



**FOOTHILLS FORAGE
AND GRAZING ASSOCIATION**

Innovation, education and regenerative agriculture

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Phone: (403) 995-9466 ~ www.foothillsforage.com

GRASSROOTS NEWS & VIEWS

July 2022

Director's Note — Sarah Green

Hello,

We breathe a sigh of relief now that the rains have come- once again nature has provided. For me it is a reminder to stay flexible and not attach to worst case scenarios- change is constant.

Branding is done, replacements heifers picked and bulls soon to go out. I never tire of the beautiful shifts that come with the seasons here on the ranch. Moose calves and fawns remind me this landscape still functions well and that I'm here to learn from, rather than change it. I stopped by a Rough Fescue plant today while moving cows and gave a silent thanks. The plant that is our golden child has diminished over the last century but still helps us graze cattle effectively throughout the winter. The grasslands and soils that support our cattle are a complex system and we are just scratching the surface of learning how they function so effectively.

It seems like every generation strives to achieve in a new way. We have really tried to focus on water development – mostly wells but hoping to learn more about spring development. We now use temporary electric fencing wagons- we always have 3 up and working through the spring until cows go to the mountains. It amazes me how the landscape continues to renew amid the mistakes we make and I'm thankful for that!

We have changed our replacement heifer program- feeding them more this past winter after weaning and will only breed them for 25 days. The goal is to boost our fertility and create a tighter calving season. We find that

home-grown heifers have increased longevity on our landscape. It also brings joy to see those heifers grow up in the herd- I think joy must be woven into our everyday life.

Cattle and grasslands are two passions so I look forward to my time on the FFGA board. Learning about the way other people run their operations fascinates me and being receptive to new ideas always creates possibilities for growth. The field day coming up on July 28th at Tongue Creek Ranch regarding control burns for brush control will be relevant to our operation. Willow encroachment swallows a bit more grass every year and I have memories of a control burn we did in the early 1980's on our lease land.

As I reflect, I think of the lessons I have learned – humility, being adaptable, trying to keep a sense of wonder and lightness, determination and always reminding myself that I am blessed to be on this land. With that privilege comes responsibility to respect and care for it. This comes with great challenge- different than 120 years ago- but it feels more important than ever. Our businesses along with the landscapes that support them need creative minds. May we all find moments of joy and a desire to create new and exciting opportunities.

Sarah

Moving cattle after the rain. Photo: Sarah Green



IN THIS ISSUE

In search of fescue	4
Restoring our Foothills Grasslands	6 & 7
There are low-cost ways to bring a tired pasture back to life	9

RANCHING FOR PROFIT SCHOOL

with Dallas Mount

FOOTHILLS FORAGE AND GRAZING ASSOCIATION

Location: Okotoks, Alberta

Date: November 13-19, 2022

\$3,520.00 for 1st person from operation

\$2,560.00 additional people from same operation

\$960.00 Ranching for Profit Alumni

**For More Information,
Contact Laura at Foothills Forage & Grazing Association**

**(403) 995-9466 or
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On the Cover: Dr. Abbey Wick at the Soil Structure & Production Field Tour at Gemstone Cattle Company.

Thank you for your support!



OH & Tongue Creek Ranch Tours

July 28, 2022

OH Ranch

- OH brush encroachment history on grassland. Using tools such as mechanical, spray & grazing management.
- NCC and OH partnership: water projects.
- OH field sites - MULTISAR project, historical observations, lease & deeded, disturbed & reclaimed grassland.

Tongue Creek Ranch

- Tongue Creek Ranch plans regarding prescribed burns.
- Using prescribed burns as a tool to manage brush encroachment of grasslands by wood species (brush and trees).
- Historical and vegetation context on Tongue Creek Ranch.

8:45am- Coffee & Registration at OH Ranch
Cookhouse (map on Eventbrite)

9:15am- Presentations & tour at OH Ranch

Noon- Lunch (provided)

1:00pm- Presentations & tour at Tongue
Creek Ranch

4:00- Wrap up

Cost:

FFGA Members; \$20:00 + GST

Non-Members: \$25.00 + GST

To register visit:

www.foothillsforage.com/events

***Please dress appropriately for the weather as we will be
outside for much of the day.***



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In search of fescue



No story about ranching would be complete without mention of two elements, generically unrelated yet closely coupled to ranching's origin beginning in the late 1800s and its dominating role into the 21st century. Old texts and oral history serve as background.

