



EcoServices
NETWORK

Summary and Highlights of the

GRASSLANDS CONSERVATION MARKETS SYMPOSIUM

NOVEMBER 19 AND 20, 2019

CALGARY, ALBERTA

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Introduction

On November 19 and 20, 2019, the EcoServices Network (formerly Ecosystem Services and Biodiversity Network), hosted the Grasslands Conservation Market Symposium and Think Tank, in Calgary, Alberta. The purpose of the Symposium was to foster partnerships that will establish a prairie grassland conservation marketplace.

The EcoServices Network is a multi-stakeholder group working collaboratively to develop the knowledge and capacity required to support markets for ecosystem services and biodiversity. The Network brings together researchers and leaders to support the development of a conservation market.

The objectives of the Grassland Conservation Markets Symposium were to:

- Increase understanding of grassland conservation and conservation market initiatives
- Understand demand drivers and opportunities for investing in grassland ecosystem services
- Establish leadership for grassland conservation marketplace
- Network, learn and have fun

Over 90 ranchers, farmers, conservation groups, developers, industry, government and academia attended the Symposium to identify opportunities for rewarding landowners and managers for conserving and managing healthy grasslands for ecosystem service and biodiversity benefits.

This report highlights key messages from workshop presentations and discussions, progress toward workshop objectives, and next steps towards a grasslands conservation marketplace.

The agenda is provided at the end of the document.

Presentations from the symposium are available on the [EcoServices Network website](#).

Presentations

Grassland Ecosystem Services and Values at Risk

Dr Edward Bork, Mattheis Chair of Rangeland Ecology and Management, University of Alberta

Native grasslands are one of the world's most endangered terrestrial ecosystems, with declines worldwide between 70 and 90%. Canadian native grasslands have declined over 76%, which means the ecological services provided by grasslands are at values at risk.

HIGHLIGHTS:

- Grasslands in Alberta provide forage for 1.6 million breeding cows contributing over \$3 billion in primary sales to the economy.
- Grasslands support biodiversity and provide key habitat for wildlife and pollinators.
- Healthy grasslands capture, store, and slowly release surface water, mitigating flood risk
- 10 to 30% of the world's organic carbon is stored in grasslands. Carbon stocks in Alberta's grasslands are estimated between 70 to 180 t/ha, which are comparable to carbon stored in boreal and rainforest ecosystems.
- Conversion of grasslands to cropland and urban-industrial development as well as overgrazing, recreational use and fire reduce grassland ecosystem services. Once lost, naturally, re-vegetated mixed grass prairie is difficult to recover in root mass and soil organic matter, even after 50 years.
- Moderately grazed grassland ecosystems lead to greater diversity in vegetation and bird species richness.
- There are challenges with measuring and validating ecosystem services in grasslands due to the heterogeneity, temporal variability and interpretation of management effects. However, opportunities also exist through innovations in remote sensing, drone technology, and modeling, for better understanding the effects of management on grassland ecosystem services.
- Approaches for conserving grasslands include using voluntary markets for long term protection of ecosystem services.
- Assessment approaches for establishing ecosystem service credits should place less emphasis on additionality and more on the benefits provided by maintaining existing grasslands.

Conservation Markets, Value for Alberta's Resource Sector

Tom Grabowski, President of the Alberta Chamber of Resources

Conservation markets can help address challenges facing Alberta's resource sectors through lower cost opportunities of meeting environmental requirements. Conservation markets will reward industry for environmental investments while maintaining competitiveness.

HIGHLIGHTS:

- The Alberta Chamber of Resources is working collaboratively across resource sectors for systemic and structural change that will promote economic growth and environmental protection.
- A competitive regulatory environment is necessary to attract capital, sustain its existing operations and grow its economy. Factors affecting competitiveness such as approval timelines, certainty and flexibility are strategic priorities for the Alberta Chamber of Resources.

- Conservation markets are innovative approaches to move from prescriptive to outcome-based regulation that is more cost end environmentally effective.
- Offsets could help increase certainty in regulatory decisions and reduce wait times for approvals.
- Conservation markets will require codes of practices, professional sign-off and third-party certification to ensure credibility and recognition that environmental performance has been met. They should also tie into higher order regional plans focused on long term outcomes related to water quality and quantity, biodiversity, and air quality.

