An Obsession with Irrigation

Taber's Path to Retreading Past Mistakes

By Ruiping Luo, AWA Conservation Specialist



In June 2026, AWA visited the site that would soon be converted to irrigated cropland in the MD of Taber. Construction had already began. **Photos © L. Wallis**

In Southern Alberta, a green pasture is cut in half by a dark scar of newly deposited dirt. An excavator rolls across the field, flattening yellow blooms and leaving churned mud and tire tracks. Over the rumbling of machines, frogs can be heard calling, and in the distance, meadowlarks sing. Soon, the only trace of these grasslands will be on the edges of newly ploughed fields and in the memories of past visitors.

This describes the fate of six sections of native grassland in the Municipal District (MD) of Taber. In September 2025, the MD of Taber council voted to convert these sections to irrigated cropland, and leases for the sections were auctioned off in June 2026. Construction to build irrigation infrastructure and begin the process of breaking these lands has already started.

The conversion of these lands is more than just a loss of native prairie. It is a loss for the species and people that depend on these grasslands, shrublands, and wetlands. It is a loss of the resilience these lands provide, and a loss of faith in the MD council and the promises made. And, it is a risky and expensive investment in an area that already proved unsuitable for similar investments.

Livelihoods lost

Native grasslands are home to a diversity of species. They are habitat for hundreds of plant species, and also for many insects, reptiles, amphibians, birds, and mammals. Over 60 species at risk rely on the native Canadian grasslands, and many of these species are still declining.

Grasslands are also home to ranchers and

communities that have lived and stewarded these lands for generations. Cattle grazing on these lands help maintain the health of the prairie, which was adapted to the foraging of millions of bison. The stewardship of ranchers is the reason many of Alberta's large grasslands remain intact.

Before the MD decided to break the native prairie, these lands had been held under grazing leases for decades. Daryl Johnson, a rancher and representative from the Vauxhall Grazing Association (the former lessee of these sections), was one of the people who worked on these lands.

"The Association as a whole, we all will put out less cattle because of the loss of this land," said Johnson.

Being able to put cattle out on the prairie, he went on to explain, is one of the best options for ranchers. Economically, the costs of feeding cattle on irrigation are much higher, but it goes beyond financials.

Johnson continued, "Until maybe the past five years, cow-calf ranching has been like, you have to love it to do it, because nobody's making big dollars at it. It's more of a lifestyle, something you've grown up in, something that you want to keep going... But as a rancher, there's nothing better for your cows and your calves than to get out into the prairie and to graze grass and grow naturally as any animal should. Like you just can't replicate that."

Talking about the land that would be lost, he added, "It's [the land] been a big blessing for us for sure as an association, and that's why we have worked so hard to try to keep it."

The permanent loss of the large, intact prairie these six sections provided will seriously hurt rancher communities.

"And of course," Johnson finished. "Our worry is, once one project like this happens, what stops another project?"

Promises broken

"Don't believe government promises," Cliff Wallis advised.

As a Professional Biologist and AWA Director, Cliff Wallis was involved in opposing the conversion of these native grassland sections. He, along with Cheryl Bradley, Director for Southern Alberta Group for the Environment (SAGE), presented written and oral submissions to the MD of Taber council in late 2025, explaining the reasons these lands should not be broken.

One reason was a promise the MD of Taber had made in 2014 to "conserve prairie grassland for grazing for generations to come."

Prior to 2014, these sections were owned by the province. The province had managed them for over 50 years, maintaining these areas as grazing pastures, until the municipality requested the sections be transferred to them. However, the province was reluctant to transfer these lands. These sections were considered environmentally significant areas, meaning they held important or unique habitat for Alberta. At the time, the province kept and protected lands of high environmental significance.

To encourage the transfer, the MD of Taber promised these lands would not be broken. The Municipal Council described their intention "of assuring continued access to the grazing land by the current leaseholder for the long term." These promises were codified in the *Prairie Conservation Bylaw* (Municipal Bylaw 1845), aiming to "ensure the proper stewardship of all municipally owned, controlled or managed Grasslands for the purpose of maintaining healthy and functional natural prairie rangeland ecosystems."

"The conservation of the tax recovery land we have coming back is extremely important to the MD of Taber, so we want to make sure it's managed properly," Reeve Brian Brewin told *The Taber Times* in 2014.

As is recognized in the bylaw, "prairie grasslands owned by the Municipal District of Taber provides both economic and environmental



Taking a look at some of the unique flora in the MD of Taber during an Adventure for Wilderness. Native prairie improves water storage, anchors soil, and protects against severe flood and drought.
Photo © R. Luo



Beardtongue in the MD of Taber.
Photo © L. Wallis

benefits to the residents of the Municipal District of Taber." The bylaw prohibits grazing leaseholders from breaking or altering the native grasslands. It did not, however, prevent the MD of Taber from breaking the lands themselves.

Just over a decade later, the MD council, lured by the prospect of generating more revenue, voted to proceed with irrigation on 3,100 acres of tax recovery lands under their stewardship. They are going into debt — debt that will fall on taxpayers if the project fails — to finance the irrigation project (Bylaw 2022). The decision to proceed with the project passed by a narrow four to three vote.

