FOOTHILLS FORAGE AND GRAZING ASSOCIATION
Innovation, education and regenerative agriculture

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GRASSROOTS NEWS & VIEWS
August 2026

Director's Note—Matt Malyk

Greetings FFGA Members

Pasture, hay fields, and crops sure got a nice boost with the June rains this year! July has been warm and sunny making for some nice haying weather. Our family went on a trip to interior BC in mid-July and there was a lot of hay bales put up down the 22HWY between Diamond Valley and Crowsnest Pass. Very nice to see! The crops look voluminous too!

My mind then wonders to what appears to be readily available feed for cattle this fall and winter, compared to previous years. Which should equate to more affordable feed sources this winter, potentially.

On our operation, we've been extending our grazing season for the past 5 years utilizing straw bunches/chaff piles with some supplementation for our dry bred cows. Then when they get closer to calving, we transition them to polyculture swath grazing, and then calve on swaths (April-May). That said last winter we tried bale grazing hay on some sub-prime pasture areas for the first time. This was possible because we drilled a well and installed a year round solar waterer on that piece of land. Looking at the cost of the well and the solar water system, it seemed like a very costly endeavour. But when we crunched the numbers and looked at the opportunities it created for us, it opened a lot more doors to bring the cows to the feed, reducing our overall winter feeding costs. Its amazing to me how much of an improvement that area of pasture has shown already where we bale grazed. Even though it was an added cost to buy feed and haul in, compared to straw bunches and swath grazing; the added nutrients, increased soil water holding capacity, and increase productivity in pasture volume it created in the sub-prime pasture areas, made it very much a worth while experiment.

We are going to be grazing cover crops for the first time this late-summer and fall. Which, Im sure it will be a learning experience with wins and lessons. Our goal is to try and rest some perennial pastures before our first frosts; but also capitalizing on the higher quality forage provided by the cover crops for the pairs going into fall compared to the advanced maturity pastures. Hopefully this equates to better cow and calf gains prior to weaning, and soil health benefits in following years on the crop land.

With the busyness of summer projects and commodity market monitoring and strategizing, its also important to take a moment and appreciate what we get to do on a daily basis. Yup, here's the sappy part of the directors note. Personally I have to work at not getting caught up in all the work projects and time critical events the summer and fall has. Its important to stop and take the time to look up, and admire what we are blessed with, and smile. Time is the only commodity we manage that we cannot trade to get back. Taking a moment to appreciate what nature shows us and the family and friends that surrounds us is always time well spent.

I'm looking forward to seeing you fine folks at future FFGA events, such as the Stockmanship schools this fall, KLR Marketing school in January, or the Western Canada Conference on Soil Health & Grazing in December.

Keep smiling,

Matt Malyk

Photo: Matt Malyk

IN THIS ISSUE

On the Cover: Celebrating Pastoral Stewardship: Research & Ranching Together at the Stavely Research Ranch. Photo: FFGA

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4 Ways to Improve Your No-Till Soil Health


Photo: FFGA

Worms, fungal glue, chemicals leaked from plants and the feces of microscopic mites: This unappetizing cornucopia is just a sampling of the teeming world of the soil, where underground communities of tiny organisms are key to farm productivity.

"When you're standing on your ground, you're standing on the rooftop of this whole other world that is there to work for you," said Jill Clapperton, a private soil health researcher and speaker.

1. To Build Soil, Start With the Root Zone

The root zone, or rhizosphere, is the most biologically active part of the soil. After all, the roots of living plants anchor the entire soil ecosystem, Clapperton said.

Mycorrhizal fungi colonize around roots to exchange nutrients with the plants. In doing so, the fungi serve as a barrier against pathogens. They also produce a gluelike substance called glomalin that stabilizes the soil and helps it resist erosion.

Mycorrhizal fungi grow around the roots of most plants, including corn, soybeans and even weeds like johnsongrass. But they don't associate with brassicas like canola.

As important as these fungi are, they are only a small part of the soil ecosystem, Clapperton said.

Most soil microbes are decomposers, and others are predators that keep nutrients moving through the system.

Tiny mites eat fungi. The mites concentrate nutrients in their scat, which contributes to soil structure and provides food for bacteria and other fungi. Add in protozoa, nematodes and insects, and there's a lot of things eating other organisms or their waste.

Some of the microbes that get eaten in this food web would otherwise be trying to attack the plant, Clapperton said.