Conservation Exchange 101

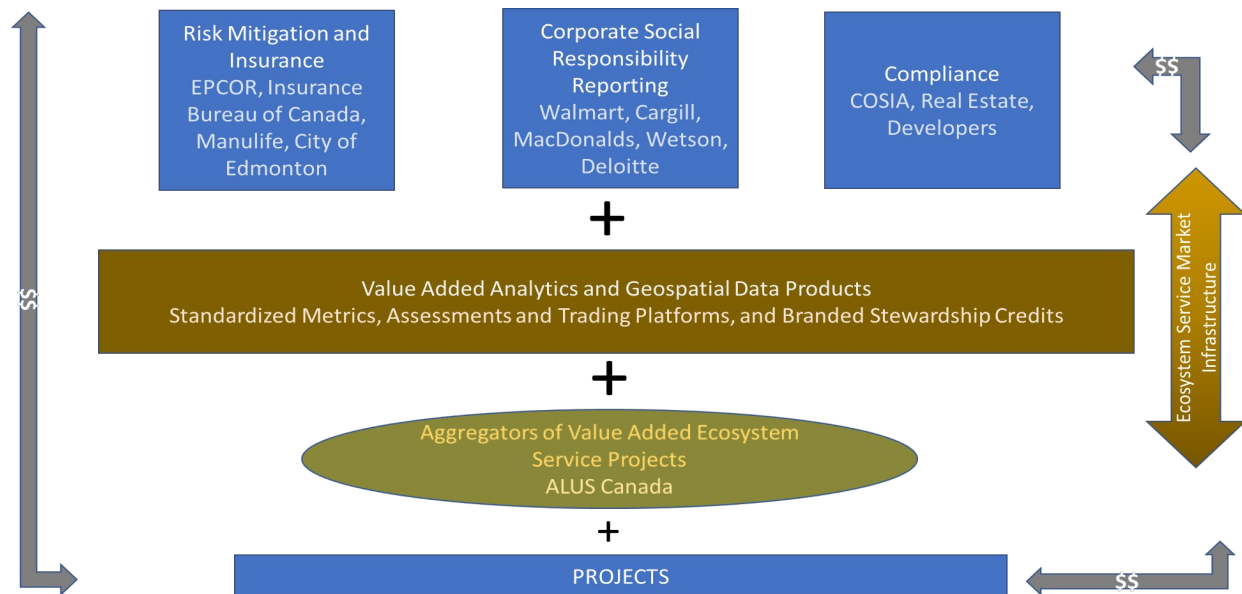
Dr. Marian Weber, [Ecosystem Services and Biodiversity Network](#)

Public demand for sustainable supply chains, risks of increasing environmental regulation, and material risks due to flood, drought, and biodiversity loss are driving the business case for natural capital investment. In Alberta, upwards of \$100 million is invested annually in ecosystem restoration and conservation by NGOs, government, and industry. However, lack of standardized metrics and institutional arrangements makes it difficult to understand the effectiveness of investments and to leverage conservation investments to improve outcomes.

HIGHLIGHTS:

- The natural capital value chain connects buyers (companies with requirements for risk mitigation, social corporate responsibility, or compliance) to sellers (landowners, managers, aggregators) through data, analytics, standardized metrics and trading platforms. (see figure on Connecting Natural Capital Value Chain)
- Data and information systems are required to link conservation investments to changes in ecosystem services that can be credited and traded in a marketplace
- Business analytics are needed to understand material impacts from degraded ecosystems and transform the way ecosystem services are accounted for in corporate decision-making.
- Market platforms support and coordinate multilateral contracting which can leverage and improve the effectiveness of conservation investments.
- A clearinghouse and exchange could calculate and clear transactions for ecosystem debits and credits. Functions Roles include registering and extinguishing individual environmental liabilities, prioritizing and targeting investments, and reporting on aggregate ecological and financial outcomes.
- The primary difference between conservation investments and conservation markets is coordination. Information and digital platforms are needed to address interdependence and complexities in ecosystem service markets, send the right price signals about future constraints, and leverage and pool multiple conservation investments to maximize benefits.
- A conservation exchange would reduce transaction costs, and provide credibility, transparency, and efficiency in the delivery of ecosystem services.

