

A Blueprint for Range Management: The Anderson Grazing Rates Report of 1941

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Grass is pleasing to the eye and therefore pleasure giving. It preserves the soil, enriches it and spells the difference between verdure and desert.

—Anderson Grazing Report

As an agent of change, the Great Depression of the 1930s has been a focus of considerable study. The miseries and impasse generated during the long years of the Depression had their impact on federal/provincial relations, the birth of the social welfare state, and even constitutional change. In terms of agriculture, the formation of the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA) to deal with the problems of soil erosion and lack of sufficient water resources to enable agricultural development in the crippled dry areas of the Prairie West was a major response to farm abandonment and drought. The impact of the Depression on ranching, or more specifically on the leased grasslands on which it depended, is less appreciated. So, also, is the way that the Western Canadian ranch, always shaped by external techniques and practices, became reconfigured around new management ideas. In many respects, the ranch became more rooted to its

place in Western Canada by grassland ecology tested on far distant ranges and locations. In that context, the publication of a document in 1941 entitled the “Grazing Rates Report” (later known as the “Anderson Report”) was crucial in that its recommendations represented a radical shift in philosophy and practice. By reinforcing the importance of the range as a fragile variable, and by relating the value of grass to its productivity, the Anderson Report changed the way ranchers did business by adding a monetary bottom line to the emerging principles of range management. Ranching practices, then, applied by newcomers to the region, were reformed by lessons learned elsewhere to allow the rancher and his place in Western Canada to finally find a sustainable home.

Changing land use patterns involving human intervention invariably result in dispossession and alienation, a theme forming a constant in this anthology’s contributions. The rolling grasslands and wooded areas of the southern Alberta foothills country were no exception. For centuries, Indigenous peoples interacted with wildlife in a predator-prey relationship, acted out seasonally, rhythmically, and with a balance that barely brushed the landscape. The buffalo were the first to be dispossessed (via near-extirpation) by outside human intervention, followed by the Native people, their displacement to reserves rationalized on grounds that mocked who they had been. The incoming ranching frontier, sanctioned by the federal government in the name of proper progress and wise land use, replaced the buffalo with less environmentally adaptable cattle, and replaced the Indigenous peoples with European, eastern Canadian, and American uninformed strangers bent on turning grass to dollars. In this transformation, wildlife was alienated from its habitats. Ungulates consumed grass that was no longer theirs. Raptors and wolves took animals that were not theirs. Both became enemies of the new order. Milling cattle trampled delicate riparian ecosystems, fouling waters and ending the lives of the unnoticed and irrelevant creatures that lived there. Though to the untrained eye the incoming cattle regime simply dotted a pristine landscape with intermittent human activity, it had done much more. The dispossessed, the displaced, and the alienated were of minor consequence in the new age of progress where everything had to earn its keep or get out of the way.

The leasehold system

Unlike the US experience, ranching in Western Canada was founded on the leasehold system. Beginning in 1881, tracts of up to 100,000 acres on Crown land could be leased from the federal government at a cent per acre per year. This availability of cheap, nutritious fescue and other native grasses spawned the big ranches and launched the golden era of the open range industry. Over the next forty-five years the availability of these Crown leases was seen as crucial to the survival of the beef cattle industry. The prime issue with them up to 1925 concerned their security. Besieged by the onslaught of farmers, homesteads, and cash crops, leasehold size and length of tenure suffered curtailment (1892, 1905, and 1920) before being stabilized in 1925. In that year, regulations were amended, setting the maximum leaseholding at 25,000 acres and providing for 21-year closed leases. When Alberta took over the control of grazing leases following the transfer of natural resources by the federal government in October 1930, they numbered 3,778 and occupied 3.22 million acres.¹ They ranged from the foothills country to the west and south of Calgary to the arid areas to the east near the Saskatchewan border, to the short grass country in the south and southeast.

Between 1885 and 1930, when the federal government handed over control of its natural resources to the Prairie Provinces, annual rental rates on grazing land were stabilized at 2¢ an acre, a figure based on an arbitrary assessment of all western grazing land at 25¢ an acre with 8 per cent interest.² However, this low figure must be set against the volatility of beef prices which, in addition to the vagaries of the 14-year cattle cycle, were compounded by the uncertain and tariff-prone American market upon which the industry relied after 1913. Leaseholders paid no extra tax to the federal government unless the lease happened to impinge on school lands, in which case a levy was assessed, as high as 10¢ an acre in some cases. Local taxes were involved but only if the lease impinged on a municipal area or an improvement district.

The emergence of problems

In spite of the consolidation of leasehold tenure in 1925, problems began for ranchers in the not-so-roaring twenties. Faced with an unpalatable US tariff, low prices, and drought, the industry hovered at times on the brink of extinction. Two results were evident. Both gathered devastating momentum in the ensuing decade.

The first was the increasing burden of land costs. Lease rentals were only partly to blame. The main cause concerned deeded land. In most cases ranchers carried lease land in addition to their own holdings. Taxes on deeded land rose considerably in the wake of increasing demands for roads, schools, and other institutional amenities. In 1922, A7 ranch owner Alfred Ernest Cross paid \$5.20 tax on a quarter of leased land. A deeded quarter in the same township cost him \$26.34 in taxes.³ Especially in the drought-ridden years between 1921 and 1923, tax arrears began to build. In 1922, the Province of Alberta took title to 105 sections of land in forfeiture for unpaid taxes.⁴ Uncollected taxes were more than the actual levy in Alberta's municipal districts every year in the 1920s. In 1930 taxation arrears exceeded the levy in municipal districts by \$1.6 million.⁵ Even before the full onslaught of the Depression, ranchers were in dire straits. One source quoted a rate of return of 0.83 per cent on the typical ranch balance sheet between 1926 and 1931.⁶

The second manifestation of the trying times of the 1920s was an awareness of the vulnerability of the range itself. Through the first quarter of the twentieth century, government officials were ignorant of the principles of effective range management.⁷ Reports from federal research stations during this period dealt primarily with experiments designed to improve cash crop farming. Livestock experiments concerned themselves with nutritional studies, mostly involving grain finishing and legume forages.⁸

