



You and your best friend want to take the horses out for a ride. But your dad says that's not a very good idea. He knows you two like to go fast. He also knows that the fields are full of gopher holes this year – more than ever before. And the horses risk breaking a leg if they slip into a hole.

GOPHERS DECLARED PESTS

In mid-March, the Saskatchewan government officially declared gophers **pests** by adding these furry beige rodents to its Pest Control Act. Now, Saskatchewan residents will have to do their part to help bring the exploding gopher population under control.

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Gophers live in burrows. To create these underground homes, the rodents have to dig tunnels. And to dig a tunnel, gophers need to make holes. Three or four gopher holes in a field don't cause much of a problem. But hundreds of them do. It's easy for cows or horses to slip into a hole and get stuck. Worse, they might break a leg and have to be **put down**.

And it's not only the holes that cause problems. Gophers eat crops, too. Farmers end up losing money because there's less of their product to sell after the critters have had their fill.

GOPHERS IN SASKATCHEWAN HISTORY

For more than 100 years, Saskatchewan has had trouble with gophers.

The southern and western regions of the province suffer the most from gopher activity. The dry weather of the past few years has caused a rapid increase in the gopher population. Saskatchewan farmers say there are so many gophers that sometimes it seems like the ground itself is moving!

Over the years, farmers have tried many ways to limit gopher populations. They have held hunting contests. They have tried lacing holes with **strychnine**. They have used tools that actually blow up gopher holes. But these traditional methods of controlling this prairie rodent are failing. And even though some farmers take measures to control the gophers, others don't. That means the rodents are able to continue breeding.

DID YOU KNOW?

Gophers are a Saskatchewan **icon**. The mascot for the province's football team is a gopher. The town of Eston is home to a 2.5-metre-tall gopher statue. And its annual World Gopher Derby features gopher races.

"We know we've got millions of them here," said Saskatchewan's agriculture minister. "And they just wreck the land."

GETTING A GRIP ON THE GOPHER

But now that gophers are official pests, municipalities have more power. They can demand that all farmers do their part to solve the problem. If everyone

works together, there's a greater chance of success.

The Saskatchewan government also plans to carry on with its existing **rebate** program. That's where the government reimburses farmers half of the money they spend on poison to **eradicate** the little diggers.

The decision is good news for ranchers. One Swift Current family spent around \$20,000 on gopher poison last year. The situation is so bad now that the family will even buy bullets for hunters if they'll come and shoot the animals.

"That's the best, when we know they are dead," said Gail Switzer. "[Gophers] have just ruined acres and acres of land. We are starting to see gophers in lots of different areas where they weren't really a problem maybe three years ago." ★

DEFINITIONS

PEST: an organism that causes unwanted damage to humans, their crops, their homes or their animals

PUT DOWN: killed for mercy, usually by a gunshot wound to the head

STRYCHNINE: a very toxic poison used to kill small rodents or birds

ICON: a well-known symbol that is associated with a particular person, group or place

REBATE: a refund; the purchaser pays full price and then a percentage of the price is rebated back

ERADICATE: destroy; wipe out



SASKATCHEWAN WANTS GOPHERS OUT!

ANSWER THE FOLLOWING IN COMPLETE SENTENCES:

1. Explain why gophers cause problems for farmers and ranchers.

2. List the traditional methods for controlling gophers.

3. What announcement did the Saskatchewan government make in mid-March regarding gophers?

4. How will this new policy make a difference in the battle to reduce the gopher population? Explain.

5. For what reasons are in favour of the government's decision to add gophers to the province's pest control act? For what reasons are you against this move?

6. If you were Saskatchewan's agriculture minister, how would you handle the gopher problem? Give reasons to support your response.
