



First Nations and Métis Farming in Saskatchewan

FIRST NATIONS

First Peoples of the Plains

For countless generations, First Nations people have lived on the North American continent. The Canadian prairies were occupied by several nations, each a distinct society with its own culture, language and lifestyle. People lived in small extended family groups, following the cycle of the seasons. They often travelled great distances to areas where food was abundant.

Treaties – A Sacred Trust

Between 1874 and 1906, five Treaties were signed by First Nations and the Canadian government in the name of the British Crown, covering all the land that would become Saskatchewan. With the buffalo gone, their people hungry and Europeans arriving daily, First Nations leaders realized that change was inevitable. They looked to the Treaties to provide for the future of their people. First Nations leaders secured promises of land reserves, farm tools, schools, and medical care through these agreements.

Agricultural Provisions of Treaty 6 Signed in 1876

First Nations leaders insisted on the inclusion of agricultural provisions in the Treaties so their people could survive in a new world. They lobbied for reserves with suitable arable land and provisions for seed, implements, oxen and instruction in farming. At first, First Nations farmers had some success. But all too often, the government failed to deliver on the agricultural provisions of the Treaties.

In 1889, the Indian Commissioner introduced the Peasant Policy. He did not want Indians to compete with non-Aboriginal farmers. Instead he wanted First Nations people to become self-sufficient farmers, producing enough only for themselves and their families. First Nations people were to work the land with hand tools and cultivate a single acre of wheat. They were also to plant part of another acre for root crops and vegetables and raise a cow or two. They did not need machinery, so the Policy went, for they were not growing grain or raising livestock to sell to others as non-Aboriginal farmers were. In place until 1897, the Peasant Policy held back the development of First Nations agriculture.

Permit System

First Nations farmers were not permitted to buy or sell their farm products without permission from the Indian Agent on their reserve. Anyone who traded with them also had to have a written permit. The permit system was enforced from the 1880s until the middle of the 20th century. First Nations farmers did not have the freedom to make their own decisions on what to buy and sell, and when to do it.



Pass System

Designed as a temporary measure during the 1885 Resistance, the pass system was extended well into the 20th century. Whether going for horses or to pick berries off the reserve, First Nations people had to have written permission from an Indian Agent. Each time a person asked for a pass, he had to explain where he was going, why, and how long he would be gone.

Indian Act Changes

At the outset, reserves were assigned a static number of acres based on population so First Nations farmers could not expand their operations in the same way as non-First Nations farmers. The fact that First Nations farmers did not have the money to buy machinery was made worse because they could not use reserve land as security for bank loans. Changes in First Nations agriculture came with the revision of the Indian Act in 1951. The major change was that First Nations could elect their own band councils and had more say in their own economic activities, including agriculture.

Treaty Land Entitlement (TLE)

In 1992, the Saskatchewan Treaty Land Entitlement Framework Agreement was signed by the provincial and federal governments and 25 Saskatchewan First Nations. Under this agreement, the provincial and federal governments provided signatory First Nations with \$440 million over 12 years to purchase land, mineral rights and improvements which include buildings and structures on the land. The Framework Agreement settled the land debt that was owed to these 25 First Nations because they did not receive all the land they were entitled to under Treaties 4, 6, and 10, which had been signed between 1871 and 1906.

Current Initiatives - First Nations

Today, while differences between First Nations agriculture in Saskatchewan and the broader agriculture community are disappearing, a gap still exists between First Nations and non-First Nations farmers. Of the approximately 44,000 farmers in the province, only about 500 are First Nations. Around 150 of these are wild rice producers, 100 are grain farmers, and the remainder are cow-calf producers. As well, about 80 percent of the 640,000 hectares (1.6 millions acres) of agricultural land owned by First Nations is being tilled by non-First Nations farmers.

Systemic barriers and inequities also continue to thwart the development of Indian agriculture. One of the biggest is a collective land ownership system that prevents financial institutions from taking a security interest in reserve land. In addition, many farm aid programs are not designed with Indian farmers in mind.

Agriculture training for First Nations peoples is being addressed through various partnerships between the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations (FSIN), and agencies such as the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatchewan Agriculture and the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology.