One component is an ancient grass that provided year-round nutrition for millions of bison through the centuries; the other, a weather phenomenon unique to the eastern slopes of the Rockies — the chinook.

The richness of rough fescue, a nutritious perennial bunchgrass, remains the source of extended grazing into late fall and early winter for many ranches. Fescue's existence became the lifeblood of many foothills ranching operations. Fescue, by nature, is much more than a simple bunch grass. In the words of Sarah Green, Mount Sentinel Ranch, in an article titled *Ranchers Explain Pasture Strategies* (2012): "Our fescue grass is like gold. You have to be careful with it. Fescue grasslands have to be managed in a certain way."

Sometimes called prairie wool because of the woven pattern it forms in dense mats when dry, the hardy grass cures on the stem and retains much of its nutrition above ground after maturity. The above-ground cache of protein and energy sustains both domestic and wild grazers and limits ranchers' feed costs. Clay Chattaway of the Bar S Ranch, west of Nanton, depends on fescue grasslands. Preservation of native range remains the primary reason ranchers tailor grazing management practices to individual operations. Many ranches across the foothills do not provide additional feed until March and April, and then only to keep cattle out of pastures during a vulnerable growth period. Grazing management, including care of riparian areas of the watershed, along with

conservation of wildlife become passions. Without proper care, grass invaders like timothy and tame grass, weeds and brush encroach upon natural range challenging rough fescue and other native grasses, limiting winter feeding capability. Gains on properly managed fescue can reach four pounds per day.

The chinook belt along the face of the Rocky Mountain foothills in southwestern Alberta incorporates significant tracts of remaining fescue prairie. Warm summers and mild winters characterize the chinook climate with mean annual temperatures of approximately 3.5 C. Summer temperatures hover around 14 C and winter temperatures around -8 C. Annual precipitation ranges between 400 and 450 mm. The grassland community is dominated by rough fescue with lesser quantities of Parry's oatgrass, June grass, and wheat grass. Forbs are abundant and often include yellow bean, sticky geranium, bedstraw, and chickweed. Drier sites have an increased amount of needle-and-thread grass. Moist sites along stream banks, north-facing slopes, and seepage sites support shrub communities dominated by snowberry, rose, saskatoon, and silverberry. White-tailed deer, pronghorn antelope, coyote, rabbit, ground squirrel, sage grouse, elk, moose and duck are common in the region.

Outside interest in the importance of fescue prairie is exemplified by work conducted through organizations like the Glenbow Ranch Park Foundation. With assistance from Shell Canada, the foundation established the Shell Foothills Fescue Research Institute at the Glenbow Ranch site adjacent to Cochrane. According to the foundation, rough fescue is part of this endangered ecosystem. The 1,435-hectare Glenbow Ranch Provincial Park encompasses one of the largest remaining areas of native grasslands in the province. The institute's research effort is aimed at determining how fescue can assist in land reclamation. As well, they plan to promote the use of fescues for lawns near the park because they require next to no water.

Rough fescue was designated Alberta's grass emblem on April 30, 2003, due to the efforts of another environmental steward, the Prairie Conservation Forum. Three species of rough fescue: northern rough fescue (*F. altaica*), mountain rough fescue (*F. campestris*), and plains

rough fescue (*F. hallii*) are symbolic of Alberta's natural diversity as you move from the plains to the foothills, and into the mountains. Francis Gardner, a long-time rancher and environmental steward of foothill rangelands said, "There is a spirit to this land." Fescue typifies the spirit.

Moving east, the beauty and resilience of mixed-grass prairie is captured in the amazing diversity of species. Over 150 species of plants, each adapted in its own way to the extremes of temperature, variation in precipitation, effects of fire, consequence of grazing, topography, and nature of the soil determine the mix of plants. In areas with well-drained soils, drought-tolerant grasses such as western wheatgrass and blue grama may grow within metres of areas dominated by little bluestem, a grass requiring more moisture. It is impossible to calculate the value of prairie species and what they may hold for future crops, medicines and other products (Nature North.com).

Native rangelands originally covered about 61 million hectares, but now only occupy about 20 per cent of its natural habitat. With the exception of extreme southeastern Alberta, the grasslands of southern Alberta are located in the South Saskatchewan River watershed, which comprises just four per cent of Alberta's land area. As much as 40 per cent of the headwaters of the South Saskatchewan River basin are located on private land — including many of Alberta's ranches.