Central to this system are the fungi that exude enzymes allowing them to break down woody crop residue and mine it for nutrients.

"We need them to do that because they take all the goodies out, and then they start recycling them," Clapperton said.

To her, the first steps to maintaining these healthy underground communities are to keep plants growing in the soil, and to minimize soil disturbance through practices such as no-till.

"Soil is a habitat, and you can't go destroying the habitat all the time and expect that you're actually going to succeed" in building the soil, Clapperton said.

2. Adding Plant Species to a Field Can Have Benefits

Planting multiple species in a field — whether in a cover crop mix or a cash crop-companion crop pairing — provides the soil with plants that support different microbial communities.

Research has also found that multiple species growing together can draw down soil moisture less than a monocrop will.

The abundance of plants in a multispecies field shades the soil well. This cools the ground and allows roots to function during hot days when they might shut down in a monocrop situation.

Moreover, multispecies plantings also have a knack for sharing water and nutrients.

"They're woven together," Clapperton said. "They share resources. Ones that get more because they're mycorrhizal, they'll share with ones that don't get as much."

3. Select the Right Cover Crop for Your Purposes

Plant diversity is only good if all of the species germinate, so packages with a dozen species may or may not be what a farm needs. Clapperton recommends farmers try growing mixes with three species.

Occasionally, a cover crop may prove unsuitable for a field. In dry Kansas, Clapperton noticed her milo suffered every time it got rain — the opposite of what it was supposed to do.

The rye cover crop residue had persisted in the parched conditions, and Clapperton determined the rain was washing allelopathic chemicals, which inhibit competitor plants, out of the rye residue and into the milo.

The Mid-Atlantic climate is wetter than Kansas', making such a situation less likely in Pennsylvania — but not impossible.

"What I would say is more diversity, more broadleaves, not as much rye, and then that way that can't happen to you no matter what," Clapperton said.

Perhaps more important, Clapperton recommended planting the biggest and best cover crops before corn and soybeans, not small grains.

Wheat and similar plants have root systems that are too small to feed an abundant microbial community, so the starved ecosystem may tank, she said.

4. Trace Elements Help Plants Defend Themselves

When insects start feeding on a plant, the plant sends a signal to its neighbors to protect themselves.

In their leaves, the plants build up lignin and other substances unpalatable to insects, a process that requires trace elements.

"It's really our job to make sure that those micronutrients are there and available to them so that if they have to armor up, they can," Clapperton said.

As it happens, fungicides are loaded with trace minerals that help with the delivery of the active ingredient, and Clapperton thinks these micronutrients are doing more than farmers realize.

"I'm convinced that sometimes when we see advantages of a fungicide, it's not from a change in the disease pattern, but actually from the nutrition that's being provided by the fungicide itself," she said.

In lieu of a fungicide, she said farmers might in some cases try applying humic acid with a foliar fertilizer adjusted to a neutral pH.

Author: Philip Gruber

Original Article: https://www.no-tillfarmer.com/articles/13076-4-ways-to-improve-your-no-till-soil-health

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Long live the limber pine

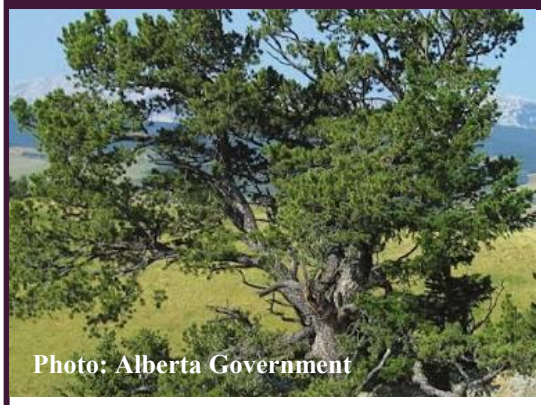
Photo: Alberta Government

The limber pine is a coniferous tree species that is vital to the ecosystems and wildlife of southwestern Alberta. However, these trees face a myriad of pressures that threaten their survival. Producers with private lands or grazing tenures that contain limber pine habitats can take steps to help preserve the tree's dwindling population.

"It is kind of a really iconic tree for southwest Alberta," says Whitebark Pine Ecosystem Foundation of Canada director Jodie Krakowski. "You'll often see it growing in these dry, rocky ridges. Sometimes it's the only species that can really kind of persist in those really tough spots. Kind of like Alberta ranchers a little bit."