FIGURE 1 THE NATURAL CAPITAL VALUE CHAIN



Wyoming Conservation Exchange

Kristi Hansen, University of Wyoming

The [Wyoming Conservation Exchange \(WCE\)](#) grew out of multi-year process engaging ranchers, farmers, energy companies, policy makers and conservation scientists to conserve grassland habitat for sage groups in the Upper Green River Basin in southwestern Wyoming.

The goal of the WCE is to provide incentives to landowners to conserve habitat for sage grouse while enabling agricultural activities and energy development. For landowners, the exchange offers opportunities to earn income by creating or maintaining critical habitat, while for industry the exchange offers quantifiable sage grouse mitigation opportunities that could be used to streamline regulatory approvals.

The WCE developed an exchange manual, habitat quantification tool, and an exchange agreement template. In 2016, the Wyoming Conservation Exchange became a non-profit governed by a Board of Directors, with one employee and a Technical Advisory Committee.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed the greater sage grouse as a candidate species to be protected under the US Endangered Species Act in 2010, however since 2016 both Federal and State governments have reduced requirements for compensatory mitigation of impacts to sage grouse habitat. In addition, downturns in oil prices, in 2015 the Sweetwater River Conservancy opened a conservation bank containing 55,000 acres of sagebrush habitat, further reducing demands for credits from the exchange.

The Exchange transitioned to a state-wide bank with a focus on greater sage-grouse habitat in 2012.

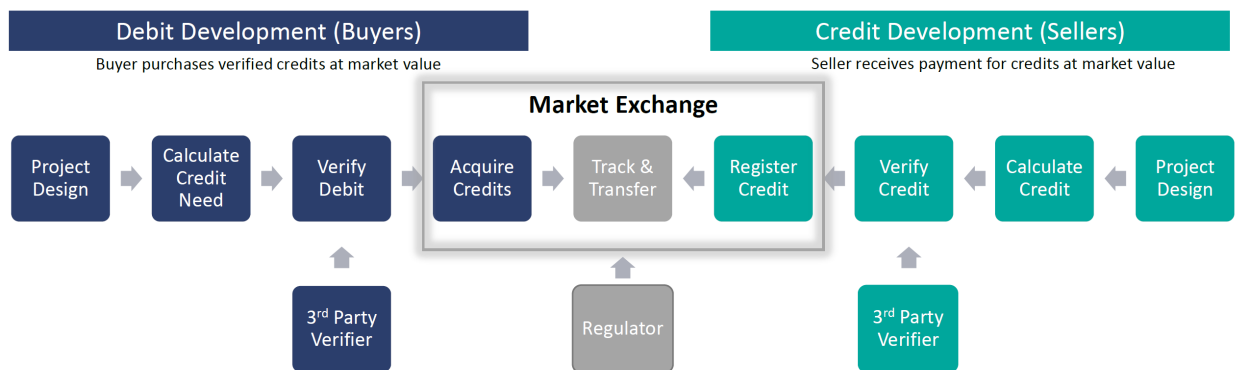
LESSONS LEARNED:

- A challenge in developing habitat protocols was finding the right balance between high resolution and high cost, and coarse resolution but low-cost quantification methods.
- No trades have occurred so far, mainly due to regulatory changes rescinding mitigation requirements, and the supply of approved sage grouse credits from the Sweetwater Conservation Bank.
- In future for the Wyoming Conservation Exchange is considering integration of carbon credits, habitat credits for other species, and opportunities in the agri-food supply chain for sustainably produced products such as sage-grouse friendly beef. The development of the WCE provided an opportunity to bring diverse stakeholders together to find win-win solutions to a common challenge.

Example of a Conservation Exchange

Toni Anderson, Silvacom

Building off the Wyoming Exchange example, Silvacom outlined the steps involved in conservation market transactions and the role for the conservation exchange.