The negative effects of unrestrained breaking of land to the plough were noted as early as 1915 by the federal inspector of ranches when he wrote in his report of a patch of 20 acres broken in 1885 which "had never grown back to its natural state."⁹ However, his warning that ploughed land was forever rendered useless for grazing went unheeded. Furthermore, the stipulations on stocking rates in the various grazing regulations, for example, showed that official interest lay in securing maximum land usage. In the 1914 Regulations, the minister of the interior could compel a rancher

to stock more cattle if he felt it necessary. In 1925, the new provisions for 21-year leases contained a clause which prevented renewal if the leasehold was not being used to its fullest extent. All regulations, including the provincial regulations of 1931, referred to 30 as representing the *maximum* number of acres per animal, a ridiculously low figure for much of the semi-arid ranch lands in the south and southeast. In 1928, the federal government rejected a request by the Dry Belt Ranchers Association to set the stocking rate at 60 acres per animal in the short grass country. Clearly, land differentiation according to carrying capacity was not part of official policy.

It is also true that most ranchers agreed with the principle of heavily stocked ranges. Accustomed to an extended period of favourable grazing conditions, they seemed to accept the notion of unlimited grass.¹⁰ All they wanted was cheap and easy access to it. By the early 1920s the visible evidence presented by deteriorating range conditions caused by overgrazing, and the vegetative degradation associated with the reversion of abandoned cropland to its natural state, brought stockmen face to face with the fragility of the land. The ensuing ten years marked the beginnings in understanding the principles and merits of range management.

It was the stockmen, and not the government research stations, who first recognized the implications of range degradation. In 1924, the Western Stock Growers Association (WSGA) appealed to the federal government for assistance in arresting the erosion of grazing lands.¹¹ The result was the establishment in 1927 of a research station on a private lease in the heart of the short grass country south of Medicine Hat. Located 18 miles south and 9 miles east of Manyberries, and comprising 18,000 acres typical of the 80,000 square miles of short grass country, the station began pioneering the new science of range management.

The Depression of the 1930s

The Great Depression began for the ranching industry in 1930 with the imposition by the United States of the prohibitive Hawley–Smoot Tariff on live cattle.¹² The results for the ensuing ten years were low prices and a surfeit of animals. One led to intolerable financial burdens and an assault on inequitable land costs. The other was manifest in accelerated range degradation due to overgrazing.

Figures released by the federal government during this period showed that ranchers needed a floor price of \$6.00 per hundredweight to break even.¹³ With this floor price unattainable, many ranchers simply could not cope. Arrears in rentals and taxes piled up while bankruptcies and lease cancellations increased dramatically.¹⁴

Between 1931 and 1936 the average yearly price paid for good butcher steers in Toronto dropped over 34 per cent from the average in the 1920s.¹⁵ The Alberta livestock commissioner referred to 1931 as recording the lowest prices for livestock in the previous thirty years,¹⁶ a situation exceeded in the following year when good butcher cattle brought a dismal \$2.90 per hundredweight at the Calgary Stockyards.¹⁷ Again, in 1933, the livestock commissioner spoke about the lowest prices on record when steers off the range brought less than \$2.00 per hundredweight.¹⁸ A Winnipeg cattle dealer told the federal minister of agriculture in January 1933 that more than half the cattle sold at the St. Boniface Stockyards brought less than \$1.50 per hundredweight and many went as low as 35¢ per hundredweight.¹⁹ In 1936, low-end cattle were bringing 1¢ per pound in the Lethbridge area while canner cows were selling at 50¢ per hundredweight. Some cattle shipments actually brought less than the cost of transporting them.²⁰ Grant MacEwan, then Professor of Animal Husbandry at the University of Saskatchewan, recalled low-quality animals being worth more for their hide than for their meat.²¹

The sustained period of low prices pushed ranchers to precarious financial brinks. A survey by Manyberries Research Station of twenty-seven ranches concluded that stockmen barely met their operating costs in 1931 and that ten of the twenty-seven had to use reserve capital or borrowed money to keep afloat.²² A study involving 10,000 head showed that the production costs were more than double stockyard prices for cattle in 1932–34.²³ According to one authority, the expected rate of return on a calf was a dismal 1.1 per cent.²⁴ In late 1933, the *Albertan* (Calgary) claimed that ranchers' operating costs exceeded revenues by 240 per cent.²⁵

Land costs were thrown into sharper perspective. Put simply, they were far too high in terms of the total costs of production. One expert told the 1935 WSGA Convention that the land charges on beef production were double that of grain.²⁶ Although statistics varied with year and area, land costs hovered between 15 and 25 per cent of the costs of total production, and the value of his cattle, around 20 per cent of his equity.²⁷

It was estimated in 1937 that land taxes, together with water and fencing costs, were over 50 per cent of the cost of production.²⁸ These were ruinous figures.

Under the effect of the appallingly low prices, ranchers could not pay their land taxes and rentals. This now included leasehold rentals, which after 1930 had doubled. When the province took over the management of leaseholds in 1930, it added a further general tax levy of 2¢ per acre to the 2¢ rental already charged by the federal government on its yet unexpired leases. This 4¢ levy in catastrophic times was perceived as too much, unfair, and a prelude to bankruptcy. In desperation, ranchers sought redress in reduced taxes.²⁹ The leasehold rentals angered stockmen more than the local tax burdens. The latter was a universal signifier of bad times; the former was unfair in that the levy on grass had no relation to its worth. The general disquiet over a disproportionate levy marked the beginnings of an attitudinal shift. In the meantime, arrears began to build.