Ecosystem services

This hardy tree provides many benefits to surrounding and downstream ecosystems and wildlife. For example, it provides habitat for insects, small mammals and birds. The tree's large and nutritious seeds are an important food source for small species like squirrels and birds, including the Clark's nutcracker, and even small bears.

To survive in its harsh habitat, limber pines must grow deep roots.

"They have giant long roots to reach the moisture and nutrients that they need," Krakowski says. "So, they really anchor a lot of soils and steep slopes – that's a really important function. Even after they're dead, they continue to do that."

In addition, limber pines provide benefits to fish habitats by providing shade that slows snowmelt and contributing to headwater ecosystem resilience.

"The snowpack can last two or three weeks longer," Krakowski says of areas with standing limber pines. "Because these areas are the headwaters of a lot of important streams, they help keep a source of cool water in a lot of those streams as well."

The multi-functioning and biodiversity-promoting limber pine also contributes directly and indirectly to human well-being, too.

"All Indigenous nations within the range of this species used the seeds as food and to trade," Krakowski says. "They also used other parts of the tree for making smudge, making textiles and ceremonial goods; pitch (sticky resin trees produce as a defense mechanism) was used for waterproofing and as gum, and limber pines could be important place markers where there were particularly picturesque trees."

Threats

Unfortunately, many pressures are pushing the limber pine to the brink of extinction. Indeed, Alberta is at risk of losing 50 per cent of its limber pine trees in the next 100 years, the Waterton Biosphere Reserve Association (WBRA) reports. This figure increases to 75 per cent in southwestern Alberta. The biggest threat to this species is white pine blister rust.

"White pine blister rust is a fungus introduced to North America and since the early 1900s has just spread across the continent. It attacks the five needle pines, so limber pine and whitebark pine in Alberta," says WBRA conservation biologist Elizabeth Anderson. "We can see upwards of 90 per cent mortality in some of those stands already on the landscape. The tree has very little defence against the rust when it is infected."

The fungus enters the needles and then grows down the branch into the main stem, disconnecting the water and nutrient supply, which ultimately kills the tree.

Only a small percentage of trees have a natural resistance to the disease, and these rare plants are key to species recovery. Dedicated teams scour limber pine ranges to scout for rust-resistant trees. They harvest the seeds to develop seedlings for restoration efforts.

The slow nature of limber pine's cone production cycle poses another challenge for the species. Seeds that are not eaten by animals or overcrowded by other vegetation will generally germinate within two years, but a full-grown tree takes up to 50 years to produce its first cones. Even then, a tree can take 60 to 80 years to produce full cone crops, which only happens in a two to four cycle.

Other threats to limber pines include wildfires, fire suppression changing the habitat to favour competing species over limber pine, mountain pine beetles, human development and climate change.

Mitigative measures

The first step producers can take in protecting limber pines is identifying if these trees exist on their properties or leased ranges.

The easiest identifying characteristic of a limber pine is its bunches of five needles.

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Cattle often avoid places where limber pines grow, because forage quality near them isn't ideal, but may seek shade amongst these trees if there are no other options or travel through stands towards preferred grazing areas.

"We're really recommending some consideration of how they're grazing in those landscapes," Anderson says.

For example, producers can use drift fencing, salt blocks, water systems or shade structures to guide cattle away from these sensitive areas. Ultimately, producers want to prevent cattle from breaking off cone-bearing branches or trampling seedlings.

If grazing in these areas is necessary, producers are encouraged to use 25 per cent of the annual forage production followed by a longer rest period.

At his family's cow-calf operation, Dylan Zoratti of Pincher Creek installs electric fencing that lines the perimeter of limber pine stands. Zoratti, along with his brother and parents, raise 230 cow-calf pairs and manage 3,000 acres of hay and pasturelands in the foothills of southern Alberta.

Since using exclusion fencing, Zoratti has noticed a difference in the grassland's vigour with a bit more grazing management diligence in these sensitive areas.

Scientists have monitored and studied limber pines on the Zoratti family's grazing ranges for over 15 years and discovered critical rust-resistant trees.

Even if producers do not have rust-resistant trees, established small seedlings and large mature trees on their properties can still help support the ecosystem and bridge the gap to establishing resistant adult trees.

Overall, limber pine protection requires a long-term outlook and commitment to ensure species viability for the next generation of ranchers.

"A simple thing … that's kind of always going through my head with this is: protect the trees, protect the water and the cattle will flourish," Zoratti says. "It's kind of more of a long-term thinking for sure."