Fescue prairie occupies a moister environment than mixed grass prairie and has a greater abundance of species. On average, fescue prairie produces twice as much forage as the most productive mixed grass prairie. It can be found on isolated hill complexes of the Milk River Ridge, Cypress Hills, Touchwood Hills and the Manitoba Escarpment. Fescue prairie is the prominent grassland in the Aspen Parkland, except in southeast Saskatchewan and southwestern Manitoba where mixed grass prairie shares aspen groves. Once extending over 255,000 square kilometres in the Prairie provinces, less than five per cent of the original fescue prairie remains.

Author: Dr. Ron Clarke

Original Article: [https://](https://www.canadiancattlemen.ca/vet-advice/in-search-of-fescue/)

www.canadiancattlemen.ca/vet-advice/in-search-of-fescue/

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TO BOOK, CONTACT LAWRENCE ROWLEY

 (403) 764- 2044  lawrence@leadertours.ca

Restoring our Foothills Grasslands



For thousands of years, the intentional and frequent use of fire by Indigenous peoples shaped the habitat and vegetation cover of virtually all ecosystems across North America. This is particularly true within the Foothills regions of Southwestern Alberta where the frequent application of low severity fire pushed back the ever-expanding forest or woody plant cover. Using fire, they kept the forests at bay, maintaining healthy grasslands for the species that they depended upon (ie. Bison, Elk, etc.). At the same time, many other species adapted to the human use of fire and benefitted as well.

With European settlement came a change in management. Most of the newcomers saw the vegetation cover as natural and well suited to homesteading and ranching, not realizing that these landscapes were created and maintained by the Indigenous peoples before them. Fire as a disturbance tool, was neither adapted nor used by Europeans as a disturbance tool. It was



Figure 1: Shrubs, deciduous, and coniferous trees on what was historic grassland on the Tongue Creek Ranch

seen more as a risk or a threat.

Today, woody plant encroachment (WPE) is a very serious issue. Without frequent disturbance, shrubs and tree species have been establishing and expanding across traditional range lands. This significant ecological change is resulting in considerable decreases in the carrying capacity of rangelands. As forest plant communities expand across the traditional grasslands, they not only impact forage and livestock production but also influence carbon sequestration, water yield, wildlife habitat, wildfire risk, and biodiversity. Left unchecked, Woody Plant Encroachment evolves into permanent

will become unsustainable. To reduce the impacts of WPE and to restore grazing capacity, the Tongue Creek Ranch is setting priorities for vegetation management. These include:

- Protect, maintain, and expand healthy range
- Develop prescriptions and treat areas impacted by WPE
- Target and remove seed sources that enable an expansion of WPE
- Develop a woodlot management plan to manage coniferous growth and schedule harvesting to renew the mature forest cover.
- Identify areas which have noxious undesirable plants and develop

ENCROACHMENT OVER TIME

	TITLED	NCC	LEASE
EXISTING GRASS COVER	25%	34%	5%
HISTORIC GRASS COVER	90%	86%	73%
HEALTHY RANGE LOSS	65%	52%	68%

forest cover resulting in the permanent loss of grasslands.

WPE results in increased costs to the producer and at the same time causes a decline in forage production. While both grasslands and forest ecosystems are found within the same sub eco-regions, they cannot co-exist without some sort of frequent renewal mechanism. It is a necessity to set back the ever-expanding forest encroachment and renew the grassland communities.

Recently the Tongue Creek Ranch, undertook a vegetation assessment to compare current and historic vegetation cover in an effort to understand how vegetation is evolving on the ranch. The comparative inventory demonstrates that WPE is having a negative impact on carrying capacity and livestock production. Left unchecked, production will decrease while operational costs rise. Eventually, ranching

methods of treatment and removal. Proposed restoration tools will include:

- Grazing
- Timber Harvesting to utilize mature to over mature coniferous trees
- Mechanical
 - Traditional piling and burning, mulching, mowing
- Herbicide application
- Native plant community restoration
- Prescribed fire
 - Both spot and broadcast burning

Each treatment will be monitored for its success and cost effectiveness. It is expected that combining treatments will increase their effectiveness in both the short and long term. This past spring, fire was put back onto the ranch for likely the first time in over 100 years. Several burns were conducted on various sites to determine how and when it can be used success-

(Continued on page 7)

(Continued from page 6)

fully and safely. These will be assessed over the summer to measure the mortality in areas impacted by WPE. Further burning will continue into summer in willow patches to determine if mortality after leaf flush is increased while the plant is still in a weakened state.

