reportedly “were definitely of the opinion that there was no occasion for alarm, and that the ranchers would be duly advised if there were any intentions of disturbing their leases.”

³⁸ Glenbow-Alberta Institute Archives (GAIA), Irrigation Research Project - W.L. Jackson Collection (M3761), box 38, file 353 ‘Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act, 1935, 1939-1940, 1946,’ O. Freer, *Land*

To some extent, the economic and environmental purpose of community pastures meant they did not affect ranchers. In 1939, J.G. Gardiner suggested that community pastures were not designed for ranchers, but for mixed farmers with ten to thirty head of cattle.³⁹ O. Freer elaborated on this point, distinguishing between areas of predominately sub-marginal land, where a minimum economic livestock unit would be based on approximately 100 cows using from 8000 to 10,000 acres, and areas with a mixture of sub-marginal and quality farm land where fewer head of cattle were required for economical operations.⁴⁰ Freer said,

the wisdom or the need for developing community pastures in strictly range areas might therefore be very rightly challenged because the carrying capacity of an area is not increased by merely putting a fence around it and providing range lands are scientifically grazed and properly watered under efficient ranch management there is very little in the way of service that P.F.R.A. can render other than the suggested water and grass survey work.⁴¹

In a 1953 survey of thirty-eight ranches in southwest Saskatchewan, none of the ranchers interviewed used community pastures; rather the majority used long-term provincial grazing leases.⁴²

Pasture distribution involved a range of factors. Before a pasture site was selected, the area was surveyed to determine land ownership, land use, and the

Utilization Problems Submitted to the Dominion Provincial Seminar, 12 January 1940, 8-9. According to Freer, the leases incorporated into community pastures, "were hopelessly overgrazed and production possibilities of these land decreasing every year."

³⁹ *Debates*, 20 March 1939, 2081. Responding to the suggestion that one or two men owning a large number of cattle might monopolize a pasture, Gardiner replied, "[I]n the first place we do not form pastures for ranchers. These pastures are formed for the people who are farming from a half section to a section of land in the neighborhood of the pasture. They may have ten or twenty or thirty cattle each. They themselves take care of the matter referred to; they see that no one has too large a number of cattle..."

⁴⁰ *Minutes and Report of Meeting of the Advisory Committee on Land Utilization and PFRA Conference, Regina, 23-25 May 1942, 77.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

relationship of the area to the surrounding farms. One function of the survey was to determine whether long-term control could be obtained over a sufficient amount of land to justify pasture construction.⁴³ The first years of the program indicated that blocks of at least 15,000 acres were necessary to ensure economical operations.⁴⁴ At 1944, Saskatchewan pasture sizes ranged from 6,800 acres to 154,720 acres, but the majority fell in the 10,000 to 30,000 acre range.⁴⁵ Pasture construction could be delayed or prevented where the current basis of land ownership prevented the acquisition of suitable sized blocks. Hence, the distribution of pastures in Saskatchewan did not correspond to any strict guidelines. Most of the pastures were located in the brown soil zone characterized largely by scant precipitation and thin vegetation, but this zone contained substantial variation in soil quality and annual rainfall. (See Maps 3-4, pp.99-101)

As local circumstances figured strongly in pasture distribution, they also played a strong role in pasture management. At the 1948 PFRA Pasture Managers' Conference, Raymond Youngman, PFRA pasture supervisor, emphasized the varying pasture conditions and their effect on operations. He said,

our aggregation of pastures is spread out over a very large area and consequently there is a considerable difference in operating conditions in different areas. For instance, there is a lot of difference between operating a pasture in the bushy areas of northwestern Saskatchewan and one in the wide open short grass areas in the southwest...⁴⁶

⁴² S.R. Burkell, "Organization and Management Practices of Cattle Ranchers in Southwestern Saskatchewan," *Economic Annalist*, (April 1956), 34.

⁴³ *Report of Activities Under the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act, 31 March 1940*, 15.

⁴⁴ *Report of Activities, 31 March 1942*, 8.

⁴⁵ *Report of Activities, 31 March 1944*, 12.

⁴⁶ Saskatchewan Archives Board (SAB), George Spence Papers (GR80), Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Files(VI), file 8 'Community Pastures,' *PFRA Land Utilization Branch, Community Pasture Managers' Conference, 2-4 March 1948*, 2.

Each area had distinct local attitudes, carrying capacities, and costs of production. Recognizing this variation, PFRA officials strived to ensure that, “the management of these pastures is as democratic as it is possible to make it and at the same time to ensure a high standard of efficiency in operation and management”⁴⁷

The federal government appointed pasture managers but they often came from the community in which the pasture was located and were selected on an informal basis through personal contacts.⁴⁸ The manager’s position did not require any formal education or training, but the appointment was meant to encourage local support and confidence in the operation of the pasture. To this end, pasture managers were often selected according to experience and the input and interests of the local community. In 1938, O. Freer suggested to George Spence, “it is a most unwise position for anyone to try to force the appointment of a pasture manager against the wishes of the [local] Council and those who support the pasture.”⁴⁹ According to Freer, the confidential policy adopted in the appointment of pasture managers was to get the feeling of the locally elected grazing council, then ask them to submit the names of suitable appointees, whereupon the PFRA would check their qualifications and then contact the local federal member for his recommendation. Generally, this approach worked, and of the sixty

⁴⁷ GAIA, M3761, box 38, file 352 ‘Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act, 1937-1940,’ O. Freer, “Community Pastures and Their Relationship to a Livestock Production Programme for the Drought Area,” Radio Address, 21 February 1939.

