

## BACKGROUND

The Special Areas Board recognizes the value of engaging with the public as a part of the municipal decision-making process and is committed to creating opportunities for meaningful public participation. The goal of this public engagement related to community pastures was to provide residents and other stakeholders the opportunity to share feedback related to community pastures directly with the Special Areas Advisory Council.

Under the *Special Areas Act*, the Special Areas Board is responsible for the administration of public lands located within the region. Community pastures provide a reliable allotment to help establish and stabilize farm and ranch units within the Special Areas, and are an important part of these public lands.

## WHAT WE DID

Special Areas collected feedback related to community pastures from July 15 until September 30, 2024. An online survey was used to collect this feedback. This engagement was advertised using both digital and print media, as well as information posted at district offices.

The survey collected 95 responses during the engagement period. Not all respondents answered all questions in the survey; 55% of respondents provided responses to all questions.

## HOW FEEDBACK WAS USED

The goal of this public engagement was to allow residents and other stakeholders the opportunity to share feedback related to community pastures directly with Special Areas Advisory Council.

Feedback was shared with Advisory Council in December 2024 as a part of the fall Advisory Council meeting. Feedback was also shared with administrative staff responsible for community pastures to ensure feedback related to operations and potential improvements could be reviewed.

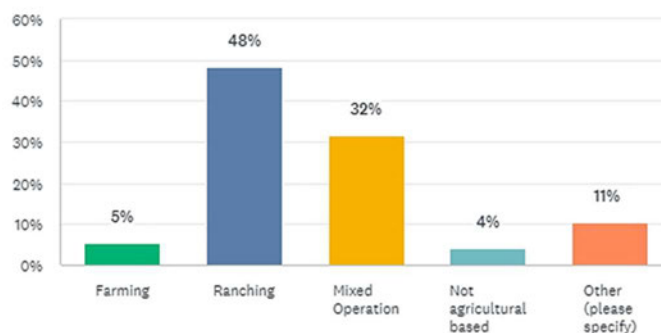
## WHO WE HEARD FROM

Respondents were asked to identify their primary occupation to help provide insight into their experience within agriculture.

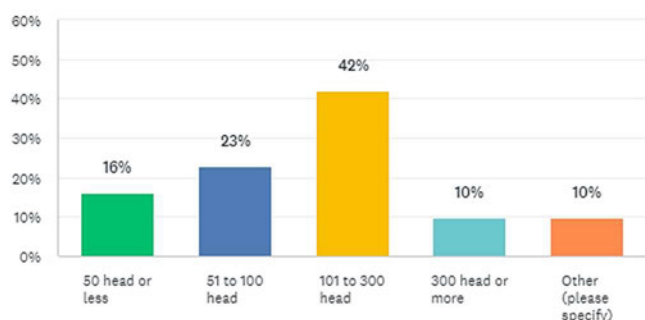
Most respondents indicated their occupation was either ranching (48%) or mixed operations (32%).

A small percentage indicated they primarily farmed (5%) or were not agriculture based (4%).

Of the Other responses (11%), a range of occupations were noted including fields like administrative, clerical, oilfield, and environmental science.



Respondents were asked to share the average size of their cattle herd, if they raised cattle.



Over 80% of respondents answered this question, reflecting the number of respondents who had earlier indicated they primarily ranched or had a mixed operation.

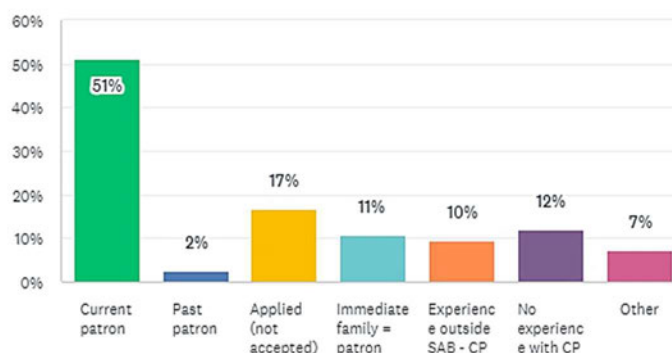
Overall, having between 101 and 300 head of cattle was most common (42%). This herd size is consistent with 2021 Census of Agriculture reporting where the average number of beef cattle per farm in Alberta was 173 head.

Smaller herd sizes were also reported, with 23% of respondents reporting herds between 51 and 100 head and 16% reporting herds of 50 or less head. In the Other response category, some respondents indicated they would not provide this information to help keep anonymity or provided a null response.

Respondents were asked to share their level of experience with community pastures. Respondents could select multiple responses, as more than one response could potentially apply.

Over half of all responses were received from individuals who identified as current patrons in community pastures (51%).

The next largest group was those who had applied to a community pasture and were unsuccessful in their application (17%). Remaining responses included: past patrons (2%), those with immediate family who were patrons (11%), those with experience in community pastures outside the Special Areas (10%), those with no experience with community pastures (12%), and Other (7%).