While prescribed fire is not the only tool that ranchers are using or considering for range restoration, it is likely the most controversial, and must be used judiciously and with caution. Years of fire exclusion and fire suppression have disconnected us from both the benefits as well as how and when to apply fire on to the landscape safely. Today we are faced with re-

learning these practices in an environment with considerably more values at risk and significantly smaller margins for error. Safety and effective fireguards are paramount, not a single match can be lit until predetermined conditions, or prescription, are met, with all staff on-site confident of their ability to contain the low-intensity fire. Considerations in this prescription include, but are not limited to the time of year, wind speed and direction, temperature, relative humidity, and fuel moisture. With the proper equipment, personnel and training, a prescribed fire is a carefully applied and calculated operation with the potential for impactful change.

Our grassland ecosystems devel-

oped over thousands of years through frequent disturbances such as grazing, fire, and drought. While these grasslands are resilient, they cannot be taken for granted. There needs to be a constant effort made for their maintenance and renewal to insure their sustainability.

Author's: Rick Arthur & Dinyar Minocher

Tongue Creek Ranch Prescribed Burn Info Session can be found at <https://www.foothillsforage.com/videos>



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There are low-cost ways to bring a tired pasture back to life



Pasture Rejuvenation workshop in Madden

Fertilizer and fuel prices got you down? If you have unproductive pasture, the high cost of a total redo may have you unsure of what to do.

But there are low-cost possibilities, says a long-time forage extension specialist.

“Everything is an option when it comes to pasture rejuvenation,” said Grant Lastiwka.

One of the first things he does to see whether or not a pasture needs rejuvenating is to look at what species are present.

“If I don’t have the right species to begin with, then I strongly consider what my choices might be.”

But no matter what option you choose, grazing management needs to be top of mind, said Lastiwka.

“The key for understanding grazing management is what goes in one end of a cow, the majority comes back out, onto the landscape,” he said. “The more we can manage land with animals and putting the nutrients back to where it came from, the more resilient of a pasture stand we’ll have.”

Mind the young ’uns

Another thing to keep in mind is that pastures are composed of perennial plants and ones, such as grass, tiller as they grow.

These tillers are “baby plants” and live for more than one growing year.

“They start growth in the fall — with that understanding, you look at the picture a little differently,” he said.

Protecting those tillers is key but the old adage, ‘One day in the spring costs you three days in the fall,’ is both true and untrue, according to Lastiwka.

“In well-managed grazing systems, we are going to start grazing a little too soon, and finish a grazing cycle a little too late, because on average it’s pretty good.”

In the spring it’s important to let the plant reach the three-leaf stage before it is grazed.

“In a biodiverse system, strengths need

to be carefully worked with and the three-leaf stage of growth (or further) in the spring is a telltale sign that a plant has recovered nutrients that it used in the winter to survive,” said Lastiwka.

So that three-leaf stage is a sign that plant is ready to be grazed. By grazing lightly at that time, the plant will shift from putting up seed heads to putting out more tillers — and that eventually equates to more plants.

In fall, it is important to remember the plant is setting itself up for next year’s growth by setting tillers.

“Tiller buds are being formed which is going to determine next year’s yield,” said Lastiwka.

A good rule of thumb is to leave 2-1/2 leaves per tiller.

That can set you up for a “feast” next season but “if the cattle are allowed to graze and pick it down to 1-1/2 leaves per tiller, famine,” he said.

“The writing is on the wall, based on the understanding of plant physiology and how they grow.”

Seeding the future

Sod seeding is another option “if the right species are there.”

Soil test first though, so you know if there is an adequate nutrient level prior to seeding, he said.

“Just so you’re not deficient, to allow those seedlings to be more aggressive.”

Seeding into sod, though, requires correct timing — preferably in spring when the ground is first able to be worked. This allows the new seeds to take advantage of existing moisture.

“Use a legume,” Lastiwka recommended. “A legume is a ‘meaty’ little seed that can get into the soil, make contact with the soil, and hopefully could be the biggest change to the system.”

Because a legume seed like an alfalfa does not have a hull, it’s able to get growing quicker, fixes, nitrogen, boosts forage quality and “adds risk adverseness for a drought.”