⁴⁸ Personal Interview with Perry Thun, 18 October 2000. Perry Thun was manager of the Mariposa pasture for three years during the period 1951-1960. When asked what experience got him his job, he replied, “[I] could stay in the saddle.” Similarly, Lester Ferguson was manager of the Bitter Lake pasture from 1948-1966. He grew up on a ranch and was hired as manager after having informally helped out with pasture activities. He said, “the supervisor was in Swift Current and the superintendent was in Regina but I knew them from riding and one thing or another.”

⁴⁹ SAB, GR80, VI, file 13(f) ‘Correspondence: Johnstone, Fred,’ Freer to Spence, 1 April 1938, 1.

pasture managers employed over the first decade, Freer could remember only three instances where individuals were replaced.⁵⁰

Pasture managers performed a variety of functions over the course of a season, including the receipt and delivery of stock, branding, fence riding, inoculating cattle, and the collection of fees. Typically, each patron pastured from ten to twenty head of cattle, although finances and space permitting this number could be much higher.⁵¹ Depending on the level of moisture, cattle were on pasture from five to seven months beginning in early April, and were taken out for marketing or winter feeding when patrons had finished their fall harvesting responsibilities.⁵² Throughout this process, pasture managers performed the role of, “expert cattlemen, veterinary surgeons, politicians, diplomats, accountants and auditors.”⁵³ Broadly, though, pasture managers had two key responsibilities: pasture and livestock management.

To conserve grass supplies, pasture managers enforced a federally determined carrying capacity. Beginning in 1937, the Dominion Experimental Station at Swift Current conducted grazing surveys to estimate the carrying capacity of different areas being brought into pastures. These surveys involved factors such as the type of livestock carried, and the distribution, palatability, and nutritive value of the herbage.⁵⁴ On the recommendation of Manyberries officials, PFRA pastures were stocked to only two thirds

⁵⁰ SAB, GR80, VI, file 8, *PFRA Land Utilization Branch, Community Pasture Managers' Conference, 2-4 March 1948*, 43.

⁵¹ At the August 1937 Meeting of the Advisory Committee on Land Utilization, L.B. Thomson, Superintendent of the Swift Current Experimental Station suggested that, “from the standpoint of land utilization...a man operating a 400 to 600 acre farm and running stock on community pasture, would require a fifty cow unit as a minimum for a balanced farming unit...” See *Meeting on Land Utilization, 3-4 August 1937*, 23.

⁵² *Report of Activities, 31 March 1946*, 27.

⁵³ T.F. Phillips, “Efficiency in Keeping Records,” *PFRA Land Utilization Branch, Community Pasture Managers' Conference, 26-27 March 1941*, 36.

⁵⁴ *Report of Activities, 31 March 1939*, 11.

of their capacity to encourage the growth of grass and ensure adequate nutrients in the grasses.⁵⁵ Under-grazing during the first years of the pastures was desired because it afforded herbage suffering from drought and overgrazing a chance to improve.⁵⁶ Using the grass in this fashion represented a more conservative approach to range management. Up until the 1930s, federal grazing regulations were designed to secure maximum use of the land, and leaseholders had been required to stock their leases with a minimum number of animals per acre.⁵⁷

Range surveys at Manyberries also illustrated that range conditions and carrying capacities could vary, not only according to the soil type in various locations, but also according to previous use and from year to year according to the amount of moisture in a given location. Thus, the actual application of carrying capacity and the decision of when and how full to stock a pasture was largely made at the local level. Lester Ferguson, manager of Bitter Lake pasture, remembers the carrying capacity being decided by the pasture grazing committee.⁵⁸ When asked how he measured his grass cover, Ferguson replied, "Well, you pretty well keep track of it and if its getting eaten down move them to some other field."⁵⁹ Perry Thun was the manager of the Mariposa pasture for three years during the 1950s. Asked how he determined the number of cattle that went on pasture, Thun replied, "Well you would look at your grass, look at your water, look at your moisture."⁶⁰ Local pasture managers generally had considerable independence.

⁵⁵ GAIA, M3761, box 38, file 352, L.B. Thomson, "The Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Programme," Radio Address, 8 March 1938.

⁵⁶ (PFRA), *Report on Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Program* (Regina 1938), 28.

⁵⁷ Max Foran, "The Impact of the Depression on Grazing Lease Policy in Alberta," in Simon Evans, Sarah Carter and Bill Yeo, eds., *Cowboys, Ranchers and the Cattle Business: Cross Border Perspectives on Ranching History* (Calgary 1999), 128.

