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Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA)

A federal legacy of competence, trust, and capacity

The Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA) has a status in rural Prairie communities that is legendary. Its reputation is unique: it is rare that a federal program or agency has been so universally viewed as positive. That fact alone, and the fact that PFRA provided first-rate services for almost eight decades, makes it worthy of examination.

Why examine the PFRA now?
Though dismantled by the federal government beginning in the early 2010s, the PFRA provides important, enduring lessons.

The PFRA was created by a 1935 Act of Parliament to respond to the overwhelming environmental and economic crises in the Prairie provinces. A federal rapid-response team was needed to address the interrelated problems that had arisen following years of drought and ill-advised farming practices, resulting crop failures, soil drifting, farm abandonment, and the financial collapse of municipalities.

In recent years, scientists have warned that climate change could present an even greater set of threats to our nation. Experts warn that Canada's food security, like that of all nations, is likely to be disrupted by an increase in extreme weather events as well as such long-standing environmental concerns as pollinator and biodiversity decline, depleted water supplies, declining soil quality, farmers' increasing dependence on agrochemical inputs, etc.

To deal with these threats, federal and provincial governments will need greater capacity. Building such capacity takes time and requires the cultivation of expertise across many disciplines. It is not prudent to wait until crises are upon us before building capacities that will almost certainly be required.

The PFRA story provides "lessons learned" in terms of how to build an effective multi-disciplinary team to address major threats to food production.

The PFRA's mandate
The 1935 Act that created the PFRA was concise: just over two pages. The PFRA's stated purpose was "to provide for the rehabilitation of drought and soil drifting areas in the Provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta."

The impetus behind the Act went beyond drought: low precipitation had been a chronic problem in Prairie regions since 1914 and had intensified from 1929 onward. By the end of 1934, the situation had expanded both environmentally and socio-economically. Farmers were defaulting, abandoning their farms, and adding to government relief rolls. Municipalities and school boards were going broke. Provincial budgets were teetering.

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PFRA's immediate task was to find ways to halt soil erosion, an urgent and complex matter. Its larger task was to rehabilitate and restore the rural economy in hard-hit areas, primarily within the Palliser Triangle (in southern SK and AB).

Department of Agriculture's capacity in 1935
The Dominion government already had a network of experimental farms (EFs, est. 1886). Many of the EF's brightest and best personnel were drawn upon, even conscripted, to guide the formation of its subordinate agency, the PFRA.

Within a dozen weeks of the Act's passage, the administrative path had been formalized. PFRA would comprise two divisions: cultural practices and water development. A committee was formed of six "Divisional Specialists," each a recognized expert in one of the following: soil drifting, tree planting, forage crops, farm implements, irrigation, and soil research and soil surveys.

Two aspects are significant: the federal government had existing capacity insofar as it had a pool of willing, committed personnel with proven practical expertise. Second, senior bureaucrats had the good sense to recognize that *a monumental task of such complexity would require a multi-disciplinary team, that it needed to work in an integrated manner, and that the new agency needed to be structured and administered accordingly.*

PFRA's water development branch
Today, apart from the remaining community pastures, perhaps the most visible legacy of the PFRA is a multitude of water projects. During its many decades, the PFRA was responsible for hundreds of major water projects as well as many thousands of smaller-scale irrigation projects, farm dugouts, wells, stock-watering dams, etc.

PFRA's cultural practices branch
The primary task of this branch was to find ways to halt the widespread drifting of topsoil, only after which the land could be rehabilitated. The latter involved improving agri-"cultural" practices. The former involved stopping several practices that should never have been started, principally the cultivation of unsuitable lands.

The unsuitable lands needed to be identified and returned to what they had been for millennia: grazing lands. This was itself a complex task that involved reseeding, installing miles of fencing, constructing handling and watering facilities, and long-term administration under the Community Pastures (CP) model.

The CP lands, once under permanent cover, would no longer contribute to soil drifting. However, the better lands that had potential for dryland cultivation remained subject to erosion and drifting and required responses of even greater complexity. If the cropping of annual grains was to continue, methods had to be found to retain soil moisture and fertility while preventing exposed soil from eroding.

Dominion researchers at EF and PFRA facilities, often assisted by researchers at universities, worked intensively and collaboratively to help farmers overcome the multitude of problems and adjustments that they faced. These included cultivation techniques, equipment modifications that were needed for the new techniques, new and alternative grain and forage varieties, planting shelterbelts, weed and insect control, and above all, radical changes to summer-fallowing.