Using a glyphosate suppression prior to seeding might be needed.

“Use a low rate to set the stand back,” said Lastiwka. “Doing so buys a bit of time to allow for the brand new seedling a ‘catch-up’ period to existing plants.”

A hard graze prior to seeding can also work.

“At times a hard graze might not work if the stand is well managed,” he said.

“When people are managing a stand well, that stand can be resilient. Trying to change species in a stand where those plants have quite a bit of competition below ground, from well-intact root systems and the vigour that is in the plants, can be a challenge.”

Another method is to use a bovine seeding rig — mix legume seed into loose mineral, and let the cows seed via their manure.

“A lot of the legume seeds will travel through a cow, more so than grass,” said Lastiwka.

However, new plants will only appear in cow pats and establishing large amounts of legumes takes quite a bit of time. However, once established (deferring grazing is needed here), they will self-seed.

Broadcasting seed and letting the cattle work it in with their hoofs is another re-seeding option.

“In early spring this works really well when the soil is a bit moist with stockpiled forage,” he said.

As the stockpiled forage starts to green up, the cattle graze close to the ground surface. Using a little higher stock density creates more hoof action to press seeds into the soil.

“This has varied success based on moisture and time,” said Lastiwka.

With any of the methods used, it’s important to remember new seedlings are competing with existing plants, he added.

“It’s timing. It’s getting off that stand to allow the seedlings to come. It’s monitoring. With hope the moisture timing is suitable that once the seedlings start coming, they have the chance of continuing to grow and having enough moisture to be able to compete with existing roots and plants.”

And no matter what method you use, patience is required.

“Trying to bring a pasture back when it’s overgrazed, or a low degree of vigour is a challenging time. It doesn’t happen overnight,” said Lastiwka. “Try to get some legumes added into those stands really ups the game and the productivity of land.”

Author: Jill Burkardt

Original Article: [https://](https://www.albertafarmexpress.ca/crops/there-are-low-cost-ways-to-bring-a-tired-pasture-back-to-life/)

www.albertafarmexpress.ca/crops/there-are-low-cost-ways-to-bring-a-tired-pasture-back-to-life/

WESTERN CANADA CONFERENCE ON SOIL HEALTH & GRAZING

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Presented by 10 Alberta Forage & Research Associations



FEATURING

Greg Judy, Dr. Bobbi Helgason, Dr. Dave Sauchyn, Dr. Ed Bork, Dr. Kris Nichols, Jay Fuhrer, Dr. Tim McAllister, Dr. Yamily Zavala, Dr. Monika Gorzelak, Daryl Chubb, Kim Cornish, Stuart Chutter, Dr. Yvonne Lawley, Kristine Tapley, Producer Panelists and More

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SOIL & GRAZING: BIOLOGY NOT GEOLOGY



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SOIL HEALTH

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FIELD TOURS



FEATURING ODETTE MENARD

Odette Menard is an agricultural engineer who has had a major role in the promotion of soil conservation. Odette is an expert in earthworm behaviour and practices that promote health & fertility.



PINCHER CREEK

July 11, 2022

Topics Include:

- Grazing plan-long term
- Building soil health over time
- System approach to grazing management
- Cost effective strategies
- Stockpiled forage & bale grazing

Speakers: Julia Palmer, Uriel Delgado & Odette Menard



STRATHMORE

July 12, 2022

Topics Include:

- Enhancing your grazing options
- Adding to the land's natural value
- Reclaiming land for production
- Cover crop silage mix under irrigation
- Soil health

Speakers: Rod Vergouwen, Graydon Garner and Odette Menard



MADDEN

July 14, 2022

Topics Include:

- Research & technology used on Olds College demo sites
- Soil amendments in perennial & annual stands
- Virtual fencing collars
- Grazing & riparian health
- Advanced Ag & soil carbon

Speakers: Sean Thompson, Laio Silva Sobrinho, Graeme Finn & Odette Menard

Registration & details visit: <https://www.foothillsforage.com/events>

COSTS

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19th Annual Southern Alberta Grazing School for Women

July 13 & 14, 2022 in
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Topics include:

- Grazing Principles and Practices
- Soil Health
- Hands- On Plant ID
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- Livestock Behavior
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Vision: We envision a global community that respects and values profitable forage production and healthy soils as our legacy for future generations.

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