⁵⁸ Personal interview with Lester Ferguson, 10 November 2000.

⁵⁹ Personal interview with Lester Ferguson, 10 November 2000.

⁶⁰ Personal interview with Perry Thun, 18 October 2000. The interview went as follows:

According to Ferguson, “[PFRA officials] pretty well left it up to you because you knew the circumstances. You knew the area.”⁶¹

As re-grassing and controlled grazing measures became entrenched, carrying capacities increased. This development was partly due to the reseeded of abandoned lands and the qualities of crested wheat grass. Crested wheat grass increased the carrying capacity of the range by offering earlier grazing, a longer grazing season, and higher gains per acre. The PFRA policy of using dams and dugouts contributed further to grass conservation and pasture carrying capacity because cattle were less prone to concentrate their grazing around a single water supply and would not lose weight walking long distances for a drink.⁶² Carrying capacities increased almost three-fold during the first decade of the pasture program, from grazing conditions of one livestock unit per 58.7 acres in 1938 to one livestock unit per 20.1 acres in 1945.⁶³

Pasture operation and maintenance costs were derived from grazing fees fixed on a “per head” basis. During the summer of 1938, fees on pastures were fifty cents per head per month for cattle, seventy-five cents per head per month for horses, and \$1.50 per head cattle breeding fee. These rates were intentionally set high to limit the number of livestock on pastures in order to give the grass cover a chance to recuperate. With

Question- How did you make the decision how many head of cattle you could carry for the year?

Thun- Well you would look at your grass, look at your water, look at your moisture.

Q- Did you have a formula?

T- No, no... better than a formula once you're used to it. Just like you look at a cow and say she's ready for market. That's my opinion anyway.

Q- Is that how it worked?

T- It worked and it worked well.

⁶¹ Personal interview with Lester Ferguson, 10 November 2000.

⁶² *Medicine Hat News*, 11 July 1935, 3. At the 1935 meeting of the Saskatchewan Stock Growers' Association, L.B. Thomson was reported to have recommended the use of “two dams in opposite corners to prevent over-grazing of land near the dam. Two dams increased the use of the lease 60 percent. If cattle walk over two miles they lose weight.”

⁶³ *Report of Activities 31 March 1946*, 30. According to the report, the 1945 carrying capacity was more than that encountered on ordinary rangeland.

improved conditions by 1939, the fees were reduced to thirty-five cents per month for cattle, fifty cents for horses, and a \$1.00 cattle breeding fee.⁶⁴

Several pastures in the southwest part of the province operated according to their own fee schedule. The 1939 monthly rate for the Govenlock, Nashlyn, and Battle Creek pastures were thirty cents per head per month for cattle, forty cents per head per month for horses, and a \$1.00 cattle breeding fee.⁶⁵ Further, blackleg and encephalomyelitis inoculation fees applied to all pastures except the Govenlock, Nashlyn and Battle Creek pastures. The slight difference in fees in the two groups of pastures reflected different operating conditions in the two areas. At the Govenlock, Nashlyn and Battle Creek pastures, patrons performed the branding, rounding up, dehorning, castrating, vaccinating and delivering, and consequently paid out nothing for extra help.⁶⁶

In addition to range conservation, the community pasture program included a livestock improvement policy. During the spring breeding season, cattle on pasture were bred to a purebred bull from either the Shorthorn, Angus or Hereford breeds, as selected by the local advisory committee of each pasture. For the first three years of the pasture, the government paid for bull replacements, then it supplied fifty percent of the bulls for the following three years, with pastures gradually assuming the full cost of supplying bulls through a build-up of reserves and a percentage of revenues.⁶⁷ This policy was partly a response to the financial and feed shortages of the mid-1930s. Reduced rations and an inability to pay for quality sires had combined to affect the sale condition of

⁶⁴ *Report of Activities, 31 March 1939, 28.*

⁶⁵ *Annual Report of Land Utilization Department of Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Branch, 31 March 1940, 19.*

⁶⁶ *PFRA Land Utilization Branch, Community Pasture Managers' Conference, 26-27 March 1941, 7-8.*

⁶⁷ *Annual Report of Land Utilization Division of PFRA for the Year ending 31 March 1940, 30.*

marketable livestock, as well as the foundation stock and progeny of herds in the dry area.⁶⁸

Community pastures were also used to develop horses and sheep. Despite a narrowing market for horses with the growth of mechanized operations in the 1940s, well-bred draught horses had a place on farms, especially as greater quantities of gasoline, oil, and rubber were required in the war effort.⁶⁹ As pressure to get cattle on pastures increased through the 1940s, however, fewer horses were placed on pastures. Conversely, sheep production was not considered a priority in the first few years of the community pasture program since the cost of sheep fences and herders was prohibitive.⁷⁰ By 1942, though, with the realization that Canada was producing only fifteen percent of its raw wool requirements, officials advocated using community pastures for sheep production.⁷¹ In 1943, Dr. K. Rasmussen, assistant superintendent of the Lethbridge Experimental Farm, suggested that the PFRA supply rams for breeding purposes in the same manner as it supplied bulls.⁷²

The benefits of the breeding program made community pastures popular among dry area farmers. Initially, the PFRA competed with custom herders and vacant sub-marginal lands, making it necessary for pastures to include stock from distant

⁶⁸ GAIA, M3761, box 38, file 352, O. Freer, "Community Pastures and Their Relationship to a Livestock Production Programme for the Drought Area," radio broadcast 21 February 1939.