By 1936, the total arrears on uncollected taxes in 1936 totalled \$18.22 million.³⁰ Leasehold arrears also showed a significant increase in the period. At the time of transfer of natural resources in 1930, leasehold arrears totalled \$39,771.46; eight years later, the corresponding figure was \$279,873.44.³¹ In the same year, 813 leases were cancelled. Between 1933 and 1937–37, taxation arrears for municipal districts averaged \$6.2 million, more than double the tax levy. The situation in the major leasehold areas was proportionally worse. In 1935 the five districts with the largest leasehold acreage were in taxation arrears of more than half a million dollars, or roughly five times their annual tax levy.³²

Range degradation reached alarming proportions. Rather than sell their cattle at ruinous prices, desperate ranchers kept them on the range hoping for a rise in prices. In 1932, 80,000 fewer cattle were marketed in Alberta due to herd accumulation.³³ Between 1931 and 1936, cattle numbers in the province increased by 430,000 and in the ranching districts by 138,000. The impact of these increased numbers was reflected in chronic overstocking and extensive range deterioration.³⁴ One report found that over a four-year cycle, overgrazing increased weed cover by 250 per cent, and reduced grass cover by 25 per cent and forage yield by 45 per cent.³⁵ The effect of overgrazing on profits was evidenced in a study undertaken in Miles City, Montana, between 1933 and 1939. Researchers found that cows on overgrazed pastures produced fewer calves. Moreover, their lower

weaning weight, compared to those bred from cows on moderately grazed pastures, increased the feed costs of finishing them by one third.³⁶ In 1934 the government was forced to take over three overgrazed leases totaling 223,500 acres.³⁷ Two years later, the provincial supervisor of grazing warned of the “probability of Alberta grasslands being completely overgrazed and developing into a desert.”³⁸ The situation was not confined to the semi-arid lands of the south and southeast. In 1937 the district agriculturalist in more northerly Camrose also commented on the chronic overgrazing of pastures in his district.³⁹

Uncontrolled displacement had wrought its own end: rich fescue grass was dispossessed by weeds and the groundwater regimes displaced by dust and dryness. Everything, it appeared, was alienated from everything else. Farmers fled from land they had violated through ignorance. Ranchers stood helplessly while their grasses turned against them. Their solution, however, was redress, not reconciliation.

A changing mentality

As indicated, the cumulative effects of rising indebtedness, land degradation, and a growing awareness of range management created an attitudinal shift within the cattle industry. For over fifty years the cost of grass itself was assumed as a constant. Feed, labour, and cattle prices were far more volatile than the cost of grass, especially on leased land. In terms of leasehold rentals, grass was grass; its value, fixed; and its state of health, irrelevant. In referring to the livestock industry in 1936 as “a hazardous occupation which now depends on exceptionally favourable circumstances and good management to save it from financial disaster,” the provincial grazing appraiser foretold the events to come.⁴⁰ They took two forms. First were the efforts to change the way leasehold rents were structured. Second, some of the principles of range management moved from “good ideas” to regulation.

The issue of changing the entire leasehold structure was broached as early as 1932 by noted agriculturalist L.B. Thomson. In a paper entitled “Economics of the Ranching Industry in Alberta and Saskatchewan,” Thomson put forward the notion that taxes and rentals on grazing land should be linked to its carrying capacity.⁴¹ Four years later he reiterated his message to the WSGA Annual Convention, stating that “in the rating

capacity of grazing lands, it should be on the basis of production value rather than on acreage alone.⁴²

Thomson's points were well taken by short grass rancher George Ross of Aden.⁴³ Ross, who was already recognized as a leader and innovator in the industry through his work in establishing the Red Label Feeders Association in the late 1920s, was no stranger to the financial difficulties associated with large-scale ranching enterprises.⁴⁴ His family had expanded well beyond its original Milk River location before being curtailed by low prices and diminishing returns. Shortly after Thomson's address, Ross initiated the formation of the Short Grass Stock Growers' Association (SGSGA) in Medicine Hat in July 1936. After dividing the short grass country of 30,000 square miles into twelve zones headed by a spokesman, the meeting passed its first resolution calling for the provincial government to rate grazing lands on their earning capacity in relation to livestock values. By January 1937, the association had organized its forces sufficiently to approach Hon. N.E. Tanner, minister of lands and mines.⁴⁵ Implicit in its suggestion to Tanner was a promise to submit to a voluntary experiment of a new tax on production should it be approved. Tanner, who was equally interested in a way out of the financial morass that was crippling an important industry, agreed to undertake a survey with a view to classifying leasehold lands in terms of their productive capacity. Four months later, the SGSGA was able to report to its membership that "a signed agreement has been made with the Provincial Government to submit the control of grazing land to a board representing the Government and stockmen ... to administer this land on a production basis."⁴⁶

By the end of 1937, the notion of leasehold rentals being based on production seemed a foregone conclusion. In fact a formula had already been worked out by the SGSGA, one based on several presuppositions. It was assumed that 50 acres per adult animal was a reasonable base rate for grazing cattle on a lease in the short grass country. It was also assumed that this same animal would gain 250 lb. in a year. If these two figures were multiplied (the number of allowable cattle on a lease at a 50:1 ratio \times 250), then one would arrive at a figure that correlated with the production capacity of the grass on which the animals had grazed. If this figure was multiplied again by the average market price of cattle (average price in the Calgary Stockyards between July and December), the figure reached would represent what the grass was actually worth that year. The annual lease

rental rate or production tax could be established by taking a percentage of that figure. The figure of 10 per cent was suggested as a maximum.⁴⁷

The issue was, of course, was it worth it? This was what the proposed survey was all about. From the outset it was agreed that it should be conducted within a valid time frame, by knowledgeable individuals, and that it should deal with the issue from a scientific and wide-ranging perspective. In July 1939, a special committee consisting of representatives from the SGSGA and the provincial government began its investigation into the best ways of protecting the natural grasslands while ensuring that ranchers paid equitable rentals on their leases.

The special committee was chaired by Graham Anderson, an inspector with the Department of Municipal Affairs at Brooks. Described as “the best man for the job,” Anderson was well-qualified, having been assistant supervisor of grazing in the Dominion (federal) Department of the Interior. His 1924 master’s thesis at the University of Saskatchewan was on scientific range management. Tanner and his deputy minister, John Harvie, were routed into the process through their addition as non-active committee members. Members of the committee were prominent ranchers George Ross, Rube Gilchrist, and P.A. Minor.

