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Research to Assess Forage Industry's Value

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Saskatoon newsroom

BRODERICK, Sask. — Saskatchewan's forage industry is initiating a comprehensive review to define its impact on the provincial economy, society and environment. The study, with a budget of \$85,000, will involve the Saskatchewan Forage Council, Saskatchewan Agriculture, the Feeds Innovation Institute, the Centre for Studies in Agriculture, Law and the Environment and Knowledge Impact in Society.

Janice Bruynooghe, executive director of the Saskatchewan Forage Council, said forage represents sectors from seed growing to livestock grazing resources, but few completely understand it. "The forage industry is far reaching but we don't get the recognition or the visibility," she said, noting the back seat it takes to the more prominent grain industry. Interviewed in the council's office on her family's forage and cattle farm near Broderick, Sask., she estimated there are 7.5 million acres of tame pastures and 12 million acres of native rangeland in the province. Bruynooghe, who holds a masters degree in grazing management, noted the linkages between forage, livestock and grain and the need to better understand its markets.

Producers struggle to get its value, with pasture rental fees and hay prices varying from region to region and heavily dependent on weather. "We have a bit of an estimate but the study will provide a snapshot of what it all looks like," she said.

The first step is a forum planned for Saskatoon Nov. 20-21. It will help create the scope of the study by spotlighting who is involved in the industry, examine direct marketing effects from forage and define the ecological goods and services from growing forages. "Forages are green, truly," Bruynooghe said, citing their role in an increasingly environmentally conscious society through maintaining green spaces, carbon sequestration and zero till farming. They also hold great potential in biofuel, in the reclamation of oil and gas sites and in sustaining wildlife habitat and water resources.

In addition to quantifying what forages do and can encompass, Bruynooghe hopes the study will lead to a resurgence in forage research. It has declined in recent years as researchers have retired and not been replaced.

Bruynooghe called forage the foundation of the livestock sector and stressed the need to continue breeding new varieties. She and husband, Chad, like many other livestock operators, use grazing land and grow feed for their herds. "On our sandy land, forage production makes sense."

While some forage acres have been put into grain with the rise in crop prices, she said there is a need to protect native rangeland and make the best use of marginal lands.

The review, led by consultant Leanne Thompson, starts with discussions and culminates with a report by March 31, 2010. "If we come at it from a collaborative approach, we will build that part

of the industry," Bruynooghe said. "Until we have that clear vision, how do we move the industry forward?"

Andre Bonneau, forage conversion specialist with Saskatchewan Agriculture, said forages have been undervalued relative to other commodities. He said part of the issue is a livestock industry based on a cheap forage supply. "If we put too much value on forages, then the value of forages is gone," he said. "It's kind of a catch 22 situation. We want cheap forages but we want to get the most value of them at the same time." Bonneau said it's important to understand forages' value in agriculture and in the province. "Before you can manage or get a good handle on what the industry is about, you have to take inventory," he said. "Once we have that under our belts, then we can start dealing with specific problems and issues."