⁶⁹ *Report of Advisory Committee on Land Utilization, 23-25 May 1942*, 79.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 79. Here, O. Freer said, "in the first place to handle sheep it is necessary to have either a sheep and wolf proof fence or a herder. The cost of the type of woven fence required is of course prohibitive and the cost of a herder could only be justified by running from one to two thousand sheep. This number of sheep is far more than any district can contribute where we have a community pasture operating on a zoning basis, nor could the average pasture carry this number of sheep and at the same time provide grazing for horses and cattle within the same zone."

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁷² *Report of Advisory Committee on Land Utilization, 17-18 February 1943*, 32.

municipalities for economical operations.⁷³ By 1942, however, buoyed by strong war-time cattle prices and sufficient time for farmers to gradually acquire livestock, the PFRA reported that it was rapidly approaching the carrying capacity of the pastures and would have to narrow its service zone.⁷⁴ One year later, O. Freer said, “The experimental stage of community pastures is long since past. Today in Municipalities where these pastures are located, it is no longer necessary to advertise or send out riders to get stock. Our problem now is to avoid overstocking...”⁷⁵

Herd management balanced central and local control. To manage the high number of bulls and maintain high performance rates, strong central control of bulls was a priority for PFRA officials. In October 1941 Spence suggested to Dr. H. Barton,

it would be a mistake to maintain the identity of the bulls in any arrangement with the [local] association. The association’s equity in the bulls should be confined to a bookkeeping entry only, the main reason for this being that it will simplify operations and leave the changing and interchanging of bulls from different pastures entirely in our own hands without the consent of or reference to local committees.

Another alternative and one which we consider has some merit, would be rental basis, the Dominion charging each pasture an agreed annual rental for the bulls, which under the present policy they are responsible for supplying. In this way we would keep the ownership with the government, and the control completely in the hands of the administration...⁷⁶

By 1944, 331 bulls were in service on community pastures, including 212 Hereford, 109 Shorthorn, and ten Angus. During the 1943-44 season, an average of twenty-seven cows

⁷³ *Report of PFRA Land Utilization Department, 1939*, 9. In 1939 the PFRA was considering a spring ‘pick up’ service in order to meet the competition from custom herders and get livestock numbers up to the carrying capacity of the pastures.

⁷⁴ *Report of Advisory Committee on Land Utilization, 23-25 May 1942*, 60.

⁷⁵ *Report of Advisory Committee on Land Utilization, 17-18 February 1943*, 32.

were bred per bull, with a reported calf crop of eighty-four percent.⁷⁷ Maintaining high conception rates meant adapting livestock policies to suit local environmental conditions and by 1947, the PFRA had a bull station to develop bulls under normal range conditions.⁷⁸

Herd health and disease control was especially important during the early period of pasture development. To acquire public confidence in the pastures, officials had to demonstrate that mixed herds in pastures were not susceptible to disease.⁷⁹ Pasture managers were encouraged to be on the alert for diseases such as pink-eye, shipping fever, foot rot and especially blackleg which was fatal for young cattle and could remain in infected soil for years.⁸⁰ Blackleg vaccinations were made mandatory on all PFRA community pastures.

In some matters, though, PFRA officials left herd management and health-related decisions to the local community. Dehorning was not a compulsory procedure despite the advantages it offered for handling and carcass and hide quality.⁸¹ And despite pressure to have warble fly treatment made compulsory in all community pastures, PFRA officials made the procedure optional. Warble flies made cattle uncomfortable and

⁷⁶ SAB, GR80, VI, file 13(a) 'Correspondence: Barton, Dr. H., 1938-1947,' Spence to Barton, 22 October 1941, 1.

⁷⁷ *Report of Activities, 31 March 1944*, 11.

⁷⁸ *Report of Activities, 31 March 1947*, 69. O. Freer said, "highly fitted sale ring bulls are handled and fed in such a way as to definitely unfit them for range breeding or community pasture breeding service and we now know from experience that we can cut replacement costs and provide our Pastures with more active serviceable bulls by using the Nashlyn Station for developing...long yearling Bulls in a more natural way for replacement purposes."

⁷⁹ *Medicine Hat News*, 21 January 1937, 2. George Ross, president of the Short Grass Stock Growers' Association, was reported to have said, "herds could not be kept clean...if they were pastured on community leases. This form of grazing held the danger of spreading disease among cattle."

