

RESULTS-BASED FEE FOR SERVICE CONSERVATION PROGRAMMING

The Ranchers Stewardship Alliance Inc. (RSAI) supports and advocates for a shift in conservation programming from traditional “command and control” policy and regulation to results-based fee for service programming. Results-based programming is an *outcome focussed process that specifies the environmental result to be achieved and largely leaves the determination of how it is to be achieved to the land manager* (adapted from Wittrup and Murphy 2012¹).

Result-based programming focuses on producing a desired goal rather than developing management prescriptions. There are often a variety of management options that can be used to reach a particular goal. Many land managers know their land base well enough to be able to create suitable or desirable conditions for a given ecological service. Management skill coupled with having a manager who can be on the land daily provide the ideal basis for results-based conservation.

One well known example of results-based conservation relevant to grassland is Range Health. The range health protocols that have been developed for Saskatchewan and Alberta and other jurisdictions in the Great Plains describe in depth the desired vegetation structure, cover, relative successional composition and soil condition for Healthy rangeland. The management techniques used to reach or maintain Healthy rangeland are not included in the protocols and are left to the land manager to determine and implement.

Despite being a results-based program, Range Health is not an adequate surrogate for biodiversity conservation as it rarely measures required conditions. For example, sage brush height and cover are key criteria for optimal Greater Sage Grouse habitat but are not measured in range health protocols. Another example is litter depth. Sprague’s pipit can use grassland with litter depths up to about 5 cm while range health protocols do not measure litter depth and assume more is better as related to litter content. Therefore desirable habitat conditions need to be described for individual species in order to develop results-based programming.

RSAI is currently involved in developing and implementing biodiversity programming aimed at recovery of species at risk. Desired habitat characteristics are defined by species and habitat experts. Those target habitat characteristics can be achieved using many different grazing practices and combinations of practices and regimes that may be specific to and dependent upon local circumstances and situations.

Ranchers who manage native prairie are supportive of species at risk and are often willing to assist in recovery programming. However, they want to be engaged in conservation programming as part of the solution. Mitigation, restoration, emergency orders and many BMPs assume grassland managers are part of the problem and focus on fixing or mitigating a problem. Because this type of programming portrays livestock producers as a threat to species at risk, and because the focus is on one small component of threat, it rarely has a measurable

impact. Fee for Service programming assumes grassland managers are part of the solution, engages them early in the process, and compensates them for their time and effort as a full partner in the recovery process. In addition, results-based fee for service programming focuses on a suite of desirable conditions for species at risk, which facilitates actual recovery as opposed to simply limiting decline.

RSAI's goal is to advance the design and implementation of voluntary, results-based fee for service conservation programming that could be used by livestock producers stewarding species at risk habitat. This program is intended to be a positive alternative to restrictive policy and legislation such as the Emergency Protection Order for Greater Sage Grouse. In addition, it is designed to be producer-friendly and politically sustainable. The development of an economic market for an ecological commodity, in this case species at risk habitat, will help put producers on an equal footing with the numerous other countries which implement fee for service programming on the agricultural land base. Unlike the status quo programming that focuses on land securement and restrictions on land use activities, fee for service conservation programming will also help sustain rural communities.

Wittrup, M.B. and K.M. Murphy. 2012. The future of environmental regulation: Saskatchewan's move to resultsbased regulation. CIM Journal (3) 2:1-9.