Range management

The impetus for changing the leasehold structure was accompanied by an increasing official awareness in the merits of range management. In 1936, the provincial grazing supervisor, in recommending the adoption of range management principles, implied that there was no alternative if the industry was to survive.⁴⁸ Though the science of range management has become more sophisticated with time, its basic principles were as true in the late 1930s as they are today. Range management in the cattle industry involves the integration of land usage with beef production so that both are optimized. The key variables in the range management equation are carrying capacity, or the number of animals that can graze the land without damaging it, and the productive value and ongoing health of the forage they consume. The new production tax was seen as being consistent with these principles.

Agricultural scientists had been carrying the messages of range management principles to the livestock community since the late 1920s. As already mentioned, foremost among these spokesmen for more enlightened grazing practices were L.B. Thomson,⁴⁹ superintendent of Manyberries and later Swift Current Dominion Research Stations, and his on-site colleague, S.E. Clarke, an agricultural scientist specializing in Forage Crops and Pasture Studies. Throughout the 1930s both men were regular speakers at the WSGA Conventions.⁵⁰ Between them, they hammered home the concept of differentiated ranching practices necessitated by variable topography, climate, and grass cover. By using visual references and statistics based on ongoing research at their own facilities, Clarke and Thomson stressed the need for drastic change in the way grass was managed if the floundering ranching industry was to survive.

The Anderson Grazing Rates Report

The special committee took two years to complete its report, which was released in 1941. Dedicated to former Provincial Grazing Supervisor Albert Helmer, whom it described as “one of Canada’s first conservationists,” the Anderson Report was extensive and wide ranging. The report covered 237 pages and was based on over 100 interviews with ranchers, government experts and administrators, stock associations, co-operative marketing organizations, cattle companies, banks, breeders, packers, and veterinarians in both Canada and the United States. It also received seventy written briefs on a wide range of scientific and economic topics. The Grazing Rates Report was a solid, insightful document with important implications for both the government and the livestock industry. Anderson himself described it as far reaching in scope and ground breaking in its implications.⁵¹

He was right. Though the report’s primary focus was on a survey of sixteen ranches in the short grass country, it gave much more. It opened with a solid historical review of the leasehold system, which was put in further perspective by a scientific analysis of the short grass area in terms of soils, vegetation, topography, and fitness for economic use. The range management work at Manyberries Research Station was highlighted as a source and guide for all ranchers, and a detailed analysis of production

costs identified how short grass ranchers were facing challenges beyond their control. The report also dwelt on marketing and beef grading issues.

Government grazing policies were studied in British Columbia, Saskatchewan, South Africa, Argentina, New Zealand, three Australian, and a half a dozen US states. Here, the report found a diverse range of policy and several conciliations to leaseholders. In Australia, tenure was longer and some states offered to pay for improvements. Argentinean leaseholders paid very low taxes while South Africa included provision for buying leases. None offered a production tax. The report found that state grazing policies in the United States were similar to Alberta's in terms of their defects. However, the National Forest Service, a branch of the US federal Department of Agriculture, which administered grazing policies in national forest reserves, provided guidance. Here, a form of production tax had been in place since the early 1930s, when lease rentals were set against current prices in proportion to those in the 1920s, when the average price of cattle was \$6.62 per hundredweight. The fact that this policy had been well received by American leaseholders was a further vindication of the direction the Anderson Report wanted to take.⁵²

The report directed its recommendations separately to government, individuals, and livestock associations. Its common message to all three was to recognize and become more sensitive to the intrinsic value of grass as an invaluable and vulnerable resource. It advised the government to adopt the new formula for assessing leasehold rentals and justified the various standards upon which it was based. The report also recommended 20-year leases, the division of the province into three areas of differing carrying capacities, a herd limit of 500 in the short grass region, and a relaxation in arrears repayments.

In terms of range management, the report provided direction. In recommending that the province adopt a policy of conservation, it suggested the formation of a Grasslands Commission comprised of government officials and representatives of the stock associations to direct grazing policy and to act as a clearing house for information. It recommended that at least 25 per cent of grazing revenues be turned back into range improvement programs. The report was critical of agricultural practices in the short grass area and felt that all crop lands yielding averages of less than 12 bushels of wheat per acre should be allowed to revert to grazing.

The report did not let ranchers “off the hook.” They were advised to be more efficient in their record keeping and management practices, and proactive when it came to marketing their product. The report felt that ranchers were too resistant to scientific range management principles and warned them that continued reliance on the old ways would not be tolerated. The stock associations were encouraged to show the way in education and co-operative marketing. Above all, the report charged them to become “the foremost proponents of conservation in all its forms including wild life.”

While the Anderson Report was under preparation, two significant events occurred – events that combined to undermine its impact. The first concerned the revised lease regulations issued by the provincial government in 1940 which, in addition to guaranteeing a 20-year leases, also froze the maximum flat rental rate at 4¢ per acre.⁵³ Second were cattle prices. They were on the rise. In 1941 they were 8.62¢ per pound. It takes no arithmetical wizardry to realize that under the new formula, cattle prices over 8¢ per pound translated into a production tax in excess of 4¢ an acre. Also of note is that it was anticipated that any change to a production tax was to be on a voluntary basis. Yet the tenor of the Anderson Report and the fact that Anderson, a government employee, authored it suggested a wider application. The recommendation to accept the new formula made no mention of its voluntary nature.

Thus, for all its farsightedness and validity, its strong plea for the widespread adoption of range management principles, and its recommendation that, under conditions of drought and low prices, 3¢ an acre should be the maximum leasehold rental, the Anderson Report was in for a rough ride upon its release.