⁸⁰ SAB, GR80, VI, file 8, *PFRA Land Utilization Branch, Community Pasture Managers' Conference, 2-4 March 1948*, 38.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 10. Dehorning contributes to better carcasses through a reduction in bruising and subsequent blood clots, reduces hide damage, and facilitates handling. See *PFRA Community Pasture Managers' Conference, 26-27 March 1941*, 1-7.

disrupted their feeding, leading to reduced gains and a longer finishing period. In beef cattle, estimated losses could reach seventy-five to eighty pounds, and milk production in dairy cattle could be reduced by twenty-five percent.⁸² The reason for making warble fly treatment optional appeared in a December 1942 letter from George Spence to Dr. H. Barton:

In the management and operation of community pastures, as in other P.F.R.A. activities, we are endeavoring to build up good public relations. The nearer this relationship approaches a spirit of partnership between our administration and our pasture patrons...the better it is for all concerned. We think therefore, that anything which savors of compulsion is the wrong note.⁸³

By 1945, all of the PFRA community pastures had voluntarily adopted warble fly treatment programs. Generally, this balanced approach to health management was successful. The 1947 PFRA report lists 566 casualties out of a total of 67,900 head of cattle and horses on pasture, or a casualty rate of 0.008%.⁸⁴

Viewed at the local level, the PFRA community pasture program offers some interesting insights into the understanding and administration of prairie lands in the 1930s and 1940s. At times, the nature of rehabilitation seemed contradictory. Not everyone agreed that community grazing was the solution to the problems facing prairie agriculture. The geographic and social boundaries of rehabilitation, moreover, were difficult to resolve. But in applying the community pasture program, rehabilitation officials exhibited an awareness of ecological and social variation in the region. A key component of this mindset was an element of flexibility regarding pasture development,

⁸² *Minutes and Report of PFRA Advisory Committee on Land Utilization, 17-18 February 1943, 94.*

⁸³ SAB, GR80, VI, file 13(a), Spence to Barton 14 December 1942, 1.

⁸⁴ *Annual Report of the Land Utilization Division of the PFRA, 31 March 1947, 36.*

and an effort to involve local communities in the new program. The operation and management of PFRA community pastures reflected this sensitivity, through a balance of central and local control.

Conclusion

In 1939, O. Freer, PFRA Superintendent of Land Utilization, observed: “experience has proven, experimental tests have proven that, if we are to make agricultural progress in these dry areas we must work with nature and not against her.”¹ Freer’s comments about the Canadian prairie district had implications on several levels. He noted that indiscriminate and inappropriate patterns of land use could not sustain a viable agricultural population in the Canadian prairies. This notion formed the basis of the PFRA community pasture program. Furthermore, his reference to experience and experiment reflected the broad foundations of this new understanding. The decision to adjust prairie land use was not spontaneous, but was part of an ongoing process involving governments, scientists and farmers. This process did not end with the decision to implement community pastures. During the first decade of the PFRA community pasture program (1937-1947), the prairies were increasingly understood, as rehabilitation officials juggled ecological, economic, political and cultural factors to make the program work. The increased understanding was reflected in practice. The PFRA community pasture program balanced local knowledge with central control, and was flexible in order to meet the varied conditions of the prairies.

To the 1930s, the federal government administered the southern prairie region with policies that reflected a sense of geographic uniformity and a faith that dry farming

¹ Glenbow-Alberta Institute Archives (GAIA), Irrigation Project – W.L. Jacobson Collection (M3761), box 38, file 352 ‘Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act, 1937-1940,’ O. Freer, “Community Pastures and Their

techniques would overcome the region's climatic deficiencies. Federal land use policies and the organization of prairie society neglected geographic variety, and divided the prairies into identically sized parcels meant to equitably sustain individual families and support public services. Through the first decades of the twentieth century, farmers indiscriminately devoted large areas of sub-marginal land to the cultivation of wheat. Drought near the end of the First World War prompted federal and provincial governments to devote more attention to local circumstances and adapt agricultural practices to better suit the natural environment. But federal efforts to revise agriculture in the early 1920s were neither intensive nor long-lived. Information from soil surveys was not yet available, and schemes to use sub-marginal land for community grazing were neither actively encouraged nor financially supported. The return of favourable conditions for wheat production consequently saw many farmers resume their devotion to cultivation.

During the sustained drought and economic depression of the 1930s, the rehabilitation of prairie agriculture acquired renewed importance on a national scale. In 1935, the federal government passed the PFR Act according to the notion that agricultural problems in the prairies were temporary and could be solved with improved cultivation techniques and water conservation. The legislation also provided for an investigation of the prairies, including soil surveys and economic land classification studies that soon indicated areas of settled land unsuitable for cultivation. As drought conditions worsened, the PFR Act was amended in 1937, to include an emphasis on land utilization, resettlement and the development of community pastures. Community pastures were

Relationship to a Livestock Production Programme for the Drought Area," radio broadcast, 21 February 1939, 1.

intended to use sub-marginal land as pasture and balance the operations of prairie farmers through livestock production. Federal control of the pastures, meant to ensure the stability and permanence of the new plan, was part of a growing realization that prairie agriculture needed long-term rather than short-term solutions.