The MD of Taber is not the only one breaking promises. When the Alberta Irrigation Modernization Program (AIM) was announced in 2020, there were assurances given that irrigation would only be expanded to already cultivated lands, not native grassland. Further, irrigation districts must act in accordance with *Alberta Land Stewardship Act* regional plans, including the South Saskatchewan Regional Plan (SSRP), which states, "maintaining intact native grasslands and habitat will be a high priority."

Yet, when questioned about these assurances, Richard Phillips, General Manager for the Bow River Irrigation District (BRID), which will be proving water to the MD of Taber for irrigation, replied, "This is not technically irrigation expansion and has no connection to the AIM program." It is not clear how they are defining irrigation expansion if the plowing of native grassland to grow irrigated crops is not considered expansion.

"There's an absence of goodwill there," Bradley noted. "An absence of credibility."

Procedures evaded

The project utilizes other technicalities as well, bypassing the safeguards and regulations around irrigation expansion. For instance, the irrigation district intends to irrigate the land under annual agreements, which means water will only be guaranteed for one year before agreements must be renewed. As a result, according to the BRID, the new parcels do not need to be added to this irrigation district.

"Because they're annual acres, they don't appear on the assessment, right? They're not considered part of their [the BRID's] expansion limit," Bradley explained of the response she received after reaching out to the BRID. "It seems to be really devious, like they're playing some kind of game to avoid abiding by the rules regarding allowable irrigation expansion."

Since these sections will not be added to the district, the BRID maintains it does not have to give notice of the added irrigation sections, or assess the new parcels, as would normally be required under the *Irrigation Districts Act*.

"With the annual agreement, they really bypassed everything," Johnson stated.

"They made a grey area even greyer," Wallis agreed.

Not only are they using annual agreements, but the MD of Taber has also promised that the project "will not impact other water users' allocations, as it draws from excess water that currently cannot be fully utilized." They are referring to 'spillwater' from the Scope Reservoir, which is extra water remaining in the reservoir that is not fully used for irrigation.

"This is not real water. This is just ephemeral water," Wallis said, referring to how the water is seen by irrigators, though normally, this water is returned to the Bow River and contributes to the instream flows for the river. The Bow River, downstream of the Bassano Dam, is already degraded from excessive water use, mainly by irrigation.

Because this is water already drawn from the river, no new water rights had to be purchased, further bypassing procedures that exist to reduce the irresponsible use of water.



Rocky Mountain Beeplant in the MD of Taber.
Photo © L. Wallis



Fleabane in the MD of Taber.
Photo © L. Wallis

Warnings dismissed

"So these ones here are specifically called tax recovery lands," was how Johnson presented the site when AWA visited there in June 2026. "And so in the thirties, when the original settlers came and tried to farm these areas, they couldn't make it due to the poor land. Thus, they couldn't pay their taxes, and the province took the land back."

As tax recovery lands, these lands already have a history of failed cultivation. Alberta's Land Suitability Rating System classifies these soils as poor, with severe to extremely severe limitations for crops. The soils are sandy and do not hold water well.

> "I fear we're having to relearn the lessons of the Dirty Thirties."
>
> -Cheryl Bradley, SAGE

Despite this, the BRID has now determined the land to be suitable for irrigation.

"I think we're taking quite a risk," Bradley observed. "Because if we get a couple of years of drought, and then we get winds similar to those that came in the thirties, exposed topsoil will erode and all the productivity that nature provides will blow away."

Irrigation can worsen soil erosion. Many irrigated specialty crops, such as sugar beets, potatoes, and beans, leave little residual cover to shield the topsoil from strong wind. Without residuals, the best prevention for soil erosion is to plant a cover crop, a layer of vegetation that covers the soil through the winter and early spring; however, these specialty crops are also harvested in late fall, leaving little time for a cover crop to establish. As a result, these fields are unprotected throughout the winter and in the spring, when strong winds can easily carry away soil.

Other methods for soil conservation can also be difficult to apply to irrigated crops. For instance, reducing tillage helps minimize soil loss, but crops such as potatoes and sugar beets require tillage, since the vegetables need to be dug out of the ground. Farmers also use deep tillage as an emergency solution to blowing soil. Unfortunately, while this may help in the short-term — by revealing heavy, moist layers and creating grooves that trap airborne particles — it has long-term consequences in breaking apart deeper soil layers, making them more likely to be blown away once dry. The dust storms created from this can be highly destructive. We are already seeing the effects.

In 2021, high amounts of soil erosion were reported in Lethbridge, Taber, 40 Mile, and Newell, all counties with irrigation agriculture. In 2022, a dust storm blew through Southern Alberta that covered the skies and was seen from space. In 2024, severe drought conditions prompted more warnings of soil erosion, with *The Canadian Press* noting that "severe erosion events have been increasing in frequency and severity in recent years." Another massive dust storm formed in May 2026, blowing across the Canadian prairies and stealing more soil from fields.

Once the soil is lost, it takes decades or even centuries to recover. Without soil, no amount of water will make the crops grow.

"I fear we're having to relearn the lessons of the Dirty Thirties," Bradley noted.

Keeping the land as native prairie is one of the best strategies for surviving drought and reducing soil erosion, yet we are continuing to lose our grasslands. The conversion of these six sections in the MD of Taber is just one of many projects that favour irrigation or other developments over the protection of our prairies. They made an economic decision, prioritizing immediate profits by selling our future.