

What's a SAR and Why Should I Care?

By Richard Quinlan, Alberta Sustainable Resource Development

SAR is not some strange disease; SAR is short for “Species at Risk”, a catch-all phrase for endangered and threatened species, and some others that need special management. There are over 25 species at risk in Alberta’s grassland natural region, more than all the rest of Alberta. Prairie species at risk include some we are used to referring to as wildlife: mammals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians, and they also include some fish, plants, and invertebrates.

So What? Why should I care? Well many of you already do care, not because of the science or politics, but because species at risk are wild things in natural places and you value that. And yes, it’s true that we humans do need nature and nowadays nature also needs us. If you don’t care, consider that somebody else does care and that should be enough reason for you to begin to care. In fact many Canadians cared enough that they pressured the federal government for over a decade to establish a federal Species at Risk Act in 2002. And Albertans also cared enough to force amendments of the Wildlife Act in 1996 to list many endangered and threatened species, and to start recovery programs for them.

You may own your land, and maybe you also lease land that your family has a long history of investment and sweat equity in. You have a right to protect your private ownership from intrusion, and if you’ve been managing your lease land well you should continue to have first opportunity to it. But, whether you like it or not, by law you do not own the species at risk or other wildlife on your land. They are owned by all Albertans. Ah, but they would not be there without your good management, right? Yes, right, but not everybody knows nor appreciates that. Let’s get that fact out to the general public.

And what about those activists who care so deeply for the environment but forget about the people who make their livelihood on the land? What if they decide to get assertive or use legal avenues to try to change how the Alberta government and landholders do things on the land? Well, that’s where due diligence comes into play. In other words, the best way to keep somebody out of your operation is to be able to demonstrate that you are already doing the job right. Stewardship programs such as those provided by MULTISAR can help you do that. Years from now history will show that MULTISAR participants who had Species at Risk Conservation Plans on their land, and who managed according to them, will have been recognised, acknowledged, and protected from unwanted intrusions.

I am Alberta’s provincial specialist for species at risk. I care about species at risk for all the reasons above. I care enough to have built my career around species at risk. I’m

further motivated by the fact that, if Alberta cannot demonstrate effective protection of an endangered or threatened species, then a “safety net” clause in the federal Species at Risk Act could be activated, transferring jurisdiction from the provincial government to the federal government. That would mean management from further away with reduced empathy for the local circumstances. Positive action through proactive voluntary stewardship measures is going to be a big part of preventing that from ever happening. Rural agricultural communities need to work with other conservationists such as Operation Grassland Community, Nature Conservancy of Canada and MULTISAR on the conservation and recovery of multiple species at risk.

Your participation in these stewardship programs can provide you with information and tools to improve your own land management, profit and long-term sustainability while conserving and recovering species at risk on your land through a voluntary collaborative approach. This will help to provide a secure future for the species at risk as well as for those who make their living from the land – those who care.