Grassland Conservation Initiatives in the Canadian Prairies

Tom Harrison, South of the Divide Conservation Action Plan

John Cross, Southern Alberta Land Trust & Rancher

Brad Downey, Alberta Conservation Association

Cedric McLeod, Canadian Forage and Grassland Association

Two panel discussions with participation from audience members highlighted the current state of prairie grassland conservation initiatives in Canada, what issues were derailing investment, and how conservation markets could address some of the challenges in financial sustainability of those initiatives.

[South of the Divide Conservation Action Plan \(SODCAP\)](#) has helped conserve close to 250,000 acres of working grassland in Southwestern Saskatchewan, under legally binding conservation agreements with landowners that fit the needs and uniqueness of the landowners on a working landscape. Although there is high acceptance by producers, expansion of the program is impeded by lack of conservation investment opportunities.

[Southern Alberta Land Trust Society](#) (SALTS) is a rancher-based land trust working to protect open landscapes and ranchlands in Southern Alberta from urban and commercial development, and conversion to other agricultural uses. SALTS protect ranchlands through conservation easements. The easement keeps the ownership and management of land with the landowner while restricting future development in exchange for some financial incentives. As of the end of 2016 SALTS had 38 conservation easements protecting over 17,000 acres in areas located from west of Sundre to the border of Waterton Lakes National Park. SALTS also facilitates stewardship projects with landowners to improve riparian and range health. SALTS is committed to the conservation of native grasslands and riparian areas anywhere south of the Red Deer River including south central and southeastern Alberta.

[MULTISAR \(Multiple Species at Risk\)](#), [Alberta Conservation Association MULTISAR](#) works with partners to conserve grasslands in Alberta. They work with landowners to secure lands as well as to develop conservation strategies and plans that assess and conserve priority habitats for wildlife. MULTISAR works directly with ranchers to provide a free habitat assessment and recommendations for management practices that benefit priority species and are compatible with the agricultural operation.

[Canadian Forage and Grassland](#) is a national voice for producers of hay, forage and grasslands for the main purpose of supporting the livestock industry in producing high quality hay and forage products. They have been working with value chain stakeholders and partners in seeking an approved protocol for carbon sequestration in grasslands.

[ALUS](#) supports producers to implement projects that have ecosystem service benefits. ALUS channels the funding provided by individuals, governments, foundations and corporations to invest in farmers and ranchers who actively produce ecosystem services on the working landscape. ALUS operates in about 26 Canadian watersheds or communities, with half being in Alberta. Their programs are focused on addtionality and high value conservation areas.

Voluntary Demand Drivers for Conservation Markets

Denise Chang-Yen, Shell

David Y Smith, Orion Global Business Sustainability Consultants

Bob Lowe, Canadian Round Table for Sustainable Beef

SUSTAINABLE SOURCING AND AGRI-FOOD SUPPLY CHAIN

Public trust is an important challenge for the food industry. To build credibility and trust, transparency and traceability are necessary. Sustainability also needs to be to be observable and measurable. Grassland conservation will require increased relevancy for the food sector and elevating the importance of grassland conservation in the public and for food consumers.

Conservation markets could provide reputational benefits as well as supply chain security benefits for the food and retail sector. However, there are challenges due to the lack of understanding of how ecosystem services and biodiversity affect the agri-food sector, and lack of consumer awareness and demand. Companies generally measure performance against short-term deliverables while biodiversity improvements can take 20 years or longer. Sustainably standards are evolving to better integrate biodiversity and ecosystem services. Examples include Pepsico, Danone, Unilever, Nestle and General Mills.

Collaboration is needed throughout the food system and at the multi-national level to meet the challenges of systemic environmental and social problems. There are opportunities to share insights and analysis and address challenges with verification (e.g. “audit fatigue”) and data sharing. The agri-food sector requires a comprehensive, turnkey tool kit that includes data capture, measurement, and chain of custody for supply chain transparency and credibility.

CANADIAN ROUNDTABLE FOR SUSTAINABLE BEEF (CRSB)

[CRSB](#) established in 2014, was driven by the recognition by food retailers, processors, NGOs, and producers of the importance of sustainability for the beef industry. CRSB is based on the principle that sustainability is good for both the ecosystem and business through building public trust.

CRSB’s sustainability strategy is based on three priorities: sustainability benchmarking; certification framework development; and sustainability project implementation.