Author: Kate Ayers

Original Article: AB Beef Magazine

Virtual fencing at $125 a head: Does it beat barbed wire?


Photo: FFGA

John Smith and Laura Laing say the move early in 2026 to virtual fencing technology with their 450-head cow-calf operation in southern Alberta represents one of the biggest advancements to the ranching industry since the introduction of barbed wire.

Ironically, as they outfitted their herd with solar-powered neck collars that are guided by GPS satellite signals, the biggest learning curve for them is realizing that fences are no longer needed.

Why it matters

Cross-fencing is one of the largest capital and labour costs on a cow-calf operation, and on remote or leased range it is often impossible to build at all. Virtual fencing shifts grazing distribution from posts and wire to a phone, which changes what a rancher can manage and how much country they can manage it across.

"It takes a while just to get your head around the fact that we don't need fences anymore," says Laing.

"We don't even have to close a gate anymore. The technology controls cattle movement for you, and as we are learning it can also do so much more."

Smith says the benefits have become clear.

"In just the last few months as we've been using this technology you soon begin to realize that the fencing you do have can be a pain in the butt," he says.

"For example, in giving cattle access to water we had a fencing system that allowed cattle access to a watering site. Now with virtual fencing you can set the parameters using GPS coordinates allowing cattle more direct access to that water and the fencing is actually in the way."

Third generation, 65,000 acres

Smith and Laing are the third generation on Plateau Cattle Company, a commercial cow-calf operation west of Nanton, Alta.

Along with the homeplace that includes about 1,200 acres of mostly pasture and hayland, they have a Crown grazing lease that covers about 65,000 acres in the Livingstone Range.

Smith and Laing had been investigating the opportunities of virtual fencing technology for seven or eight years. When they were contacted in 2025 by Halter, a New Zealand company that was looking to introduce its technology into Canada, they went for it.

"We liked the design of the collars: neat and compact, yet very durable," says Smith. "And the technology appeared easy to use."

Halter, created by a New Zealand dairy farmer about 10 years ago, provides services to more than 2,000 farmers and ranchers across New Zealand, Australia and the U.S., with about two million head of cattle wearing the virtual fencing collars.

Three pounds, two solar panels

Outfitting a herd with virtual fencing technology consists of a technology -loaded, belt-style collar that goes around the animal's neck. The Halter collar has two small solar panels on the top side of the collar to charge the batteries, and each collar is weighted at the bottom to keep the solar panels facing up. Each collar weighs about three pounds. All controls for the collar are within the Halter app for your smartphone.

"It takes a bit of learning, but if you can use a smartphone you can learn to use the Halter app," says Smith.

When Halter technicians arrived at the ranch in January to help get the herd equipped with virtual fencing, the system relied on setting up GPS towers that could receive cellphone service. Each tower had an eight-kilometre radius range. Plateau initially needed two towers.

However, it wasn't long before Halter partnered with Rogers Communications to use satellites to deliver signals for smartphone service and collars. The towers were no longer needed. Having the system operate with satellite service certainly simplified the whole virtual fencing concept. The towers provided good GPS service on relatively flat ground, but for the mountain pastures Smith estimated he would have needed eight to 10 cell phone towers.

While Smith and Laing did a fair bit of research on virtual fencing systems, they really didn't know what to expect from the technology. Their first priority was to use the virtual fencing to help manage cattle on their extensive and remote Crown grazing lease. The technology would help manage grazing and also be able to track and locate animals over that 65,000-acre lease.

"We have only been at this for about five months, but we are continually amazed at what the virtual fencing technology can do," says Laing.

"We are just getting started, and I believe we are going to see more and more applications as the months roll by. In some ways the only limits of what it can do may be our imagination."

Thirty minutes to learn the beep

As Halter helped to install equipment in January, Plateau started out easy, outfitting the herd with collars for use on barley swaths used for winter grazing near home. When they attached the collars, they selected the hole spacing that allowed room for two or three fingers between the collar and the cow's neck. For yearlings or first-calf heifers, it is important to leave enough room to allow for growth of the animal.

The barley was cut in 30-foot-wide swaths. Then, they created a virtual GPS fenceline every 30 feet. With the fencelines mapped out on the Halter app and the collars activated, cattle could graze a swath, but as they

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reached that next 30-foot virtual fence, the collar activates a deterrent signal.

