

Standing Committee on Alberta Heritage Savings Trust Fund Act

Monday, August 23, 1982

Chairman: Dr. Reid

4:30 p.m.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Okay, Mr. Minister, we can get the committee to come to order. Perhaps the minister could introduce the gentlemen with him. Then we can go into any initial statement the minister may have, if he wishes, and then questions by members of the committee.

MR. MILLER: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, gentlemen, and lady. I would like to introduce two people from the department who are with me today. The first is Mac Forbes, the assistant deputy minister in charge of lands. As well, we have Murray Turnbull, the director of land management and the development branch.

The grazing reserve program has been in effect for -- what is it, Mac? Three years, four years? Basically the principle of establishing grazing reserves -- and most of these were established in the northern part of Alberta -- was to give greater opportunity for the smaller farmer to be able to have a more viable operation. It has been successful in this regard: we have been able to take what might be termed some of the marginal lands in parts of the province which were largely composed of scrub poplar, with very little grazing potential, no agricultural potential, or very limited, develop them, and increase the carrying capacity of this area, which benefited both the grazing and wildlife aspects.

You have the handout, which was delivered to your offices on Friday, I believe. Right now we have 12 reserves in place. As well, we have one more reserve in the final planning stages. You will recognize, of course, that when you are establishing a grazing reserve in any area, you have to have a fair amount of land available. Right now we are not only developing these 12 and finalizing planning on the 13th, which is the Blackfoot grazing reserve; we're also looking at three other areas of the province with the idea of being able to assemble enough land, if possible, to put in three more reserves. One of them, which is awaiting a land-use study, is in the Kinuso area. It's in the process of being developed. We've looked at the northeastern part of Alberta as well, the Cold Lake area, to see if there is potential up there -- and I think it's on Tomato Creek, which is by Athabasca -- as to whether we might be able to put in a grazing reserve.

Mr. Chairman, you have the information as to what has been done over the past years and what was done this last year. We're prepared to answer any questions we might be able to.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Mr. Minister. Any questions about the grazing reserve program?

MR. PAHL: Mr. Chairman, I had an opportunity to fly over the Three Creeks grazing reserve about midsummer. I was much impressed with the irregularity of the clearing. It seemed to fit in rather well with wildlife needs and other needs. But I noticed that the soil looked like -- I guess to describe it in terms I would understand -- a lot of alkali sloughs around Hanna. The whole ground looked to be leached out with an alkali type of soil formation. The conclusion is that it looked like pretty poor land. What sort of

limitations do you see in areas like that for grazing carrying capacity, given that you're taking off trees and you're in a gray-wooded soil? Do you have some built-in limitations that may be more or less severe, depending on what you find after you take the trees off, or do you have a pretty good measure of that before you make the investment?

MR. MILLER: Basically, Mr. Pahl, we do an appraisal and land-use plan before any development takes place. When you mentioned the irregularities of the breaking pattern, it is to accommodate the wildlife aspects so that escape routes are built into it.

As I mentioned in my opening remarks, the land which is set aside and being developed for grazing reserves is not what you would call top agricultural land. It's land we're trying to develop to its maximum use. Specifically when you mentioned the quality, there are concerns about that. Perhaps Murray could address that part, as to the research that goes into the development of a program, the type of grass which can be seeded, and the productivity of those soils.

MR. TURNBULL: We have found that by using a good forage mixture, which includes a legume, we are able to develop the soils and maintain a good forage mix in the area as well as production and, in that way, have good carrying capacity. In addition, through soil tests, we have found that by the addition of fertilizer, particularly nitrogen at the time of establishment, we are able to get a much better forage mixture established and maintain it over a longer period of time.

MR. PAHL: If I may, Mr. Chairman, a supplementary to that. Does that imply -- and I guess it would be a very, very long time span -- that through establishing grazing reserves in areas of marginal soil, the use of legumes and long-term forage growth could ultimately make the land a viable farming area, if you weren't constrained by climatological reasons? Is the long-term enhancement of the soil -- in other words, extending from forage or grazing lands to cultivatable lands -- a possibility?