Land use for beef cattle production in Canada represents about 33% of the agriculture land and 68% of the wildlife habitat capacity in the agriculture landscape. In addition, beef cattle production stores about 1.5 billion tonnes of grassland carbon in Canada, with an estimated value of \$82.5 billion. CRSB has completed the first outcome-based certified sustainable beef framework in the world, certifying more than 1000 producers, two processors, and three chain of custody operations.

NATURE BASED SOLUTIONS

[Nature-based solutions](#) (NBS) are climate solutions that protect, transform, or restore land, allowing nature to absorb more CO₂ emissions from the atmosphere. Such activities can lead to the marketing, trading and sale of carbon credits. Each credit represents the avoidance or removal of greenhouse gases equivalent to 1 tonne of CO₂ (<https://www.shell.com/energy-and-innovation/new-energies/nature-based-solutions.html>).

Such projects also have extra benefits such as offering alternative sources of income to local communities, improving soil productivity, cleaning air and water, and maintaining biodiversity. Shell is supporting NBS, through investments in natural ecosystems that will contribute to its three-year target to reduce its net carbon footprint by 2-3%. Shell plans to invest up to \$300 million in NBS between 2019-2021. In order to scale up, NBS must be competitive and provide return on investment, for example, through consumer demands for NBS carbon credits at the gas pump.

Regulatory Demand Drivers for Conservation Markets

Todd Zimmerling, Alberta Conservation Association

Chad Macy, TransAlta

Aaron Anderson, AltaLink

Brendan Hemmens, Alberta Environment and Parks

Brant Kirychuk, Saskatchewan Environment

Offsets from the impacts of energy and utility development are an avenue for protecting and restoring native grassland in the Canadian prairies.

While offsets have been used by utilities such as TransAlta and Alta Link to offset impacts to native grasslands, lack of an offset policy creates uncertainty in project permitting, construction delays and

increasing costs of development. An offset policy could benefit the utility industry by creating more certainty for the regulatory process and improved public perception.

The Alberta Conservation Association (ACA) has led an offset initiative with oil and gas producers since 2003, in which companies voluntarily offset terrestrial impacts with the purchase of private lands. The offsets are coarse scale, natural region based and include third party review. Suncor, Total E&P and Shell were early participants, with ConocoPhillips and TransCanada also participating in later years. Over 5000 hectares of grassland have been protected since 2003 through ACA voluntary programs.

The Alberta Land Stewardship Act (2009) slowed voluntary participation in ACA's programs because of the lack of clarity from government as to whether voluntary offsets would be recognized within regulatory frameworks. Offset policies are evolving in Alberta and Saskatchewan.

The Government of Alberta supports conservation offsets and is examining its role in enabling an offsets market. Potential roles include governance and oversight, for example, clarifying property rights, outlining requirements for contracts, serving as an insurer in a voluntary market, increased flexibility enabling offsets to meet regulatory requirements, encouraging developers to use voluntary markets to expedite regulatory decisions.

Saskatchewan has developed a Draft Habitat Management Plan, which will help prioritize and target conservation efforts in the province and provide strong science-based guidance for development approvals, industry mitigation and conservation actions. There is currently no formal legislation or policy framework governing habitat offsets or banks; however, there is an operational framework for fish and wildlife habitat mitigation as well as draft operational guidelines for offsetting development impacts on native prairies as well as on prairie wetlands.

Measurement and Supporting Technologies

Karen Haugen-Kozyra, Viresco

Shannon White, Alberta Biodiversity Monitoring Institute

Shawn Shao, University of Guelph

Deborah Wilson, TrustBIX

MEASURING CARBON – THE CANADIAN GRASSLAND PROJECT PROTOCOL

Canadian Forage and Grasslands Association (CFGa) and Viresco, in partnership with the Climate Action Reserve in the US, are developing a Canadian Grasslands Protocol for voluntary carbon market opportunities <https://www.climateactionreserve.org/how/protocols/canada-grassland/>. The protocol provides guidance on how to quantify, monitor, report, and verify GHG emission reductions associated with the avoided conversion of grassland to cropland.