The federal plan to permanently adjust prairie land use had a broad impact and was complicated by the region's political and social organization, and land distribution. PFRA community pasture development required the cooperation of provincial and municipal governments, corporate landowners and individual farmers. Historian James Gray identified these obstacles in Men Against the Desert. This thesis expands on Gray's work by discussing the extent to which these obstacles limited pasture development. Provincial cooperation and pasture development were most easily effected in Saskatchewan, where the federal Minister of Agriculture, J.G. Gardiner, had the strongest political ties. A lower sense of urgency delayed pasture development in Manitoba, and Social Credit opposition to the federal land control provisions of the program prevented the development of PFRA pastures in Alberta. In Saskatchewan, federal legislation that encouraged farmers to keep sub-marginal land in cultivation compounded the problem of land control. Pasture development declined as officials moved beyond the worst sub-marginal areas of Crown land, and within five years, little suitable land was available for exchange or resettlement purposes.

As the plan was applied however, the prairie region was increasingly understood. The need to coordinate responsibility for land use and the importance of working with prairie residents to effect necessary land use adjustments became clear. In practice, the first decade of the PFRA community pasture program demonstrated an appreciation for

the ecological and social diversity of the prairies. As the geographic and social boundaries of the program were tested, officials recognized that a single, inflexible system could not apply to the entire region. Local circumstances figured largely in pasture distribution, and pasture management balanced the stability and permanence of federal control with the cooperation and knowledge of local residents.

PFRA community pasture construction never again demonstrated the pace set during the first five years of the program. By 1973, Saskatchewan had seventy-two PFRA pastures covering an area of approximately 1,799,809 acres.² At the turn of the twenty-first century PFRA pastures occupied just over two million acres on the prairies. The basic tenants underlying pasture development however, have remained an essential feature of prairie land use. Following World War II, the provincial government of Saskatchewan took a more active role in the development of community pastures, and by the 1970s provincially controlled pastures occupied almost as much acreage as PFRA pastures.³ The longevity of PFRA pastures, the expanded development of provincially controlled pastures, and consistent pressure from prairie farmers for grazing privileges stand as testament to the continued application of lessons learned during the hardships of the 1930s.

² P.C. Rump and Kent Harper, *Land Use in Saskatchewan* (Regina 1980), 60.

³ *Ibid.*, 63, 68.