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The PFRA's land use branch
Returning to the matter of the unsuitable farmland that was to be converted to community pastures, an additional complication was that these lands were privately owned, often involved mortgage defaults and tax arrears, and sometimes had not yet been abandoned. Farm families on these lands needed to be resettled on better farmland.

Consequently, a third branch of PFRA was created in 1937 to deal with the tangle of intergovernmental, legal, and logistical issues that were involved in the removal and resettlement of families and their possessions.

The PFRA's extension work
It should be obvious that tasks of such scale could not possibly be achieved without the cooperative efforts of farmers themselves. Such cooperation is unlikely to be obtained without trust. Fortunately for the PFRA, a good deal of trust and respect had been earned during the prior decades of work via the Experimental Farm network of regional substations, demonstration farms, and field personnel.

That respect worked both ways: EF staff had learned much from the curiosity and ingenuity of leading farmers and had cultivated those relationships. PFRA's personnel were able to build upon and extend those relationships via Agricultural Improvement Associations (AIAs) that were organized and funded by the PFRA.

The AIAs, in turn, drew local non-members to various AIA events where they, too, could observe demonstrations and exchange ideas and concerns with PFRA's field personnel, technicians and scientists. In these ways, mutual respect was achieved. This helped keep PFRA personnel on track and boost the morale of local farmers.

Community pastures
A classic example of the close relationship between front-line PFRA personnel and local farmers was found at the community pastures. Typically, a live-in pasture manager was responsible for the welfare of over a thousand cattle that belonged to dozens of local farmers. The manager also looked after PFRA bulls, most of which were of exceptional quality.

There were once 85 CPs encompassing 1.8 million acres in Saskatchewan alone. Financially, the CPs were almost entirely self-supporting via per-head stocking fees. The insightful observations of one veteran manager may be heard in this 2014 video: https://www.realagriculture.com/2014/12/last-cowboy-mini-documentary-jim-commodore-val-marie-pfra/

Tree nursery
The planting of trees and shrubs was encouraged by PFRA for three main reasons. In the near term, they broke the wind and reduced erosion effects on bare soil. Second, conifers were especially helpful at retaining snow which would gradually release precious water. Third, the planting of farmyard shelterbelts provided many benefits to the farm: summer shade, garden shelter, winter windbreaks, etc.

An independent voice in Ottawa
If there is one constant theme throughout the history of the PFRA, it is that its personnel put the needs of local farmers first. There are numerous accounts of PFRA staff who literally went the extra mile to help farmers, sometimes in ways that had little to do with formal PFRA "job descriptions."

Over...

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As the author of the only history of the PFRA explained, "there was not an entomologist, a plant scientist, irrigationist, forage specialist or Experimental Farm director or administrator who had a normal life. They were on the road constantly.... Where something more than advice was called for, they pitched in with muscle..." (Gray, p. 51).

This dedication extended to the very top of the organization during its early years. Even the PFRA's boss, Minister of Agriculture Gardiner "spent almost as much time in Saskatchewan as he did in Ottawa. He probably had more information at his fingertips about the Palliser Triangle than any other Canadian" (Gray, p. 133).

Some observers have speculated that PFRA's principled independence may have ruffled feathers in Ottawa and contributed to the PFRA's demise. Evidence of that possibility may be found in PFRA's last major publication, *Prairie Agricultural Landscapes* (*PAL*).

The *PAL* report expressed multiple concerns that challenged the prevailing push for production despite the environmental and social harms that were resulting. With climate change now upon us, those concerns are even more relevant today. All Canadians, not just farmers, need a federal government that is tolerant of challenges to existing practices, has the capacity to respond effectively to both the environmental and policy challenges, and will work closely with farmers as they search for ways through the next great agricultural transition.

The PFRA was the right response to the situation in the 1930s. It was, and remains, a model of how governments can organize, build capacity, provide coordination and leadership, and intervene effectively to aid in transitions in the face of environmental and socio-economic crises. Its lessons are many, its supporters numerous, and its critics few. The PFRA, created in the 1930s, can help us find ways to manage the challenges as we move toward 2030, and beyond.

What was unique about working at PFRA was we were very hands-on and went out and met our clients, and remained close to them. Many federal public servants deliver nationwide programs and never meet the people they serve.

—Dr. Harry Hill, former DG, PFRA, (*Agri-Environment Services Branch, 75 Years*, p. 10)

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