There is a two-year pilot project underway, targeting 5,000 hectares of grassland across Canada. It will act as a proof of concept to help with the approval of the Alberta Grassland Protocol by Environment Canada and Climate Change. There are eligibility requirements (e.g. land must be suitable for crop cultivation - Classes 1-4, but this will be tested through the pilot) and commitment requirements, including the signing of a Qualified Land Conservation Agreement (there can be no breaking of ground, but moderate grazing and forage cropping are allowed). There is an allowance for a 25-year agreement

with a renewal clause. The agreement goes with the land title, not the landowner. Benefits of joining the project include:

- An opportunity to generate (approx.) 0.25-0.5 carbon offsets per acre per year for up to 30 years.
- An honorarium to participate, and upfront costs will largely be covered.
- The opportunity to shape how the protocol is developed.

MEASURING BIODIVERSITY – THE BIODIVERSITY INTACTNESS INDEX

The Biodiversity Intactness Index (BII) was developed by the Alberta Biodiversity Monitoring Institute (ABMI) to assess the impact of land use on biodiversity. The BII for Alberta is developed through field sampling and remote sensing, with data incorporated into species-habitat models. The BII is well-suited for use in Alberta’s land use planning, measuring regional goals, establishing targets and priorities, and for agricultural sustainability reporting. Quantifying impacts of practice change (beneficial management practices) is a challenge due to complex relationships between agricultural practices and biodiversity, lack of local data, and limitations of metrics and indicators for “scaling down” the biodiversity benefits of grassland conservation to individual fields and operations. The BII, with advancements, could be used in a conservation market to prioritize areas of interest, or for verification and quantifying additionality.

WATER QUALITY AND WATER STORAGE - INTEGRATED MODELLING FOR WATERSHED EVALUATION OF BMPS (IMWEBS)

IMWEBS is a model developed at University of Guelph to quantify the water quantity (drought and flooding) and quality (sediment and nutrients) impacts of best management practices (BMPs) at site, field, farm, watershed, and river basins scales. It integrates economic costs, carbon sequestration and biodiversity benefits of BMPs. The model can be used to quantify multiple ecosystem service credits in a conservation market. It also has a user interface which allows users to examine scenarios and target investments on the landscape to maximize ecosystem benefits. IMWEBS has been developed for Indianfarm Creek in the Oldman watershed, and is also being developed in the Modeste sub-watershed of the North Saskatchewan River.

TRACEABILITY – THE TRUSTBIX PLATFORM

In 2015, TrustBIX created the Beef InfoXchange system (BIXS), the traceability platform for McDonald’s Verified Sustainable Beef pilot program. TrustBix demonstrated full traceability from “birth to burger”. TrustBIX uses blockchain technology to provide traceability and is a trusted third party for data management for the beef industry. BIX could also enable the traceability of rangeland rehabilitation for carbon sequestration, species at risk and wildlife habitat. This opportunity is being tested through the new Canadian Agri-food Autonomous Intelligence Network (CAAIN) which will leverage existing blockchain and data capture solutions already working for the beef industry to enable financial incentives from corporations to reach producers as they strive to meet sustainability requirements.

Risks, Challenges and Opportunities – Municipal and Landowner Perspectives

Lara Ellis, ALUS Canada

Paul McLaughlin, Rural Municipalities of Alberta

Sheldon Atwood, Western Ranchlands Corporation

Bill Newton, Western Stock Growers Association

Tom Lynch-Staunton, Alberta Beef Producers

Kelly Williamson, Saskatchewan Stock Growers

Municipal and landowner representatives provided perspectives on the risks, challenges and opportunities for building a grasslands conservation market:

- It is important that a market focus on outcomes versus practices, for example, paying for carbon in the soil and biodiversity rather than paying for fencing. Landowners should have flexibility to create those desired outcomes in ways that work with their operations.
- Low transaction costs and minimizing low is key for landowner participation
- Uncertainties include whether ecosystem service credits can be stacked,
- Concerns about the share of funding that might go to third parties and aggregators relative to what landowners might be paid.
- Pilots are an effective way to test and find efficiencies and innovations.
- Stakeholders are encouraged to invest in grassland conservation and not wait for all the answers before transactions start.
- Ranchers are faced with many pressures on the landscape, and good environmental management is just one. There are economic pressures to sell to developers and public pressures for sustainable food.
- Municipalities could be a significant partner in markets as they are closer to the landowners and understand rural communities and challenges.

