

## **Alberta Conservation Association (ACA)**

**Date:** 2014-2015

**Project Name:** Landowner Habitat Program

**Land Program Manager:** Darren Dorge

**Project Leader:** Ed Kolodychuk

### **Primary ACA staff on project:**

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### **Partnerships**

- Landowners

### **Key Findings**

- Managed 46 Landowner Habitat Program agreements protecting 7,982 acres of wildlife and fish habitat.
- Reviewed six agreements that previously expired or will expire in 2015/16.
- Renewed one agreement using a Conservation Site Management agreement in our Southern Region.
- One agreement that protected 160 acres expired in our Northeast Region in 2014/15.
- Three expiring agreements are scheduled for renewal in 2015/16.

### **Introduction**

Alberta's population grew by over 800,000 in less than 10 years (2005 to 2014). This staggering growth has put intense pressure on land use from a variety of sources including industry, agriculture, forestry, and urban and rural expansion. All of these activities combined reduce the quantity and quality of wildlife and fish habitat. The Landowner Habitat Program (LHP) was established to help reduce habitat loss on privately owned land. The program compensates landowners who are willing to sign a legally binding agreement agreeing to retain habitat for a term of 5 to 20 years. In 2008/09, we modified the LHP agreement to include the provision that landowners be willing to provide reasonable public foot access to recreational users. As part of the agreement, we acknowledge our LHP participants with an LHP participant project sign and "*Use Respect – Ask First*" signs to be displayed on their properties.

### **Methods**

The LHP is structured to protect privately owned lands using term habitat-retention agreements. Agreements with 5-, 10-, 15- or 20-year terms are options. The maximum payment under this

strategy is \$10 per acre. Landowners joining the program have the option of annual or lump-sum payments. As agreements are signed, the full value (specifically for annual-payment agreements) is deposited into a special land management “deferred fund.” Payments are then withdrawn annually for the term of the agreement.

Steps for completing a new LHP agreement or renewing an expiring agreement:

- Initial assessment of property.
  - Determine if property is within our conservation priorities for land securement. If property is not of interest, advise the landowner and refer the landowner to other possible conservation organizations.
- Initial meeting with landowner.
  - Preliminary discussion of landowner’s desire for the property; preliminary walk of the property and assessment of resources, liabilities, hazardous waste, etc.; photograph the property; landowner expresses an interest in signing an LHP agreement.
  - Complete Habitat Assessment – Initial Site Visit Form.
- Obtain the legal land title of the property.
  - Confirm ownership and identify encumbrances or other interests registered against title (e.g., mortgages, liens, rights-of-way, zoning).
- Negotiate price and length of term for the agreement.
  - The maximum price for any agreement is \$10 per acre.
  - The term length for agreements is 5, 10, 15 or 20 years.
- Complete draft LHP agreement.
  - Include the following attachments: legal land title, air photo, photographs, term length and costs.
- Send new LHP agreements to the Land Management program manager for review and distribution to the Land Management team.
  - The team ranks agreement (regarding Conservation and Recreational Value) and provides comments.
- Land Management program manager forwards the LHP agreement to the President and CEO, and manager of accounting for review.
- If the LHP agreement is approved, the lead negotiator will present agreement, terms and costs to the landowner for review and signing.
- If the agreement is accepted and signed by the landowner, the lead negotiator will update the LHP database to reflect the new project.

Recent updates to focus areas assist staff in selecting the appropriate agreements to renew or let expire. We provide project signage identifying the landowner as an LHP participant. We also

provide *Use Respect – Ask First* signage to identify contact information for recreational access. Landowners are given the option of either controlling access themselves or allowing ACA to control access.

## Results

We currently manage 46 LHP agreements that protect 7,982 acres of wildlife and fish habitat across Alberta. We reviewed six agreements that previously expired or are expiring and prioritized them for renewal. Prioritization included the following criteria: 1) habitat quality, 2) recreational opportunity, 3) reasonable foot access, and 4) likelihood that the landowner would idle the habitat. One agreement was renewed through a special Conservation Site Management agreement in our Southern Region, and one agreement is still in negotiations with the landowner in our Central Region. One agreement that protected 160 acres expired in our Northeast Region and was not renewed. Three agreements are scheduled for renewal in our Northwest and Southern Regions in 2015/16.

The number of agreements and overall protected acres decreased in 2014/15 due to expiring agreements. During spring 2014, we managed a total of 47 LHP agreements (Figure 1) protecting a total of 8,142 acres (Figure 2). During the course of 2014/15, one agreement protecting 160 acres expired and was not renewed, accounting for a decline in the number of agreements and protected acres.