MÉTIS

Métis - Children of the Fur Trade

During the fur trade era in Western Canada, relationships between First Nations women and European or French Canadian traders gave birth to a people of mixed heritage – the Métis. Farming was part of traditional Métis life. Métis river lot farms were long narrow ribbons of land extending back from the banks of rivers. This arrangement was an ideal setup, with a water supply, pasture for hay, and a wood lot for building materials and winter fuel. The farms were located side by side with a trail linking families and neighbours.

The 1885 Resistance

In the 1870s the Canadian government began surveying the prairies into square sections, ignoring Métis petitions to guarantee their river lot system in the Batoche region. If river lots disappeared, the Métis feared that they would lose their farms and their community. Alarmed, the Métis people, led by Louis Riel, formed a provisional government at Batoche in 1885 to defend their land claims. The government responded by sending troops to put down the Métis resistance.

Métis Scrip - Métis Lose Their Land

After the 1885 Resistance, the federal government moved to extinguish Métis Aboriginal title to the land. Through periodic Scrip Commissions between 1885 and 1907, scrip certificates were issued. The government-issued certificate entitled the bearer to either 160 acres of land, or \$160 to buy land. Most Métis sold their scrip because the available land was too far from friends and family. They wanted to stay together as a community. Speculators purchased and profited from the sale of Métis scrip. Nearly 85% of Métis money scrip ended up in the hands of speculators. Out of 138,320 acres of Métis land scrip in northwest Saskatchewan, only 1% actually went to Métis claimants.

The Thirties: A Life of Dismal Poverty

The Great Depression was a time of hardship for everyone, but for the dispossessed Métis it was a desperate time. The Métis in the southern part of the province eked out a miserable life on the margins of society, building tiny shacks or setting up tents on road allowances and at the edges of First Nations reserves. Forced out by municipalities, they were constantly on the move in search of temporary employment as farm labourers, picking stones, clearing tree stumps, or stooking wheat in the fall. Others hired on as ranch hands to work with cattle and horses. Many Métis dug and sold seneca root which was used in a remedy for respiratory problems. With no place to call home, they were not even able to grow gardens. Many existed on municipal social assistance.

The Métis in the central part of the province had also been dispossessed, but they were able to collect and sell berries and seneca root and grow potato gardens. Some attempted to grow oats and barley or hayed natural meadows to feed their horses and cattle. They were often hired as labourers to clear land for settlers or to help with harvest. By 1939, the government could ignore the Métis plight no longer. It relocated 125 Métis families to the Green Lake area, giving them limited amounts of land, equipment, livestock and credit to establish mixed farming.



Recent Initiatives – Métis

The disparity between Métis and non-Métis farmers still exists in Saskatchewan. In 1986, Statistics Canada reported that 755 farmers in Western Canada identified themselves as Métis; of those, 265 were in Saskatchewan. Individual Métis farmers can be found in almost every agricultural area of the prairie provinces. The largest concentrations, however, are located along the outer edges of the agricultural areas of the western provinces where Métis established new settlements after the 1870 exodus from the Red River colony. Invariably lacking in capital, Métis farmers have not been able to compete for the more valuable agricultural lands. A problem for those occupying marginal lands is the cost associated with drainage and clearing the land for increased pasture. Many farms could support more livestock but the cost of improving the land is prohibitive. Although Métis have been fairly successful in leasing Crown land, another factor weighing against Métis farmers' ability to improve their land is that in many cases the Crown leases which they possess do not permit the clearing of Crown land for increased pasture.

Métis people benefitted to some extent from the federal support programs of the 1970s and 1980s, but less so than status Indians. The main problem has been ineligibility for funding. Although Métis farmers had access to later programs and strategies, including the Native Economic Development Program and the Canadian Aboriginal Economic Development Strategy, they have been able to use them to a very limited extent only, and they have not been able to receive support from Indian Affairs agricultural programs.

In 2002, the government of Saskatchewan and the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan signed the *Métis Act*. The Act recognizes and celebrates the historic, economic and cultural contributions Métis people have made to the development and prosperity of Saskatchewan and Canada.

The Future for First Nations and Métis Agriculture

A final factor affecting progress in Aboriginal agriculture is the change being experienced by the agricultural sector as a whole. These changes make it more difficult than ever to develop successful commercial livestock, grain or forage operations.

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