Summary of Issues Raised by Participants

Throughout the Symposium participants and presenters discussed the risks, challenges and opportunities for a grasslands conservation market to provide ecosystem services and biodiversity benefits. The summary is grouped into four major themes: market structure, protocols and measurements, regulatory framework and education.

Market Structure

A safe and effective transaction is important, to ensure that payment goes to the seller rather than just solving the diligence or verification questions. There is also a need for comparable fungible commodities – i.e., does what the buyer want to pay for match what the supplier can deliver? Some participants raised points related to appealing to a wide variety of sellers and buyers, that the conservation market needs to be more than just carbon or needs to include multiple ecosystem services. There is a need for diversity in services to draw a diversity of market players, because having only one buyer (driven by

regulation) is inefficient. Pooled investments through multilateral contracts with buyers and sellers would reduce transactions costs.

There is a need to coordinate funding for a conservation market to become established in Alberta. Long-term and better coordinated funding would better support scaling-up a conservation market. Potential funding sources for building platforms and an exchange might include Environment and Climate Change Canada Species at Risk Partnerships on Agricultural Lands (SARPAL) program, which could be a start-up funding source. Several participants also suggested that some funds should come from municipalities and/or the general public because they enjoy the broad benefits from best management practices (e.g. municipal taxpayers could pay farmers upstream to improve downstream water quality and reduce flood risk).

One participant noted that a 6% return is needed to compete with other land conversion options. Concerns were raised regarding the amount of money required for assessment and monitoring compared with the value returned to sellers. In the case of the wetland offset policy, the utility industry highlighted that it cost \$500K to assess wetland suitability for restoration with only \$11K in compensation.

Protocols and Measurement

Protocols and measurement need to be credible, transparent, and science based. However, many participants have concerns with approaches that are too prescriptive which would increase transactions costs.

Good governance and efficient systems for validation, verification and/or certification are needed. These processes are necessary to demonstrate credibility to the public. However, there were concerns that verification systems may significantly increase costs

There is a need for innovation in data collection, modeling, and platform development to predict outcomes. Ongoing data and measurement challenges include:

- Complex relationships between agricultural practices and biodiversity, and difficulty quantifying the impacts of alternative practices;
- Disparate measurement methodologies;
- Challenge to obtain land use info from landowners.

Concerns about additionality and challenges measuring the gains from maintaining existing ranchlands. Need a system that rewards maintenance of healthy existing ranchlands rather than restoring grasslands that may have lower biodiversity benefits but meet the criteria of additionality.

Regulatory Framework

Lack of a regulatory framework or a clear signal from government on regulatory requirements for terrestrial offsets is hampering the development of a conservation market and the use of offsets. It was suggested the market could move forward if there was clarity on government regulation i.e. either government enables offsets to meet regulatory requirements or government steps back so that voluntary offsets will be of greater interest to industry.

A regulated offset program requires strong and explicit leadership. One participant observed that the lack leadership has led to one-off conservation easements rather than a coordinated systemic approach.

Several participants spoke to how landowners are restricted from receiving compensation for the use of their lands for hunting, which is an option in the U.S. and can contribute significant revenues to landowners. A regulatory change would be required for this option to apply in Alberta.

Education and Awareness

There is a need for continued education and awareness of the importance of grassland conservation, the value and benefits of grasslands to the public, and the opportunity for conservation markets to be an effective tool to conserve grasslands in Canadian Prairies. Target audiences include the public, landowners, government officials, financial institutions and industry developers. Indigenous communities also need to be engaged as they manage a significant amount of native grasslands. Engagement of multiple stakeholders is needed to ensure everyone can succeed.

Think Tank Summary

Interested individuals representing key stakeholder groups were invited to a post-symposium “Think Tank” in order to advance the concepts discussed during the Symposium. Outcomes and initiatives from the think tank, and opportunities to participate in future conservation market projects or events will be posted on the [EcoServices Network](#) website.