The outcome

In 1940, in reference to the Anderson Report under preparation, the WSGA had noted that “the need for a permanent land policy ... is felt by the grazing industry,” and that the results of the investigation were “awaited with keen interest.” Upon the release of the report in early 1941, this “keen interest” was replaced with dismay. Rising cattle prices and a fixed flat rate of 4¢ an acre in the short grass country had negated the need for

a production tax. After claiming that it had achieved that which it had set out to do, the SGSGA merged with the WSGA. When the provincial government called on its members to honour their agreement to try out the new production-based leasehold rentals on an experimental basis, it was met with indifference and non-compliance. Only two ranchers of the original fifty-four volunteered, and no one else from outside the SGSGA.⁵⁴ The *Canadian Cattlemen*, the official voice of the WSGA, after giving the report a brief mention in the back page of its September 1941 issue, proceeded to ignore it completely.⁵⁵

In some ways, the stockmen's reluctance to accept the Grazing Rates Report is understandable. The new formula was supposed to be voluntary. Yet this does not explain the reluctance of SGSGA members to test it on an optional basis. After all, it was they who initiated it in the first place. It could also be argued that some WSGA members, especially those in higher carrying capacity zones, preferred a flat rate. However, the WSGA was worried about more than a production tax. It mistrusted the government and feared that the new formula might be replaced by a wider levy on all production.⁵⁶ It was also concerned about the implications for government interference in the recommended Grazing Commission.⁵⁷ The fact that the Anderson Report was essentially about the need to stabilize the ranching industry was ignored.

The Anderson Report, however, had a much different impact on the provincial government. The Hon. N.E. Tanner, the provincial minister of lands and mines, was impressed with its wider implications for stabilizing the beef cattle industry and, more specifically, by linking range carrying capacity with the costs of production. To him, the Anderson Report's recommendations should have been applicable to the whole province and warranted much more than a tepid voluntary response. He began by dividing the province into carrying capacity zones as recommended in the Grazing Rates Report.⁵⁸ Three such zones were demarcated. A 50:1 ratio (one animal per 50 acres) delineated the short grass country of southern Alberta and the drier areas of the east. Along the heavily grassed foothills, 24:1 was considered a fair allocation, while most of central Alberta and a narrow trough extending south through High River and opening up in the Milk River country south of Lethbridge were designated at 32:1.⁵⁹

On 14 January 1944, Tanner wrote to the WSGA asking for its recommendations on government grazing policies in the postwar period.⁶⁰

He followed up by going public in an article published in the *Canadian Cattlemen*. He referred to the government's commitment to the ranching industry through its recently enacted regulations providing for security of tenure, and to the co-operation between his ministry and the ranchers in devising the new production tax on leaseholds. He then castigated the short grass ranchers, saying that "this plan has been submitted to the members of the Short Grass Stock Growers' Association, but to date it is regretted that the plan has not received more favourable consideration."⁶¹ Tanner left no illusions about his perception of the situation:

It is well remembered by all that during the 1930s the present flat rental rate was high in comparison to the price of beef and drought conditions that prevailed at that time. It was during this period that many of the ranchers got in arrears in their rental which made it very difficult to carry on both from the standpoint of ranchers, as lessees, and the Department, as lessor. Today the same flat rate of rental is charged as in the late nineteen thirties, yet the price of livestock has increased considerably during the same period. The ranching industry will never become stabilized as long as the rental costs are fixed and the selling price of livestock and the quantity of grass vary from year to year.⁶²

The WSGA was not impressed. Faced with cattle prices that were still rising, it attempted to counter Tanner by advocating a policy that would allow ranchers to gradually become owners of their leases. In pressing for a continuation of the old flat rate, the WSGA stalled for time, suggesting that any new production tax "should be thoroughly tested by experienced operators before being considered as a general policy."⁶³ Bolstered by the support of its membership at the WSGA Annual Convention, the WSGA Grazing Committee journeyed to Edmonton in October 1944 to present the above views.

The Grazing Committee met on 12 October with a government that had clearly made up its mind.⁶⁴ After flatly rejecting the committee's recommendation for outright lease purchases, Department of Lands and Mines officials were equally unreceptive to other suggestions, which included a universal experimentation period and the isolation of the southeast area

of the province for a longer trial period. When the Grazing Committee continued to hedge on accepting a tax based on production, the deputy minister responded by hinting strongly at substantial increases in the flat rate. Only then did the Grazing Committee bow to the inevitable. The production tax on leaseholds was accepted for a period of ten years commencing in 1945 and subject to review at the end of a five-year period. In the same year, new Grazing Lease Regulations were implemented. They tied the leases to carrying capacity more closely by limiting cattle numbers on any lease to 1,000 and bound lessees to specific conservation provisions.

WSGA President Thomas Usher told the membership that the decision came as no surprise, and that “it was apparent that the Department favoured basing grazing charges on the production method.” He exhorted members to give the new measure their full support,⁶⁵ and indicated the fact that carrying rates had been conservatively appraised and ultimately would be established on an individual lease basis. He also referred to an appeal process which protected ranchers from inaccurate carrying capacity appraisals.⁶⁶

Still, it was a bitter pill to swallow. From a maximum flat rate of 4¢ per acre between 1940 and 1944, ranchers in the 24:1 carrying capacity zone were levied 9.25¢ per acre in 1945; those in the 32:1 zone paid 7¢ per acre while even those in the 50:1 zone accepted a rate of 4.5¢ per acre, a figure higher than the previous maximum. Over the next seven years, the levies continued to rise until 1951, when the three rates were 25.25¢, 19¢ and 12¢ an acre, respectively, based on a market price of \$25.24 per hundredweight.

Conclusion

The Anderson Report was a crucial document in that it provided the scientific rationale and the authoritative voice to convince the provincial government to take further steps respecting leaseholds. Its recommendations identified principles of range management that sought to manipulate grazing in the interests of both livestock and grass. The regulations that were in place by 1945 set the stage for the maintenance of healthy rangelands under lease and for equitable rentals that were linked with cattle prices and grass consumption.

The ranchers' negative reaction to the Anderson Report showed that they were not really interested in relating leasehold taxes with the cost of production as advertised in their rhetoric. It was more about the need to correlate lease rentals with low prices but not about the same correlation when cattle prices were higher. That the new system presupposed the need to adopt range management strategies did not seem to matter.