## WHAT WE HEARD – KEY FINDINGS

Respondents provided feedback through survey responses which represented a diversity of perspectives on the value of community pastures, as well as some of the key challenges and opportunities they create. These responses were redacted for any personal identifying information (e.g. names) and provided in detail to Advisory Council. A general summary of what we heard in these responses is shared below.

A number of responses indicated concerns if changes were made to how community pastures were managed. These concerns ranged from potential negative impacts on new applicants and the application process to pastures becoming more expensive or being managed less effectively. In addition, the need for and value of unbiased administrative processes and committee members was a theme in many of the responses which were generally opposed to making changes in community pastures.

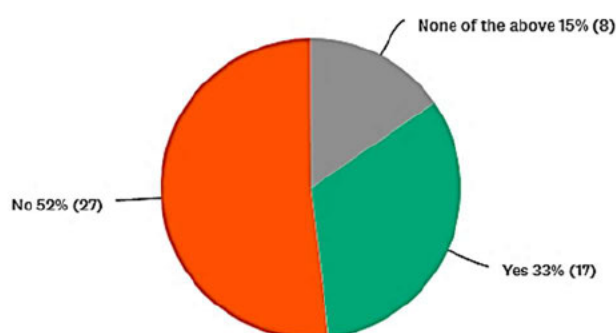
Conversely, a number of responses talked about some opportunities which could result from changing management at community pastures. These opportunities included increasing the ability of patrons to

participate in day-to-day management of pastures, and the potential for lower costs to operate pastures if they were run by patrons.

Another key theme in the responses was the need for proactive communication and collaboration with patrons, including in-person engagement and meetings. Comments also talked about the importance of community pastures in supporting new entrants to the industry, as well as younger ranchers. The value of unbiased, fair, and transparent processes in applications, allotments, and operational decisions was a key theme identified in comments. Finally, the need for continued water development and other pasture improvements was noted as something which should be focused on.

## MANAGEMENT CHANGES TO COMMUNITY PASTURES

Respondents were asked if they thought Special Areas should change how community pastures are managed. 45% of total survey respondents did not answer this question.

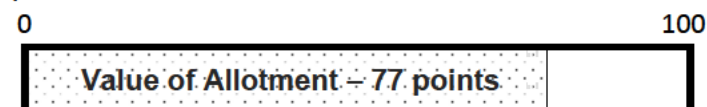


There was no strong consensus in the responses about whether Special Areas should change how community pastures are managed, with 52% against making changes and 33% in favour.

When responses were filtered based on respondent experience with community pastures, 65% of current patrons indicated no changes should be made, with 23% indicating changes should be made.

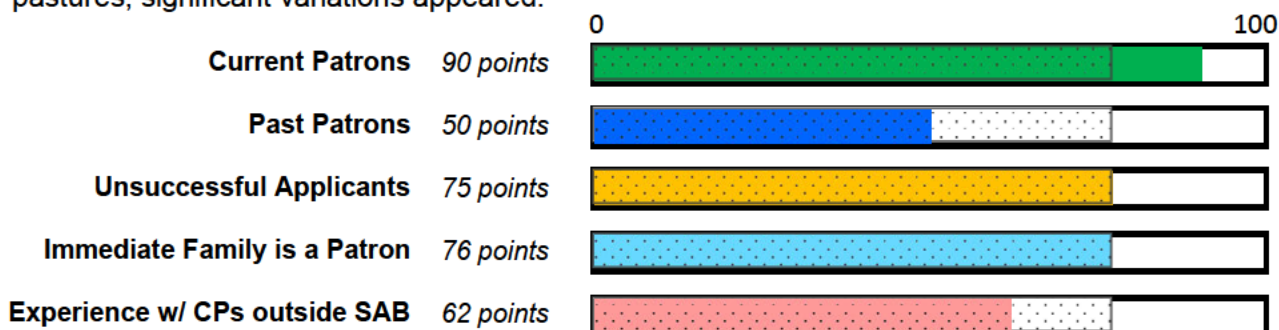
## IMPORTANCE OF ALLOTMENT IN COMMUNITY PASTURES

If respondents were currently or had been a patron in a community pastures, they were asked to share how important having an allotment was. An allotment is the number of Animal Unit Months (AUMs) which are allocated to a patron, sometimes referenced as the number of animals that can graze during a given period.



Overall, having an allotment was of significant importance to respondents, being scored 77 points out of at total possible 100 points.

When responses were compared based on the respondent's experience with Special Areas community pastures, significant variations appeared.



Generally, current patrons reported allotments as being more important versus the average response. Past patrons scored the importance of allotments lower than the average response, as well as those respondents who had experience in community pastures outside the Special Areas. Both individuals who had applied unsuccessfully to community pastures and those who had immediate family who were patrons indicated the importance of an allotment which was consistent with the average response.