As cattle approach that GPS line — that virtual fenceline — the collar first emits a beep, which increases with intensity as the animal gets closer in more rapid succession. If the animal walks right up to the grid line, the collar delivers an electric pulse, not quite as strong as an electric fence, causing the animal to turn back. As cattle learn these signals, the rapid succession may be enough to turn most animals back.

The collars can also be used to move cattle to the next swath, or to the next pasture as the case may be. As cattle are done grazing one area, the app can be used to drop the next GPS fenceline — cancel the next virtual fence — and the collars will emit a vibration for those animals that are pointed in the right direction to advance to the next swath.

"This took a little more training," says Smith. "The first couple times I went out with the feed truck and drove along the next swath, which attracted the cows to move forward." He had to do that a couple times, but the herd soon learned that the vibration was the signal to move.

The app can be programmed to automatically schedule a move for the next day or even several days in advance.

Laing says it takes about 30 seconds for the cows to get used to wearing the collar and about 30 minutes for them to figure out the meaning of the beep signal followed by the electric pulse.

"The pulse is strong enough that it will deter a cow from following her calf if the calf crosses the virtual fenceline," says Laing. "It's not a major concern, but you need to keep in mind there is a risk of them getting separated."

Along with those basic management tools related to virtual fencing, the technology can do so much more. Laing says they are learning that the sky's the limit. If you're looking for a particular animal, enter its tag number into the app, and the collar will light up, making it easy to find the animal at night or in a snowstorm.

The app can be used to group cows by collar colour. For example, you can select near calvers and late calvers and divide them into groups using collar colour.

Plateau follows the Sandhill calving system, which involves having groups of cows and calves with similar ages in separate pastures. The collars can be used to identify cows with calves in each age group and create the virtual pastures for each group.

This year, as Plateau plans to breed about 40 head by artificial insemination, the collars and colour lighting can be used to identify that group of females.

Onto the mountain

As of early June, the herd was not yet out to the summer pasture in the mountains, but Smith sees several benefits for pasture and breeding management.

"Rather than have the herd potentially spread over 65,000 acres, with virtual fencing you can create a 160-acre virtual pasture — or pasture of any size — on the mountain range to concentrate cattle in that area. When that area has been grazed, we can create and then move the herd to another virtual pasture," he says.

"It allows for better management of the range, controlled distribution of the cattle and hopefully improved forage utilization."

He says it will also help during breeding season. By keeping cows and bulls more concentrated, conception rates should improve. Some years during the fall preg-check they've had as many as 12 per cent open cows. "We're hoping to move closer to the industry average of perhaps a 95 per cent conception rate," says Smith.

They predict virtual fencing will allow them to better manage access to water and help to protect sensitive riparian areas.

The technology allows for improved tracking of cattle, making it easier to find cattle over an extensive range area. The technology also provides an alert system if the collar (or animal) hasn't moved for an hour. Is this cow calving or injured or, in a rare case, lost its collar? They receive an alert and can check out the situation.

What $125 a head buys

The Halter virtual fencing technology is marketed with two options. The equipment can be bought outright or supplied with an annual subscription fee per head. Plateau opted for the subscription fee, which works out to about $125 per head per year.

"We felt the subscription was the most practical option for our ranch," says Smith. "The technology comes with a replacement warranty and excellent technical support from the company.

"With technology changing so quickly, the subscription allows you to take advantage of any technical improvements in the collars or other updates in technology."

Laing says there is no doubt in their minds that the benefits and savings attributed to virtual fencing will easily cover the cost of the technology.

"We are learning that it will provide a great improvement in overall management of the herd," she says.

"It provides improved management during calving season, hopefully improvements in herd conception rates, and being better able to monitor cattle might help reduce predation losses."

The system could also support health monitoring and help improve grazing management, extend forage availability and potentially reduce winter feeding needs.

"We are learning every day from the company as well as other producers who have experience with virtual fencing how the technology can be used to improve overall management," Laing says. "It is definitely a game changer for our operation as well as the livestock industry. It is hard to imagine where this technology will lead us over the next five to 10 years."

Author: Lee Hart
Original Article: https://www.canadiancattlemen.ca/features/virtual-fencing-cattle-collars/

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FFGA MEMBER: $550
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TOPICS INCLUDE:

- Foundational theory on proper stockmanship
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WHEATLAND COUNTY AGRICULTURE & ENVIRONMENT

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GEMSTONE CATTLE COMPANY

Grazing Strategies in Limber Pine

September 2, 2026 - Chimney Rock area
9:45am - 2pm

The day will feature Jodie Krakowski of the Whitebark Pine Ecosystem Foundation of Canada, who will speak on best management practices for protecting limber and whitebark pine in grazing areas, tree ecology and biology, and how producers can help preserve these important species.