With some modifications this process for leasehold management and rentals remained in place for the next fifty years. By 1997, there were 5,600 leases covering 5.3 million acres. In that year, they were subject to review.⁶⁷ Under the new regulations, the lease rental structure remained largely intact, though subject to changes in terminology and other refinements.⁶⁸ However, the responsibilities of the leaseholder with respect to range management were increased. Range management has expanded. The leaseholder's stewardship includes the integrated management not only of cattle and grass but other plants, microflora, and mineral, nutrient and water cycles: in other words, the entire grazing ecosystem.⁶⁹ Moreover, leasehold lands are interpreted more strictly as being in the public realm and access to them has been widened to include oil and gas activity, trapping, and recreational use.

The Anderson Report recognized the importance of grass as a vulnerable resource. It was not the first to do so. However, in tying its use to consumption, the Anderson Report made the first statement about distancing grass from the most dangerous word that can be associated with any natural resource: "inexhaustible."

The Anderson Report, its rationale, pragmatic reception, and subsequent limited impact on deeded grazing lands emphasized an entrenched human-centred perception of the land. History by its very nature deals exclusively with human activity, with change and adaptation being measured solely in terms of which humans will be affected and how. The evolution of the ranching industry in Alberta is a typical example. It has been discussed almost solely in human terms rather than as an environmental interplay between human and non-human actors. Cattle made money and provided jobs for humans. Scholarly interest, and indeed this discussion, has concerned itself primarily with how this process unfolded, and how best it could be maintained and enhanced for a wider range of humans. The land and the wildlife it sustained were instrumental to these human interests. The dispossession of Indigenous peoples, the displacement of

small farmers and squatters, and the alienation of wildlife had all been accomplished by the 1930s when prime grasslands became alienated from their natural state. The drama of the Anderson Report and the events that led up to it had only one set of actors and a miserable backdrop they had largely fashioned themselves.

Notes

- 1 Gross leasehold acreage had been steadily rising since the formation of the province in 1905, partly as a result of farm abandonments after 1920, but mostly because of the increasing amount of marginal land being sought after for grazing purposes: 1.551 million acres were under lease in 1906; 1.737 million acres in 1910; 2.563 million acres in 1918, and 2.925 million acres in 1923. See Max Foran, "The Impact of the Depression on Grazing Lease Policy in Alberta," in *Cowboys, Ranchers, and the Cattle Business: Cross-Border Perspectives on Ranching History*, ed. Simon Evans, Sarah Carter, and Bill Yeo (Calgary and Boulder: University of Calgary Press and University Press of Colorado, 1990), 123–25.
- 2 The source of this statement was Albert Helmer, federal Supervisor of Grazing. See C. Graham Anderson, *Grazing Appraiser*, Department of Lands and Mines, Province of Alberta, in *Grazing Rates Report, Short Grass Area of Alberta* (hereafter Anderson Report) compiled with the co-operation of the Short Grass Stock Growers' Association (Edmonton: A. Shnitka, King's Printer, 1941), 71.
- 3 See A.E. Cross fonds, box 114, file folder 918, Glenbow Archives (hereafter GA). cited in Foran, "The Impact of the Depression on Grazing Lease Policy in Alberta," 126.
- 4 *Edmonton Bulletin*, 24 February 1923.
- 5 Alberta, *Department of Municipal Affairs Annual Reports, 1921–29* (Edmonton: Department of Municipal Affairs, 1921–30). Arrears on Dominion lease rentals amounted to \$39,771.44 at the time of the transfer of natural resources to the provinces. See L.B. Thomson, "Costs of Beef Cattle Production," *Canadian Cattlemen*, June 1938, 126; *Edmonton Bulletin*, 24 February 1923; and Foran "The Impact of the Depression on Grazing Lease Policy in Alberta," 126.
- 6 F. Albert Rudd, "Production and Marketing of Beef Cattle from the Short Grass Plains Area of Canada" (master's thesis, University of Alberta, 1935), 63.
- 7 S.E. Clarke, "Pasture Investigations in the Short Grass Plains of Saskatchewan and Alberta," *Scientific Agriculture* 10, no. 10 (June 1930): 731–49.
- 8 One has only to read the *Sessional Papers* during the period. Heavy emphasis was placed on crop experiments. In fact, all forage experimentation was discontinued during World War I.
- 9 See "Annual Report of the Department of the Interior for the year 1916," No. 25, Report of the Inspector of Ranges, *Sessional Papers* 52, no. 1 (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1917). In his report for the year 1916, the inspector wrote that "owing to the exceptional crop of 1915, the granting of leases for grazing purposes is getting more difficult to settle satisfactorily as much land that was heretofore looked upon as worthless from an agricultural standpoint is now being entered for that purpose." Cited in Foran, "The Impact of the Depression," 127.