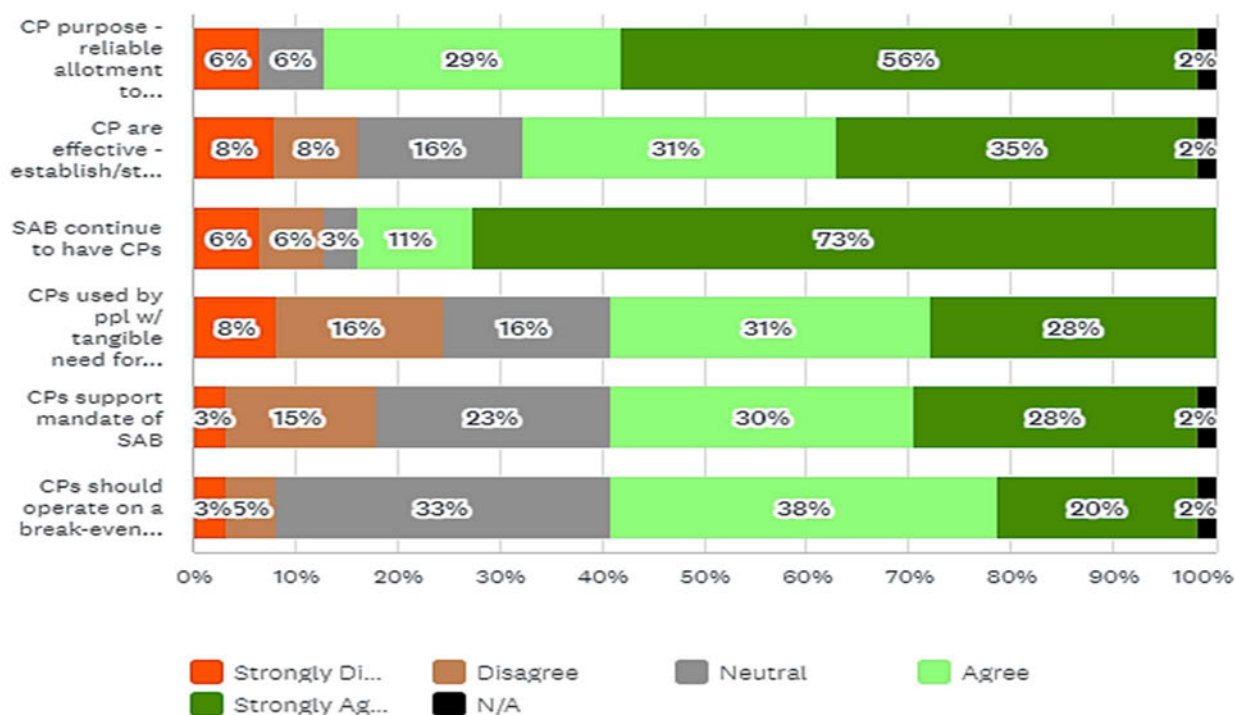
## COMMUNITY PASTURES & THE SPECIAL AREAS BOARD MANDATE

Respondents were asked to share how much they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements which spoke about the operation and function of community pastures within the Special Areas. Statements included:

- The purpose of community pastures is to provide a reliable allotment to assist in the establishment and stabilization of farm and ranch units within the Special Areas
- Community pastures are effective in assisting in the establishment and stabilization of farm and ranch units within the Special Areas
- Special Areas should continue to have community pastures
- Community pastures are used by people who have a tangible need for supplemental, seasonal grazing for their livestock
- Community pastures support the mandate of the Special Areas Board
- Community pastures should operate on a break-even basis (e.g., full cost recovery)

Respondents were asked to rank their agreement (or disagreement) with each statement which was then translated into a numerical score that showed a weighted average out of a maximum of 5. A lower score indicated strong disagreement and a higher score indicated strong agreement with the statement.

Across all responses there was strong support for the majority of statements.



There was strong support for Special Areas continuing to have community pastures (4.37 out of 5.0). The statement related to the purpose of the community pastures (reliable allotment to establish/stabilize) also showed strong agreement across respondents, with an overall score of 4.31 (out of 5). Overall, respondents agreed with the statements more than they disagreed, including the statement related to operational cost recovery.

Responses were also compared based on respondent's experience with Special Areas community pastures.

Current patrons had the strongest support for the statement about the effectiveness of community pastures, and most strongly disagreed with the statement related to cost-recovery operations.

Unsuccessful applicants most strongly supported the statement that Special Areas should continue to have community pastures, and most strongly disagreed with the statement that pastures are used by people who have a tangible need for them.

Individuals with immediate family members who are current or past patrons showed strong support for the most statements, and showed strong support for Special Areas continuing to have community pastures.

Respondents with experience with grazing reserves or comparable outside Special Areas showed the strongest disagreement with the statement that community pastures support the mandate of Special Areas.

Finally, respondents who had no experience with community pastures showed the strongest disagreement with the greatest number of statements. The exception to this was the statement related to cost-recovery operations, to which this group showed the highest level of agreement with.

## **WANT TO LEARN MORE?**

For more information on this report, or on public engagement by the Special Areas Board, please contact Maeghan Chostner, Communications Officer, at:

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