
Backgrounder

How a conservation easement works

Conservation easements are legally binding, voluntary agreements between a landowner and a land trust. When placed on the land title, an easement restricts future surface development but allows current activities, such as grazing, to continue.

In this case, the research activity being conducted on the Mattheis Ranch will continue. In fact, the \$3.8 million received by the University of Alberta from Western Sky Land Trust, thanks to funding from the Alberta Land Trust Grant program, will be placed in an endowment and be used to fund research.

With native grasslands experiencing a pronounced decline across much of the prairie provinces (decreases that range from 65 to 90 per cent of the land base, depending on the natural sub-region), efforts to conserve these critical habitats and the biodiversity they contain will increasingly require cooperation among organizations such as the U of A and Western Sky Land Trust.

About the Rangeland Research Institute

The Rangeland Research Institute was established in 2010 when the Mattheis Ranch was gifted to the university.

The objectives of the RRI include developing innovative best management practices capable of balancing socio-economic considerations (including cow/calf production, mineral extraction, etc.), with the ongoing maintenance of environmental goods and services, the latter of which includes understanding the relationships between land uses and landscape, community and species diversity.

There are currently 20 research projects underway, covering a wide range of issues. The RRI focuses on the following:

- Grassland ecology,
- Wildlife management,
- Grazing systems and carbon sequestration,
- Carbon sequestration and storage,
- Impacts of climate change,
- Establishment, production, harvesting and storage of forages,
- Land reclamation, and
- Water resources management.

Research conducted at the ranch enables us to become better managers of the land. It will ensure that the way we use the land and grow our food will continue to respond to changing times and circumstances, including climate change. So that we may continue to derive, to the fullest extent possible, the economic, social and environmental benefits from the land.

About the Mattheis Ranch

The University of Alberta's Mattheis Ranch is a 12,000-acre ranch located near Duchess, in southern Alberta. It was donated to the university by Edwin and Ruth Mattheis in 2010 and is home to the U of A's Rangeland Research Institute.

The University is managing the property through the Rangeland Research Institute as a working ranch and as a major centre for research and education, providing leadership in sustainable agriculture, particularly in rangeland ecology and management.

The Ranch and surrounding landscape are primarily native grasslands but also include a river valley, streams, wetlands, vegetated sand dunes, and shrubs. There are also irrigation ditches, irrigated fields, and water control structures. Several high voltage transmission lines and oil and gas infrastructure are present including 134 active well leases, compressor stations, pipelines and access roads. This intensive activity on native rangeland extends throughout the region and is a major conservation issue for the South Saskatchewan Regional Plan.

There are more than 30 species on the Ranch that are listed under the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) and Alberta's Species at Risk (SAR) as endangered, threatened or of special concern. In addition, prime habitat has been identified on the property for another 16 SAR, including either species of special concern or threatened species.

The Ranch's water resources and their associated riparian areas provide other important habitat. The ranch contains approximately 1000 acres of wetlands, 1.6 miles of land along the Red Deer River and 3.4 miles along Matzhiwin Creek. The riparian areas of these wetlands, creeks and rivers are vital for biodiversity, particularly on the prairies, as they provide critical habitat for a large number of species including 158 bird species, 17 mammals, and 16 amphibians.

The exceptional biodiversity values found on the ranch are a testament to how well it has been managed for decades by Ruth and Edwin Mattheis. It also highlights the importance of ensuring that the ranch remains this way forever.

About Western Sky Land Trust

Western Sky Land Trust is a conservation organization that protects critical watersheds, conserves vital habitats and provides managed public access for recreation and education. It conserves lands for their natural, agricultural, scenic, recreational and heritage values throughout southern Alberta, with a focus on the conservation of areas in and around the Calgary region. It champions the conservation of environmentally sensitive lands that support the health and integrity of southern Alberta's watersheds.

About ESRD's Land Trust Grant Program

The Alberta Land Trust Grant Program focuses on conserving ecologically important areas to prevent habitat fragmentation, maintain biodiversity and preserve native landscapes. Grants are available to land trust organizations for the purchase of conservation easements and the administration and management of new conservation projects on private land.