

LETTER TO THE EDITOR OF THE WESTERN PRODUCER FROM LORNE SCOTT

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Letter to the Editor

In reference to the article in the November 21 issue of the Western Producer, titled SASKATCHEWAN MLA KEEPS DOOR OPEN FOR MORE DRAINAGE, I found some comments by delegates at the recent mid-term SARM Convention to be disturbing and unfounded. To say that all cropland has to be considered habitat because some wildlife eats the crops, is nonsensical. With upwards of 90% of our natural landscape in southern Saskatchewan lost to development, a few species such as deer and geese have adapted to artificial surroundings. However, the vast majority of birds and animals have not adapted and their populations are in decline.

Southern Saskatchewan is located in the Temperate Grassland Biome, which is the most endangered, the most altered and yet the least protected Biome on the planet. We have more Species at Risk than any other region of Canada. Over 80% of grassland birds are declining in numbers. Since the 1970's bird populations have decreased by 1/3 in North America. Once common species such as Western Meadowlarks, Killdeer, Mountain Bluebirds, Loggerhead Shrikes, Barn Swallows, grassland sparrows, shorebirds, song birds and others are in decline. White-tailed Jack Rabbits, Long-tailed Weasels, Badgers, Franklin's Ground Squirrels and Leopard Frogs, not to mention bees and other insects important to agriculture, are all declining due to human development in their natural habitats.

Another comment was that "We have not lost habitat with all the drainage...there's more there than ever ...", is absurd. Like grassland birds, many species of water birds that rely on wetlands such as American Bitterns, Horned Grebes, Black Terns and Yellow-headed Blackbirds are declining in numbers. The fact is with up to 90% of our wetlands gone in some areas we have changed our natural landscape significantly. A little talked about fact about Saskatchewan's proposed policy on mitigating agricultural drainage is that wetlands one acre and smaller in size would be exempt from regulations, meaning that they can all be drained without assessment or permits. These small sloughs make up more than 30% of all wetlands. It is going to be difficult to retain the proposed 50% of wetlands in a mitigation plan, when you consider previously drained wetlands are well over 50% in many areas and another third are exempt from drainage regulations.

Another comment that drainage doesn't release phosphorus or doesn't amplify the effects of flooding are also misinformed. A new University of Saskatchewan study of the Qu'Appelle River found that over 90% of phosphorus comes from agricultural lands and not from towns or cities. Dr. John Pomeroy, an internationally recognized hydrologist with the U of S has measured the water flowing out of drainage ditches in the RM of Churchbridge and confirmed that drainage increased peak flows and volumes of water during wet years by 30%.

Agricultural drainage has required licensing since the 1980's and, despite the introduction of the Agricultural Water Management Strategy in 2015, illegal drainage continues out of control. An enforced policy is long over due that allows for development but respects and considers downstream impacts, accounts for accumulative effects and recognizes the many public values wetlands provide before any more drainage is allowed to occur. We have drainage laws because water belongs to the public, and drainage is a privilege not a right.

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