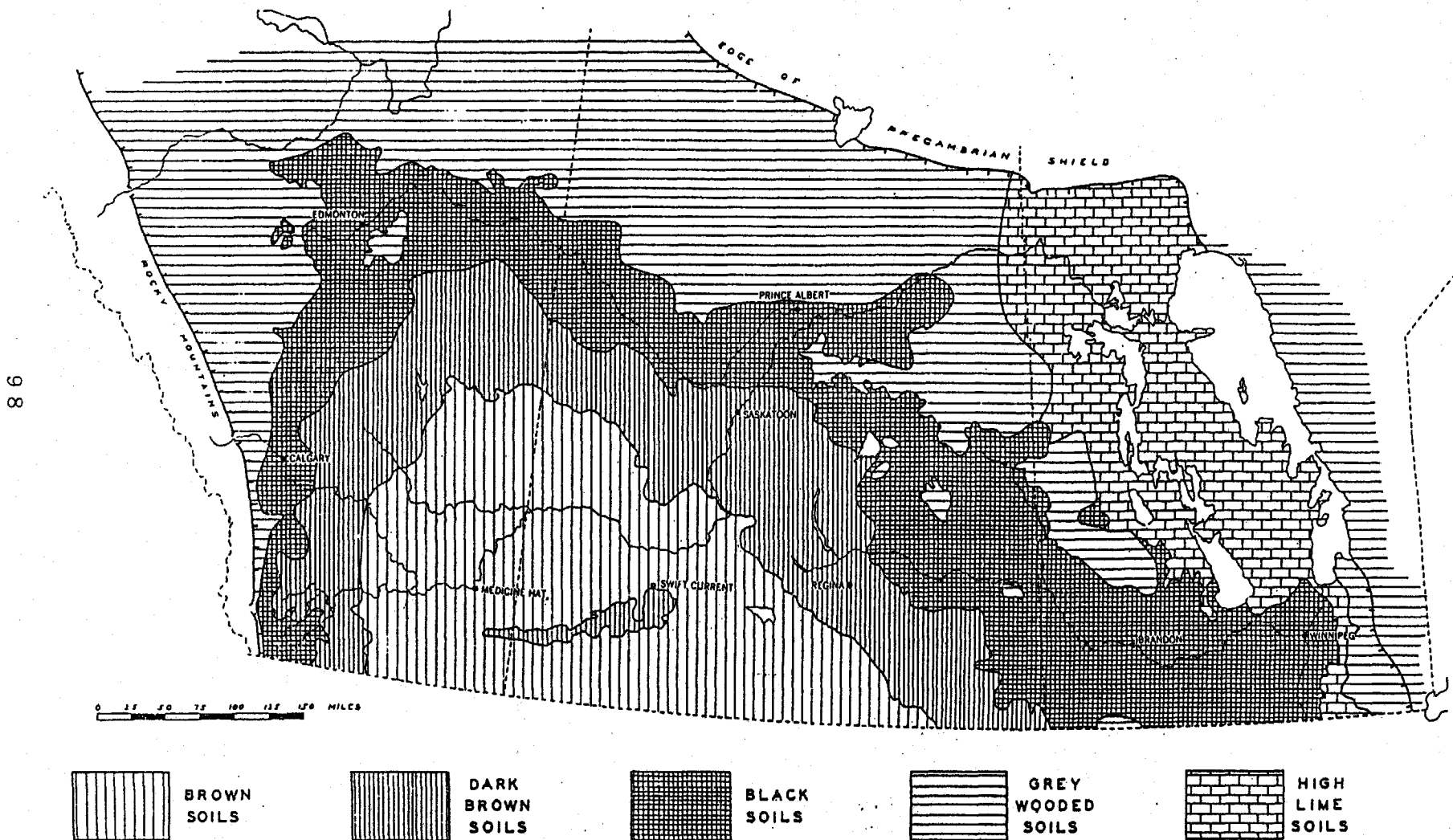
Appendix One

Maps

1. Generalized Soil Map of the Prairie Provinces, 1941, p.98.
2. Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act Area, 1937, p.99.
3. Distribution of PFRA Community Pastures, 1941, p.100.
4. Distribution of PFRA Community Pastures, 1947, p.101.

GENERALIZED SOIL MAP OF THE PRAIRIE PROVINCES, 1941.

GENERALIZED SOIL MAP OF THE PRAIRIE PROVINCES

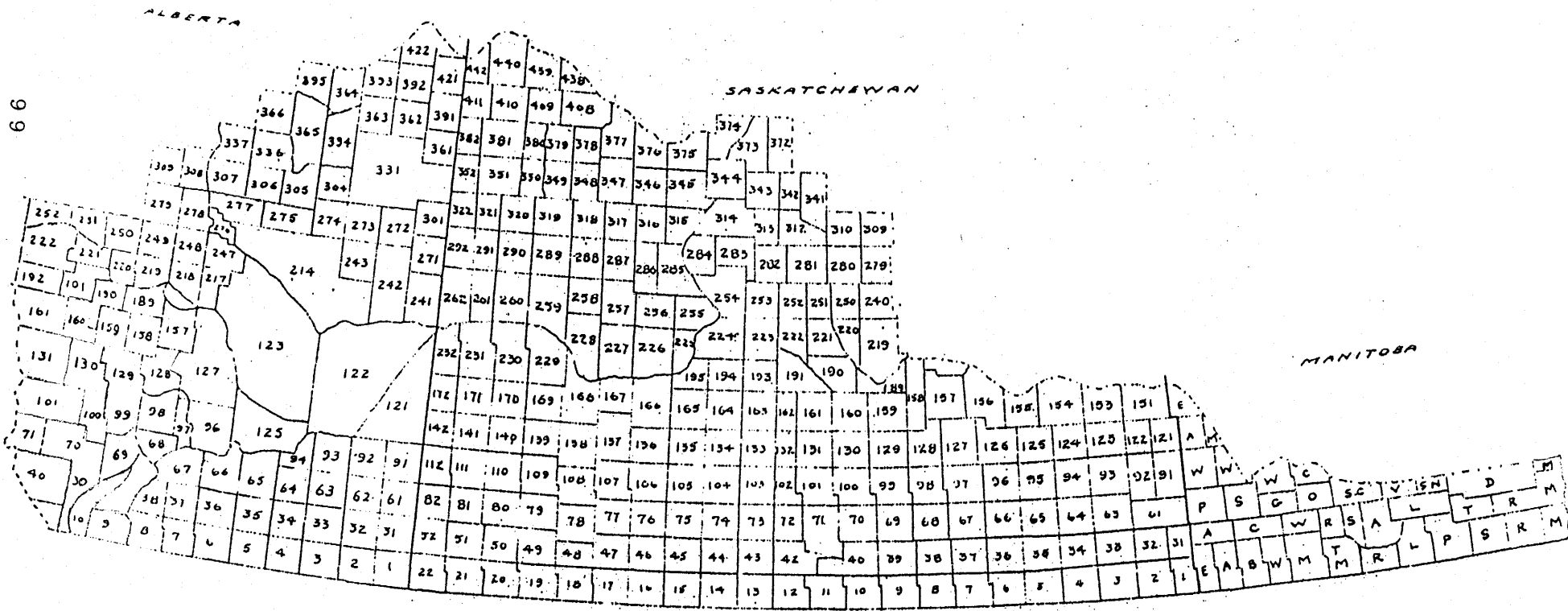


Source: Report of Activities Under the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act for the Year Ending 31 March 1941.

