

CHAMPIONS

FOR OUR COMMON FUTURE

Ordinary people taking extraordinary action

JEFF OLSON EDUCATES ABOUT WETLANDS

After a twenty-year career as a Conservation Officer, Jeff Olson started work for the Saskatchewan Environment department of the government as a Wetlands Specialist - a position that aimed to close the gap between policy and practice impacting wetland loss. What Jeff learned about wetlands changed the trajectory of his life's work.

At the end of the last ice age, the receding ice left thousands of potholes. From the time the first land was cleared for agriculture, these water-filled potholes were regarded as an obstacle to farming, so were drained or filled in. On-farm economic pressures contributed to this, as did limited understanding of the benefits of wetlands. Today the importance of wetlands is better understood, as are the potential impacts of losing them.

Wetlands filters water to keep it clean and healthy, and they buffer against over-land flooding. They support biodiversity. An estimated 80% of Saskatchewan's wildlife rely to varying extents on wetlands for food and shelter. Wetlands sequester carbon, which is critical to reducing our greenhouse gas emissions. Draining wetlands leads to downstream flooding, increased erosion, a falling water table, and reductions in the supply of water during drought. This gradual desiccation of the prairie could cripple our capacity to grow food and handle drought, flood and fire. Working as a Wetland Specialist convinced Jeff of the importance of wetlands but also helped him to understand the barriers to protecting them.



After leaving Saskatchewan Environment, Jeff worked for the Water Security Agency (WSA) for several years on watershed planning and flood reduction. His public engagement work as a Watershed Planner convinced him that many landowners recognized the value of wetlands, but they felt constrained by the economics of optimising their farm operations

After retiring from WSA, Jeff helped create the Citizens' Environmental Alliance (CEA) which aims to raise awareness of the value of wetlands and the impacts of their accelerated loss. This decision was ignited by the realization that, if not properly managed, the province's push to increase agriculture production could come at a cost to wetlands. He also realized that very few citizens were aware of the importance of wetlands. Jeff feels that CEA has played a key role in raising the profile of the issue in the last decade. CEA played a key role in a series of roundtables on emerging wetland drainage issues

and solutions. Participants representing rural, urban, agriculture, downstream landowners and cabin owners from across Saskatchewan and Manitoba participated.

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The roundtable report *Call to Action: Findings from Farmland Drainage Roundtable Initiative* concludes "Critical avenues that should be considered when acting on farmland drainage include education and communication to change perceptions surrounding the issue, as well as building partnerships and lobbying for greater policy enforcement and changes."

Wetland protection continues to be a driver of Jeff's life work. Jeff is no longer active in CEA, but he continues his work in other ways. On the ranch that he co-owns with his wife, son and daughter, the permanent protection of wetlands and native prairie/parkland has been bequeathed through their wills. He currently works for Ducks Unlimited Canada in a role that protects waterfowl habitat, including wetlands. He still advocates for wetlands in both his public and private life.

Jeff is hopeful. Awareness is increasing. He just fears that change may not happen until after we have hit a crisis. In the meantime, he will continue to do what he can.

This column is a collaborative project of the Saskatchewan Environmental Society and the Regional Centre of Expertise on Education for Sustainable Development – RCE Saskatchewan.



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Saskatchewan Environmental Society is a non-profit, registered charity that is committed to supporting sustainable living and sustainable resource use in Saskatchewan. We work with, and on behalf of, communities, organizations, businesses, and policy makers to encourage

informed decision-making that moves us towards sustainability. SES's current action areas include sustainable energy and climate solutions, water protection, resource conservation, biodiversity preservation, and reduction of toxic substances. Our work in Saskatchewan is carried out in Treaties 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, and our office is in Saskatoon on Treaty 6, the traditional territory of Cree peoples and the homeland of the Métis Nation. Learn more at: www.environmentalsociety.ca



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University of Canada, Campion College at the University of Regina, the City of Regina, City of Saskatoon, Craik Sustainable Living Project, and United Nations University. Our honorary patron is Her Honour the Honourable Bernadette McIntyre, Lieutenant Governor of Saskatchewan. There are more than 190 RCEs around the globe. Learn more at: www.saskrce.ca