In the afternoon, Gerald Vandervalk of VXV Ranch will discuss livestock watering systems and how they can be used to support managed grazing, improve pasture utilization, and enhance grazing management.

Cost

(Lunch included)

FFGA Member: $20

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www.foothillsforage.com/limberpine

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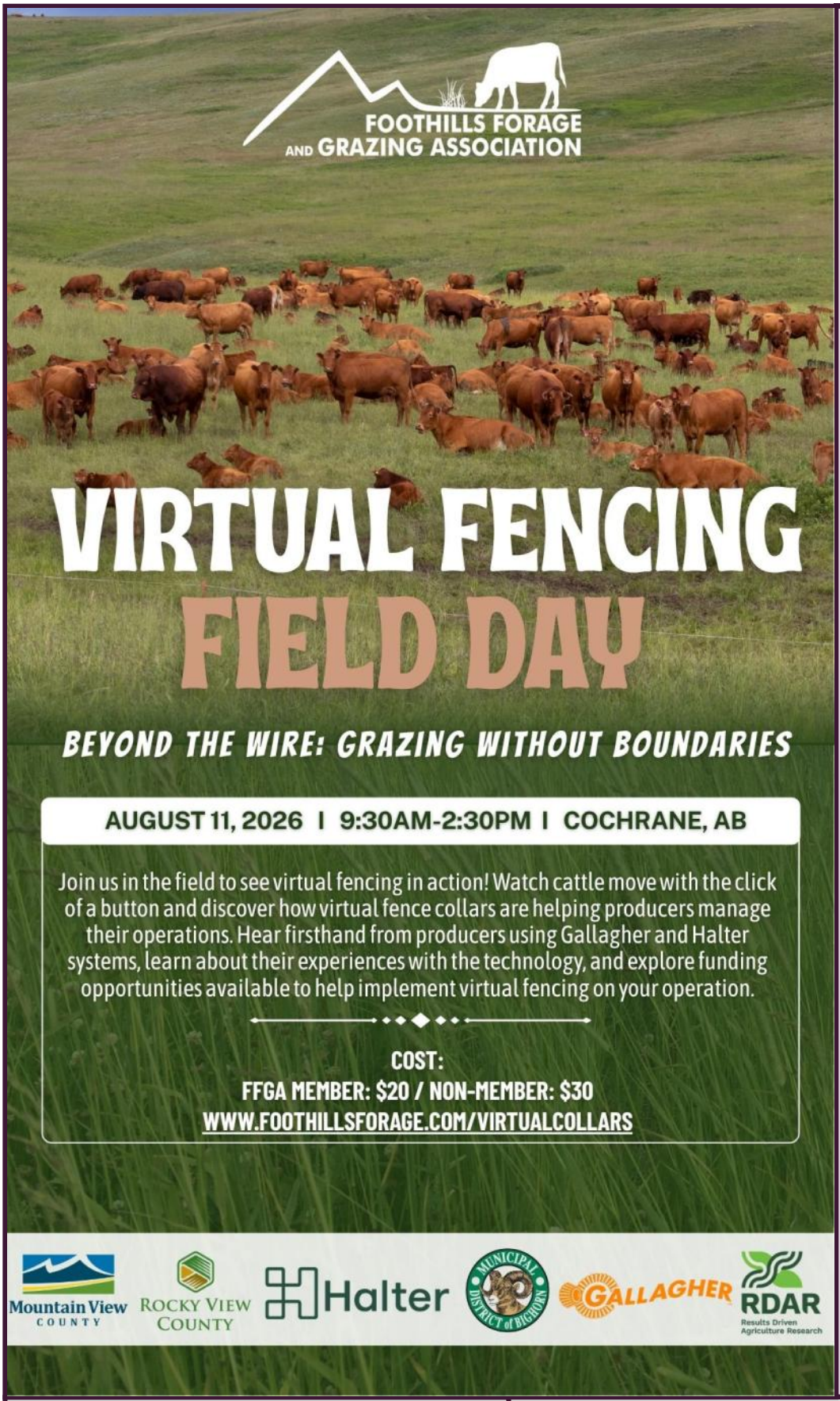

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