AREA COMING UNDER THE PRAIRIE FARM REHABILITATION ACT, 1937.

PRAIRIE FARM REHABILITATION ACT
MAP
SHOWING
AREA IN ALBERTA-SASKATCHEWAN-MANITOBA

TO WHICH
ALL ACTIVITIES UNDER THE PRAIRIE FARM REHABILITATION ACT
ARE CONFINED AS DEFINED BY THE EXECUTIVE TO THE COMMITTEE ON LAND UTILIZATION
JUNE 1937
AS AMENDED BY THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OCTOBER 18TH 1937



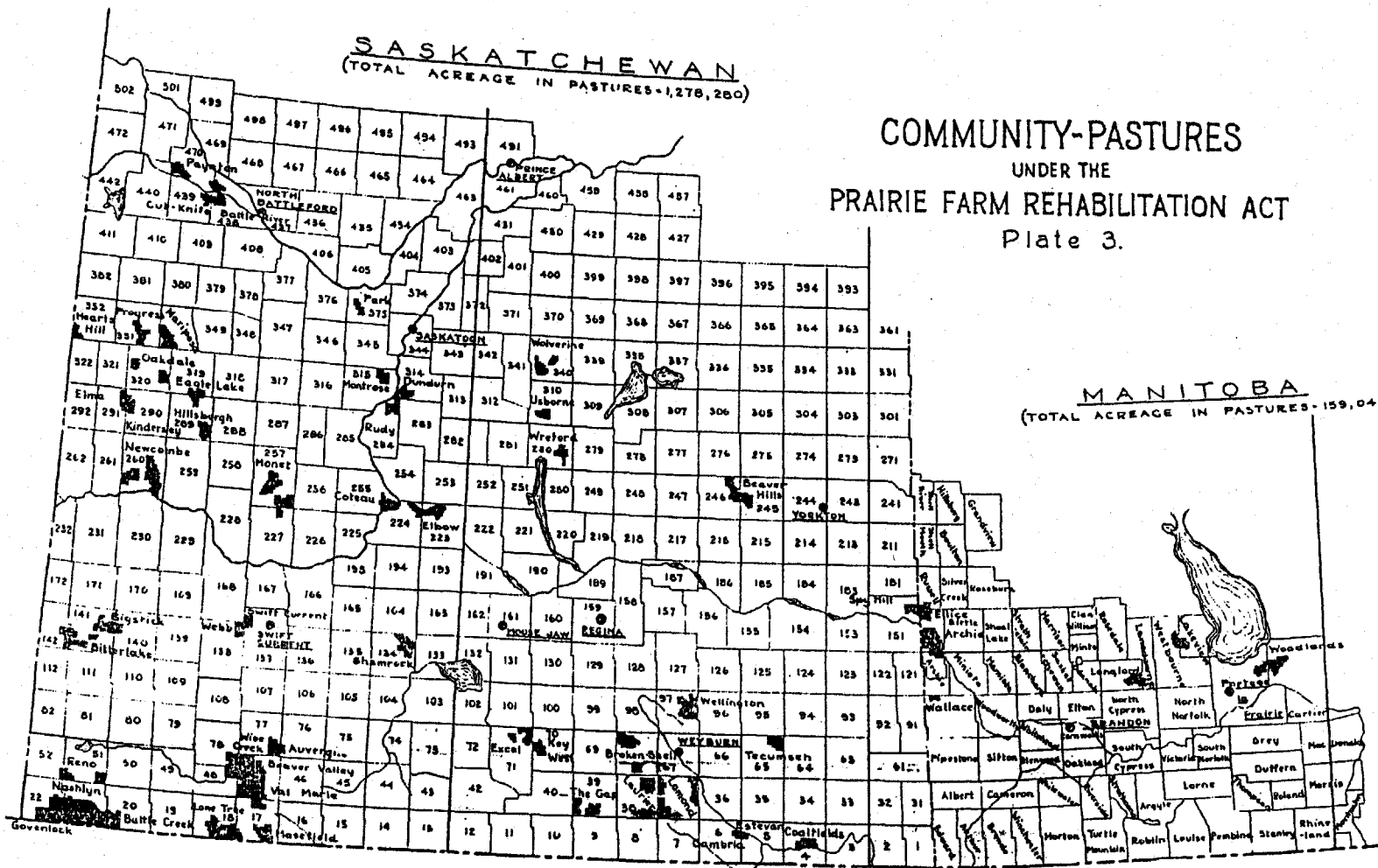
Source: Report of Activities Under the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act for the Year Ending 31 March 1938.

DISTRIBUTION OF PFRA COMMUNITY PASTURES, 1947.

SASKATCHEWAN
(TOTAL ACREAGE IN PASTURES - 1,276,260)

COMMUNITY-PASTURES
UNDER THE
PRAIRIE FARM REHABILITATION ACT
Plate 3.

MANITOBA
(TOTAL ACREAGE IN PASTURES - 159,040)



101

Source: Report of Activities Under the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act for the Year Ending 31 March 1947.

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