- 10 Clarke, "Pasture Investigations," 733.
- 11 See S.E. Clarke, J.A. Campbell, and J.B. Campbell, *An Ecological and Grazing Capacity Study of the Native Grass Pastures in Southern Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba*, Publication No. 738, Technical Bulletin 44, Department of Agriculture, Division of Forage Crops, Dominion, Experimental Station, Swift Current, Saskatchewan, 4; Resolution passed at 31st Annual Conference, Calgary, 30 March 1927, Western Stock Growers Association Papers (hereafter WSGA Papers), box 1, file folder 9, GA.
- 12 This crushing tariff exceeded the already burdensome Fordney–McCumber tariff of 1922 and amounted to a 30 per cent levy on exported cattle to the United States. Shipments to the United States from Canada dropped from over 160,000 in 1929 to less than 10,000 in 1931. In Alberta the reductions were even more dramatic. From 27,650 in 1929, the number dropped to just 48 in 1931, and a year later no cattle left Alberta for the United States. According to the Alberta Department of Agriculture, prices immediately dropped after the imposition of the tariff by between \$1.00–2.50 per cwt, followed by another decline a few months later of between \$2.00–2.50 per cwt. See *Annual Report for the Department of Agriculture of the Province of Alberta for the Year 1930* (Edmonton: King's Printer, 1931), and *Canadian Cattlemen*, June 1938.
- 13 "Brief on Grazing Lands," Short Grass Stock Growers Association, 1937. WSGA Papers, box 13, file folder 121, GA. Another economic survey in 1938–39 put land charges and rentals as 19 per cent of production in the short grass country. See also *Canadian Cattlemen*, December 1940.
- 14 Figures abstracted from the Department of Lands and Mines Annual Reports suggest that well over 1,000 leases were cancelled between 1935 and 1940. One result of these cancellations was the establishment of Provincial Grazing Reserves. By 1944 there were three such reserves totalling 223,500 acres running 3,933 head of cattle, plus another ten reserves run by approved grazing associations. In Foran, "The Impact of the Depression," 130.
- 15 "Monthly Average Price Good Butcher Steers, Toronto, 1920–1938," *Canadian Cattlemen*, September 1938, 91. The average price of \$19.59 in 1920 dropped dramatically the following year to \$7.58, and fell below \$7.00 in 1923 and 1924 before recovering slightly and then exceeding \$10.00 in 1928–29. In sharp contrast, the average price between 1931 and 1938 was \$5.50. These Toronto prices were higher than what would have been realized in regional markets such as Calgary.
- 16 "Report of the Livestock Supervisor," *Annual Report of the Department of Agriculture of the Province of Alberta for the Year 1931* (Edmonton: King's Printer, 1932).
- 17 *Ibid.*, 1932.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 1933.
- 19 Harry Vosper to Robert Weir, 11 January 1933, "Correspondence Between G.G. Serkau and Department of Agriculture Respecting the Exchange of Canadian Cattle for Russian Oil Products," No. 238, *Sessional Papers 1932–33*, 52 (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1934).
- 20 The low prices received for agricultural products during the Depression has spawned a host of stories, most apocryphal but all making a tragic point about the economic miseries of a world gone crazy. The story is told about a farmer who, after bringing his wheat to the elevator, received less the cost of getting it there. He resolved the situation by promising the elevator operator a turkey to make up the differential. A month later he brought in two turkeys as payment. When reminded by the elevator operator that he only owed one

- turkey, the farmer replied that the other turkey was to cover the second load of wheat he had just brought in.
- 21 “Interview with Dr. J.W. Grant MacEwan, Professor of Animal Husbandry, University of Saskatchewan, 1928–46, Dean of Agriculture, University of Manitoba, 1956–61,” Calgary, 20 August 1997. MacEwan himself was heavily involved in animal nutrition research at the time, and frequently published his findings in *Scientific Agriculture* in the early 1930s. He later published extensively in *Canadian Cattlemen*, where he served for a time as associate editor. “Canner cow” was used to describe those low-grade animals whose meat was to be used for canning purposes. See also Foran, “Impact of the Depression,” 130.
 - 22 L.B. Thomson, “Costs of Beef Cattle Production,” *Canadian Cattlemen*, June 1938, 42. Thomson at the time of writing was superintendent of the Experimental Station at Swift Current, but was referring to experiments undertaken at Manyberries during his tenure as superintendent. The survey represented cattle numbers in excess of 50,000.
 - 23 “The Livestock Industry of Alberta,” WSGA Papers, box 13, file folder 112, GA.
 - 24 L.B. Thomson, “An Economic Study of Beef Cattle Raising on the Range Areas of Alberta and Saskatchewan,” Preliminary Report, 1932, WSGA Papers, box 13, file folder 112, GA.
 - 25 The editorial gave a selling price of 2.5¢ per pound and a production cost of 6¢ per pound. *Calgary Albertan*, 27 November 1933. See also Foran, “Impact of the Depression,” 127.
 - 26 See “Address” by L.B. Thomson, then superintendent of Manyberries Research Station, 11 May 1935, WSGA Papers, box 2, file folder 11, GA. According to Thomson, land costs on producing 100 lb. of beef represented 12 per cent of total costs; a similar figure for grain was 6 per cent.
 - 27 L.B. Thomson, “Costs of Beef Cattle Production,” *Canadian Cattlemen*, June 1938, 42. Thomson at the time was superintendent of the Dominion Experimental Farm, Swift Current, Saskatchewan. It was felt that profits were assured only when ranchers had over 50 per cent of their equity in cattle.
 - 28 Discussion on Range Rehabilitation, 4 July 1937, WSGA Papers, box 4, file folder 23, GA.
 - 29 In 1935, the WSGA successfully negotiated for a reduction in rentals and taxes. Then in January 1937, leasehold arrears in rentals and taxation were amalgamated. *Canadian Cattlemen*, September 1938.
 - 30 “Federal Survey of Living Conditions on Alberta Farms,” *Brooks Bulletin*, 23 April 1936. See also Foran, “Impact of the Depression,” 140.
 - 31 The above statistics were abstracted from Alberta, *Department of Municipal Affairs, Annual Report, 1927–42*.
 - 32 WSGA Papers, box 13, file folder 112, GA.
 - 33 Reports of Grazing Supervisor, 1931, 1935, 1936, *Annual Report of the Department of Lands and Mines of the Province of Alberta* (Edmonton: King’s Printer). It was held that overgrazing could reduce the market weight of a yearling by as much as 55 lb.
 - 34 See J.A. and J.B. Campbell, “Grasslands Investigations in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba,” in *Canadian Cattlemen*, March, June, September, December 1942.
 - 35 The report was quoting an article by Louis C. Hurt, Senior Range Examiner, “Overgrazing Increases Production Costs by Reducing Number and Weight of Range Calves,” Anderson Report, 151–52.
 - 36 *Department of Lands and Mines Annual Report for the Province of Alberta, 1944*.

