



May 13, 2010

Hon Nancy Heppner,
Minister Responsible for Saskatchewan Ministry of Environment
Legislative Buildings
Regina, Saskatchewan
S4S OB3

Dear Minister Heppner,

We write to ask you to reconsider your proposed amendments to the Wildlife Habitat Protection Act. Our Society has a strong preference for retaining as Crown land the 3.5 million acres currently designated as protected under this legislation. Not only do these lands provide essential habitat for wildlife in our province, but they contribute to the provision of water quality, air quality, pollination of plants, cycling of nutrients and other essential ecological services. Your government's plan to sell off portions of this land is, in the judgment of our non-profit organization, not in the public interest. These areas of native grassland, aspen parkland and wetland need to be preserved.

We recognize that your government's current plan is to sell no more than 10% of the 3.5 million acres without any restrictions. However, this policy could result in as much as 300,000 – 350,000 acres being lost for the purposes of wildlife conservation in Saskatchewan over the coming years. Such habitat loss, fragmentation and degradation will place additional stress on wildlife populations, such as grassland bird species that are already in sharp decline.

We know that wildlife habitat land sales beyond the 10% limit referred to above will have a conservation easement attached to them. This is certainly much more desirable than selling the lands without any form of protection, but at the same time, it is far less preferable than retaining the lands as protected crown lands. Over time the details of conservation easements can be changed with the agreement of the owner and the provincial government of the day, leaving them vulnerable to diminishment. More importantly, conservation easements are only as effective as the quality of the programs under which they are monitored and enforced. If any future government fails to properly monitor and enforce the conservation easements on what will quickly become hundreds of thousands of acres of private land, some of these lands will inevitably decline in the quality of habitat they offer for wildlife and in their other ecological features. (It should be recognized that

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properly monitoring conservation easements involves significant public service staff time and over the long term will be an activity that could be vulnerable to budget cuts during periods of government restraint.)

The Saskatchewan Environmental Society also does not endorse the provision in your bill that allows for the removal of land from protected crown land status based only on Cabinet regulation. Given the value of wildlife habitat lands, we prefer to see an approach taken that requires the passage of a bill in the provincial legislature, whenever lands are being removed from protected status. We also support a policy of no net loss. In other words, if crown lands are removed from protected status, they should be replaced with other crown lands with high ecological value that are protected, so that the total of 3.5 million acres is not diminished, but in fact over time is increased.

On a positive note, we applaud your government's decision to significantly increase the penalties for non-compliance of the provisions of conservation easements. We also applaud your efforts to develop the Crown Land Ecological Assessment Tool (CLEAT). Finally, we appreciate the stakeholders consultation meeting you held on amendments to the Wildlife Habitat Protection Act earlier this month.

In closing, we urge you to table your current amendments to the Wildlife Habitat Protection Act. The changes you are embarking upon, once instituted, will largely be irreversible, and should thus be more carefully considered. More consultation with our own organization and with conservation groups across Saskatchewan would be appreciated. Many species in Saskatchewan are in decline and it is important that the Government of Saskatchewan avoid policies which further accelerate the loss of vulnerable species.

If your government does choose to proceed with the bill, we urge consideration of the following changes aimed at reducing the long term loss of wildlife habitat that will otherwise result from your current amendments.

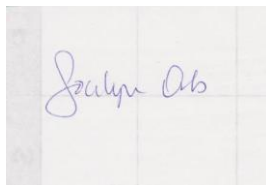
- a. Cancel all plans for your government to sell crown land in Saskatchewan's forest fringe, the part of our province most vulnerable to loss of wildlife habitat as lands are sold. In this part of Saskatchewan there are significant pressures to see wildlife habitat lands cleared for agricultural purposes or for wood harvesting. The current bill before the Assembly should be amended to prohibit any sale of currently protected wildlife habitat lands in Saskatchewan's forest fringe.
- b. Cancel all plans for your government to sell crown lands that include the fescue grasslands ecozone, of which only 3% remains.
- c. Reinststitute the policy of no net loss of crown lands designated for wildlife habitat protection purposes. Thus, all sales of crown land with good wildlife habitat should be replaced by designating other crown land with good wildlife habitat for protection. This policy should be applied in every eco-region of Saskatchewan.
- d. Whenever crown land is sold with wildlife habitat and other ecologically important features on it, a conservation easement should always be attached to the land prior to its sale. It follows that no Wildlife Habitat Protection Act lands should be sold without conservation easements.

- e. Ensure that all crown land designated as protected under the Wildlife Habitat Protection Act maintains its protected status by virtue of legislation, not regulation. Withdrawal of lands from protected status should only be possible by way of legislation. It should never be done by way of Cabinet regulation.

In closing, our strong preference continues to be to see the current legislation before the Assembly tabled while further consultations are undertaken.

Thank you very much for considering the views of our Society. We wish you well in your deliberations.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jocelyn Orb". The signature is written on a light-colored, possibly lined, background.

Jocelyn Orb, President
Saskatchewan Environmental Society

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "A Brady". The signature is written on a light-colored background.

Allyson Brady, Executive Director
Saskatchewan Environmental Society

c.c. Premier Brad Wall
NDP Environment Critic Sandra Morin
Liberal Leader Ryan Bater