MR. MILLER: Mr. Pahl, I think that would be a long-term possibility. It's not our primary concern at this time, but there's no question that through the use of legumes and grass mixtures as such the quality of the soil will be improved. The time frame is something that -- I don't know if research has been done over a period of 50 years to see if this is possible or not. Certainly it could well be.

MR. PAHL: I guess the comment then would be that the moneys expended for those enhancements for forage are well invested in the long-term future of our agricultural or soil resource. So you can say it's heritage savings and it's long term. Long, long term.

MR. MILLER: Yes, I think that when you develop a grazing reserve, you have to look at it as a development of a natural resource to its maximum utilization. It's not a short-term thing. For example, if you ask any farmer when he breaks land and puts it under cultivation for cereal crops, he doesn't look for that return to be in one year or two years. It's over a longer span. Certainly it's an improvement of a capital resource we have in Alberta.

MR. PAHL: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

MR. ISLEY: Just a couple of questions on the handout we received, Mr. Minister. Where it lists the acres, is the size of the pasture the total acres in the pasture or the developed acres?

MR. MILLER: Murray tells me this is the total acreage of the parcels, Mr. Isley. Then the development takes place within this area.

MR. ISLEY: Okay. Two more questions, Mr. Chairman. I see from the map that the last four reserves from Three Creeks down to Sang Lake are under development. That means there's no livestock on them at this point in history? Is that correct?

MR. MILLER: I'll speak from the bottom up. On the Sang Lake development, clearing took place this past winter. The fencing is in place, I think. Have they been doing some breaking this summer and getting ready, Murray?

MR. TURNBULL: They haven't carried out any this year. They were hoping to.

MR. MILLER: What about the others? Could you comment on those?

MR. TURNBULL: Okay. With Pembina, an area has been cleared and piled, and breaking is taking place this summer. Rocky Mountain House: there are areas that already have been seeded. Some fencing has been completed, some dugouts, and we expect to be grazing in the 1983 season. On Three Creeks, cattle are grazing this summer.

MR. ISLEY: Thank you.

One final question, Mr. Chairman. Looking down the last two columns, the approximate number of livestock and approximate number of patrons, if you divide patrons and the livestock you're running from a high of 50 per patron in Fort Vermilion down to as low as eight per patron in Wolf Lake. I think maybe you should check those figures, because I don't think there are 74 patrons in Wolf Lake with that low an average.

MR. TURNBULL: It's an error. I don't have the correct number. That definitely is a typographical error.

MR. ISLEY: Okay. Thank you.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Are there any further questions?

I have one from the Chair that comes from the question by the Member for Edmonton Mill Woods on the upgrading of soil and the initial remarks by the minister. I presume care is taken that areas used for these are not areas that would be better used for high-quality forest growth, which at the moment means essentially coniferous timber.

MR. MILLER: Mr. Chairman, we ran into this problem somewhat in Sang Lake, which you'd be familiar with. Some coniferous trees were logged out before the clearing took place. It wasn't what you would call a salvage operation as such; it was an operation whereby we were harvesting the timber before clearing the land for pasture. Certainly this is one of the considerations the planning team looks at, as to whether the area set aside would be best utilized for agricultural potential or forestry potential, and it's one of the problems we run into when we're trying to assemble enough acres to make a viable operation. We run into that conflict with the forestry people, in that there is a potential for forestry production vis-a-vis agricultural production, and trade-offs are being made.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Are there any more questions? It looks as if everybody is very happy with the program, Mr. Minister, because that looks like all the questions. If there are no more, I'd like to thank you and the gentlemen from the department for coming, and somebody will see you next year.

MR. MILLER: Mr. Chairman, if you would care to have copies of the work that was completed, we can send those around, in answer to Mr. Isley's question.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

I'll repeat once more the change from the agenda for tomorrow that was sent around. The Minister of the Environment will be appearing at 11 a.m. At 12 noon we go to the Treasury building, and then back here at 2 p.m. for the Auditor General's reappearance. Are there any questions about that agenda? We reconvene at 11 tomorrow morning.

*The meeting adjourned at 4:43 p.m.*