- 37 Ibid., 1936.
- 38 *Annual Report of the Department of Agriculture for the Province of Alberta, 1937.*
- 39 Report of the Grazing Supervisor, *Annual Report for the Department of Agriculture of the Province of Alberta, 1936.*
- 40 Likely Thomson was influenced by the recent move toward a production-type tax by the US Forest Service, which administered grazing leases in national forest reserves. WSGA Papers, box 13, file folder 112, GA.
- 41 Thomson's words were echoed by Clarke in an address to the 1937 Convention. WSGA Papers, box 2, file folder 10, GA.
- 42 Ross is a fascinating figure. The son of a rancher, he learned to fly during World War I and afterward became one of the first, if not the first cattleman to use his own plane for business activities. He served for several years on the executive of the WSGA, including a term as president. He was also chairman of the Canadian Council of Beef Producers and a member of the federal advisory Wartime Prices and Trade Board. Ross died at his Milk River ranch in 1956. See also Foran, "Impact of the Depression," 132.,
- 43 In the late 1920s, Ross conducted what many thought was a foolish experiment when he shipped several feeders to farms around Saskatoon to be tended by rural children. The success of the experiment confounded his critics. One carload sold at 17¢ per lb., well over the current market price.
- 44 George Ross to N.E. Tanner, 20 January 1937, WSGA Papers, box 2, file folder 11, GA. See also *Farm and Ranch Review*, July 1936, and *Canadian Cattlemen*, July 1939, for SGSGA's President George Ross regarding the reasons for founding the organization. Also see Foran, "Impact of the Depression," 132.
- 45 Proceedings of WSGA 41st Convention, 25–27 May 1937, WSGA Papers, box 2, file folder 10, GA. See *Farm and Ranch Review*, July 1936; *Canadian Cattlemen*, July 1939; and Foran, "Impact of the Depression."
- 46 On a 2,000-acre lease with a carrying capacity of 50:1 and an average price of 5¢ per pound, the formula would look like this: Carrying capacity: 2,000 divided by 50 equals 40 animals. Multiply this by 250 lb. to compute 10,000 lb. of gain, 10,000 lb. x 5¢ equals \$500. This represents the total value of the grass that year. Production tax or levy on this grass at 10 per cent is \$50, or 2.5¢ per acre over the 2,000 acres under lease. Report of the Grazing Supervisor, *Annual Report of the Department of Agriculture of the Province of Alberta, 1936.*
- 47 Known as "LB," Thomson, according to Grant MacEwan, was a no-nonsense, very capable, and highly respected administrator. MacEwan remembers him as the only Western agriculturalist "who Jimmy Gardiner [federal agriculture minister] would ever listen to." See also Foran, "Impact of the Depression," 135.
- 48 Report of the Grazing Supervisor, *Annual Report of the Department of Agriculture of the Province of Alberta, 1936.*
- 49 L.B. Thomson, "Costs of Production and Land Charges," 1935, "Carrying Capacities and Beef Production," 1936; S.E. Clarke, "A Study of Our Range Pastures," 1929, "The Differences Between Grass in the East and in the Foothills," 1932, "Providing Feed for Range Livestock," 1935, "Leaseholds and Production Costs," 1937.
- 50 Anderson Report, 17.
- 51 Ibid., 50

- 52 Ibid., 91–93; *Canadian Cattlemen*, March 1940.
- 53 See “Revised Alberta Lease Regulations,” *Canadian Cattlemen*, March 1940, 359; and *Annual Report of the Department of Lands and Mines of the Province of Alberta*, 1940. It is interesting that while the three-year cancellation clause remained in effect, this long-contentious issue had ceased to be of concern. The soil surveys which had followed the provisions of the new Land Act in 1939 had clearly classified the true agricultural potential of land.
- 54 “N.E. Tanner to WSGA Board of Directors, 14 January 1944.” WSGA Papers, box 2, file folder 12, GA. The 54 members who had originally said they would be part of the production tax experiment represented 1,045,000 acres of leased land. See “Grazing Rates Report,” p. 9, in the same file. Though not documented, it is likely that George Ross was one of the two who did volunteer.
- 55 The report’s lack of mention in subsequent issues indicated that it had been conveniently forgotten.
- 56 “Resolution passed at 42nd Convention, 2–3 June, 1938,” WSGA Papers, box 2, file folder 11, GA.
- 57 “Board of Directors Meeting, 22 October 1941,” *ibid.*
- 58 On 3 April 1939, the legislature of the Province of Alberta had assented to an important new Act, “An Act to Amend and Consolidate the Provincial Lands Act,” Chapter 10, *Statutes of Alberta, 1939* (Edmonton: King’s Printer, 1939). This Act abolished the old Homestead System and replaced it with an Agricultural Leasing policy. The Act also directed the minister of lands and mines to divide the province for land utilization purposes.
- 59 Later a 40:1 animal zone was added to include most of the area north of Edmonton. See Map, “Alberta, Grazing Capacity and Grazing Rates, 1951,” GA.
- 60 “Tanner to Chairman of WSGA Grazing Committee, 14 January 1944,” WSGA Papers, box 2, file folder 12, GA.
- 61 N.E. Tanner, “Alberta’s Grazing Policy,” *Canadian Cattlemen*, March 1944, 172–73.
- 62 *Ibid.*
- 63 “Report of Grazing Committee, WSGA Annual Convention, 15–16 June 1944,” WSGA Papers, box 2, file folder 13, GA.
- 64 For more details, see “Meeting with Government and Grazing Committee, 12 October 1944,” WSGA Papers, box 2, file folder 13, GA.
- 65 Usher’s words were conciliatory: “This may seem a pretty drastic change for some, but I would ask all our members to give the plan a fair trial before passing judgment on it.” See *Canadian Cattlemen*, December 1944.
- 66 Following the first year of the new arrangement, the Department of Lands and Mines reported on its satisfactory implementation, noting that very few ranchers had resorted to the appeal process: *Annual Report of the Department of Lands and Mines of the Province of Alberta*, 1946. The department was correct up to a point in that objections were expressed mainly in terms of carrying capacity appraisals. The real issue at stake was not so much the objections as the fact that ranchers realized that the era of flat rates was gone forever and that the production tax was a *fait accompli*.

- 67 “Review Focuses on Grazing Leases, Public Lands,” *Western Producer*, 12 June 1997, <http://www.producer.com/1997/06/review-focuses-on-land-use-grazing-leases/>, (accessed 7 August 2016); “Grazing Leases Discussed with Thurber Commission,” *Western Stock Grower*, July 1997, 4.
- 68 Government of Alberta, *Alberta Lease Review Report* (November 1998) (Edmonton: Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, 1997). The basis for assessment rests on Animal Units and Animal Unit Months.
- 69 *Grazing Lease Stewardship Code of Practice* (Edmonton: Alberta Sustainable Resource Development, 14 December 2007).

