

A GRASSLANDS PARK — YES OR NO?

by MAUREEN REVER*

On March 27, 1975, Saskatchewan's Minister of Tourism and Renewable Resources announced the signing of a memorandum of agreement" between the federal and provincial governments to determine within the next 2 years the suitability of establishing a national grasslands park in the Val Marie area of southern Saskatchewan. Prior to a decision being taken, public hearings were promised.

In the light of the record of both provincial and federal governments in regard to public hearings on environmental issues, some citizens' groups and individuals with a long standing interest in seeing a grasslands park in Saskatchewan, are now concerned about how the decision — yes or no — will be reached. Will the large number of letters and expressions of support for a national grasslands park already in the Premier's office — letters not only from Saskatchewan citizens but also from other parts of North America — be considered? Or are we starting from scratch?

The record is not good.

The Saskatchewan government made its debut with the public hearings on a proposed plan for Meadow Lake Provincial Park. Although many excellent briefs and comments were presented by

professional groups, highly skilled and knowledgeable members of the public and individual citizens with property and experience of the park area, today, almost 2-1/2 years later, there has been no indication as to the conclusions reached. Furthermore, at the time of the hearings it became evident that part of the proposed plan, on which the public was being asked to comment, was already in operation. Who is fooling whom?

Then came the public hearings on the Poplar River thermo-electric plant. A quick answer — yes — a foregone conclusion. It was clear to the environmentally concerned that these public hearings were nothing but "window dressing". That the hearings were held only at Coronach made it extremely difficult for persons outside the area to attend. Briefs sent by mail may or may not have been given attention — who knows? The information given to the public less than a month before the hearings was, for the engineering aspects of the project, highly technical, and for environmental issues, totally inadequate. The panel of adjudicators had no one competent to judge the environmental impact of the project.

While the federal government has done better in making information available in advance of public hearings, thus making the preparation of briefs more meaningful, still the public has reason to question whether these hearings, too, are just "window dressing". For example, it appears that Village Lake Louise will be built in

For the Resources Study Group, Box 276, Sub Post Office No. 6, Saskatoon, Sask. A study of the Grasslands Park is available from the author. From *Probe*, June 1975.

spite of overwhelming public disapproval of the project. Although somewhat modified from the first proposal, the federal park's design has flaws equal to, or even more horrendous than, the original Esso-proposed development.

And so we take a dim view of the announced "memorandum of agreement" to determine the suitability of establishing a national grasslands park. How can we be sure the information provided to the public prior to the hearings is unbiased? Will the pros and cons of the project be clearly stated? We should know the views of the ranchers in the area and the reasons for them; we should know whether or not there are valuable resource deposits in the area; we should be aware of the unique and fragile ecology of the area. So far, little of this information has been made available to the public. So far the public has had to make educated

guesses as to what the situation really is.

In my opinion, before the citizens of Canada can make a wise decision on having a national grasslands park — a park that would be unique in North America — it would be necessary for the governments concerned to make a sincere effort to release extensive, factual information to the public well in advance of the hearings. All interested groups should have opportunity to contribute to this. The hearings, then, should be held well after the summer months and in places accessible to people from other areas of the province to ensure a maximum representation and high quality contributions.

To gain the confidence of the public it is necessary that those appointed to evaluate the hearings are capable of judging the evidence and opinions of different interest groups and in



Kildeer Area

Frank Bellan

dividuals. Why, for instance, was there no representative of Saskatchewan's Environmental Advisory Council at the Poplar River hearings? The Council was not even consulted as to whether those appointed to the panel were qualified to make environmental judgements. Is this, the public's "Advisory Council", more official "window dressing"?

I do not know how much longer citizens' groups and individuals are going to spend the time and effort required to prepare detailed, reasoned

recommendations for any level of government unless there is a clear indication that their opinions will be given an honest evaluation. I do know that the national grasslands park is worthy of every effort by those of us who value this unique ecological treasure and strongly feel that the issue must be given serious consideration by the public.



Silhouette of Short-eared Owl on Fence Post

Chris Rees



Pronghorns

Lorne Sco

PARKS CANADA COMMENTS

The following is the text of a letter dated July 10, 1975, from G. M. Davison of Parks Canada, 114 Garry St., Winnipeg, to Maureen Rever:

I read your paper on "A Grasslands Park — Yes or No" with a great deal of interest. The concerns expressed by you are relevant and are concerns of a large number of Canadians. We are also concerned with these matters and we hope that the following approach will give many people the opportunity of making their views known to us and to the Saskatchewan Government.

Parks Canada and the Saskatchewan Government are now in the process of drafting an information booklet for the Grasslands hearings, which will be sent out to interested groups and to people in the immediate area of the proposed Park. This booklet will be distributed around mid-August, thus giving the general public a chance to evaluate the contents prior to any public meetings.

On or about September 15th, the Saskatchewan Government and Parks Canada will commence holding a series of information-type meetings at various locations in the Province of Saskatchewan. These meetings are to

be held with the intent to clarify any misunderstandings that may develop as people evaluate the contents of the booklet.

The information-type meetings will be followed by public hearings which will commence in late fall. Again these meetings will be held in various locations in the Province of Saskatchewan, thus giving all interested groups and individuals an opportunity to make their views known.

Your comments on biased information were well taken and to avoid this pitfall we will be trying to present all information as straightforward as possible. In addition to this, an independent chairman will be appointed for the public hearings, thereby reducing the chance of biased opinion from influencing any final decisions.

The commission of enquiry will be submitting their report to the two ministers sometime in December or early January which will outline the degree of support for the proposed Park. Afterwards the Saskatchewan Government will be in a position to make a decision on the proposal. Yours sincerely, G. M. Davison, Director.