

Regional planning in the Alberta Land Stewardship Act

Background

The economic viability of agriculture relies on having an available suitable and productive land base with access to both quantity and quality of water. Agricultural and natural land, including pasture land, contributes to the sustainability of the environment for the benefit of all Albertans.

The *Alberta Land Use Stewardship Act* fails to require regional plans to specifically ensure that agriculture continues to be an economic stabilizer for the province of Alberta. Regional plans that do not adequately address commercial viability of agriculture, threaten the economic and social viability of rural Alberta, and urban centres with a strong economic base in agriculture.

It is estimated that by 2020 Canada will be one of only six net food exporting nations, with the bulk of Canadian exports coming from Alberta and Saskatchewan.¹ The volatility of the oil and gas industry is a strong reminder of the importance of a diversified and stable economic base. Alberta has a proud history of agriculture and Alberta's farm cash receipts were the highest in the country at over \$10 billion in 2016.² Agriculture isn't just about the export market. Locally produced food reduces our dependence on foreign imports and ensures that Albertans have access to safe high-quality food, irrespective of the world economy.

In April 2002, the Government of Alberta issued a report *entitled Towards the Development of a Provincial Land Use Strategy* and summarized Alberta's land use-issues:

- There is a lack of an overall provincial (government, industry and public) land-use vision.
- The long-term sustainability of Alberta's land base is at risk as higher-quality soils continue to be taken out of production.
- Agriculturally productive soils must be recognized and respected as a finite, non-renewable resource when it comes to changing land use – this precious commodity cannot be replaced once it is gone.

¹ John Knapp, former Deputy Minister of Agriculture, Alberta Agriculture & Rural Development – January 24, 2013 presentation to Red Deer Chamber of Commerce

² Government of Alberta. (2013). *Farm Cash Receipts*. Retrieved from <http://economicdashboard.alberta.ca/FarmCashReceipts#interProvGraphGrid> on Feb 6, 2017.

- Land-use conflicts are rapidly escalating among users and sectors competing for the same finite resource.

There are 66.4 million hectares in Alberta. In 2002, Alberta boasted a healthy percentage of agricultural land (the second largest in Canada, with 21.3 million hectares with 11 million hectares cultivated and producing grains.³ The 2002 *Agricultural Land Base Monitoring Study*, found that since 1976 “... *The net loss of agricultural land has ranged from 50,000 to 60,000 acres annually... land being lost out of agriculture has significantly higher (productive) capability than land coming into production... The greatest proportion of agricultural land being lost is within the Black Soil Zone in Alberta, in areas adjacent to Edmonton and Calgary, and along the Hwy 2 corridor. Lands in the Black Soil Zone are generally highest-overall capability for agriculture. As such, we need to give top priority to preserving those lands that are suitable for cereal and oilseed production for the benefit of current and future generations.*”

In 2008, the *Land Use Framework* (LUF) set out guiding principles (page 15) for land stewardship that in Alberta, land use decisions will be sustainable, accountable and responsible, ensures that land-use decisions are mindful of consequences for future generations; collaborative and transparent; integrated, taking into account current and new land use on public and private lands and coordinates land, air, water, biodiversity, economic development and social objectives with the region; knowledge based; responsive; fair, equitable and timely; respectful of private property rights; respectful of the constitutionally protected rights of Aboriginal communities.

From 2006 to 2016, Alberta’s population grew by 30% to 4.252 million at an estimated 100,000 people per year. This growth has put significant pressure on urban centres, especially those along the Hwy 2 corridor or the Black Soil Zone in Alberta. Substantial development of residential, commercial, and public infrastructure has been required to manage the growing population and growing economy.

The November 29, 2013 Stats Canada Study: *Measuring ecosystem goods and services* measured the conversion of agricultural and natural lands to settled areas, and found that between 2000 and 2011, the development of settled areas in and around cities and towns increased by 3,158km, with a 19% increase in the settled area occupying agricultural land and a 29% increase on the very best Class 1 farmland.

Development policies aimed at preserving environmental and natural areas have the potential to take productive land out of agriculture. For example, conservation easements that limit the availability of grazing may have a negative impact on the maintenance of a healthy ecosystem.⁴ Policies that restrict grazing on public lands negatively impact agriculture. The *Alberta Land Stewardship Act (ALSA)* was brought into law in October 2009, and amended in May, 2011. This legislation governs land use in the

³ Government of Canada. (2002). *Sharp Decline in number of farms in Alberta*. Statistics Canada. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/ca-ra2001/first-premier/regions/5214965-eng.htm> on Dec 10, 2013.

⁴ Holechek, Jerry L, Baker, Terrell T. “Red,” and Boren, Jon C. (2006). *Impacts of Controlled Grazing Versus Exclusion on Rangeland Ecosystems: What We Have Learned*. New Mexico State University Library, New Mexico.

province of Alberta and does not employ and align with the guiding principles in the Land Use Framework. In particular, the *Alberta Land Stewardship Act* fails to mention land stewardship or recognize the importance of agricultural productivity in its guiding principles for the development of Regional Plans.

The recently released draft South Saskatchewan Regional Plan, the second of seven regional plans, directly impacts the livelihood of ranchers and farmers in southern Alberta, and the communities that rely on this economic driver.⁵ The draft plan was critiqued in the November 2013 *Alberta Farmer Express* (Vol.10, No.24) as failing to identify and prioritize long-term grazing leases on public lands. The plan increases conservation easements and effectively takes land out of agricultural productivity. The plan also fails to proactively address irrigation and the viability of expanding agricultural productivity in this region.

Without clearly stated objectives and guidelines in the enabling legislation which incorporates the guiding principles in the Land Use Framework, Regional Plans are not required. Nor does it appear that regional plans are being developed with due consideration to the future economic viability of commercial agriculture. They also fail to give adequate consideration to the future social, economic, and environmental impact on Alberta.

The Alberta Chambers of Commerce recommends the Government of Alberta:

1. Take a leadership role in placing a high priority, ensuring that government policies, legislation and regional planning considers the importance of agricultural operations and the benefits of agriculture to the economy, environment, and the social fabric of Alberta.
2. Amend the Alberta Land Stewardship Act to include a fourth purpose in section one that states: “(d) to give consideration to the importance of agricultural operations, land stewardship and environmental protection outcomes in land-use planning and decision making.”

*Section 2.0 of the ALSA, defines “land” as “everything in, or under the land.”

⁵ Government of Alberta (2013). *Draft South Saskatchewan Regional Plan 2014 – 2024*. Retrieved from <https://landuse.alberta.ca/REGIONALPLANS/SOUTHSASKATCHEWANREGION/Pages/default.aspx> on Jan 4, 2014.