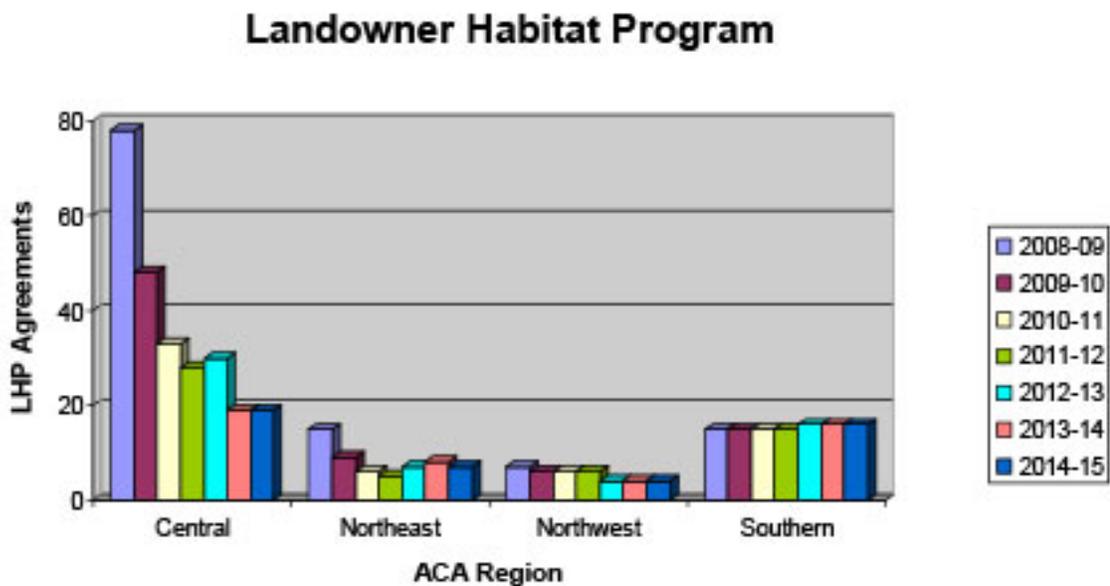


Figure 1. Landowner Habitat Program agreements in each Alberta Conservation Association region, 2008 to 2015.

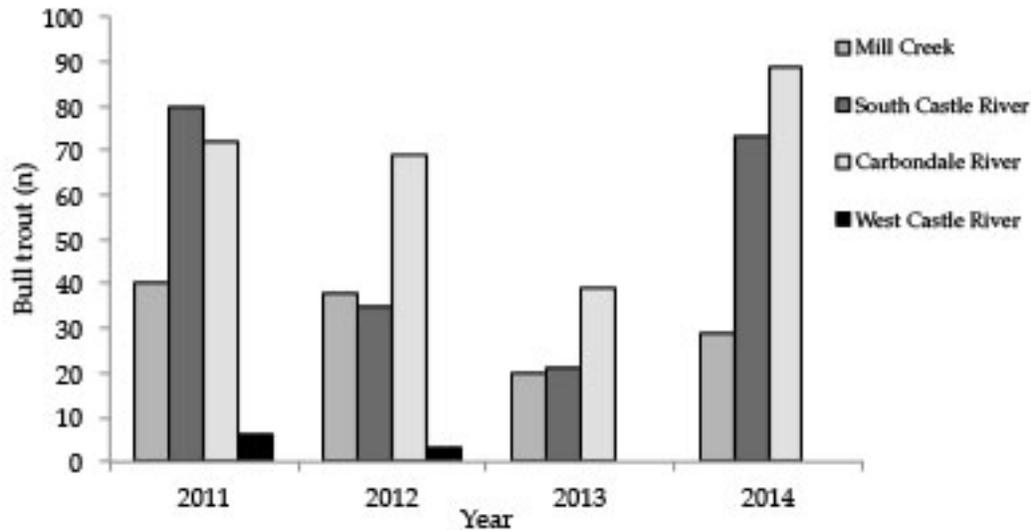


Figure 2. Conserved acres in each Alberta Conservation Association region, 2008 to 2015.

Several factors have contributed to the trend of declining agreements since 2008/09, including availability of funds to sign new or expiring agreements, the rate per acre (considered low) ACA pays to landowners, landowners not wanting to renew agreements after lengthy 20- or 25-year agreements, renewals transferred to our Riparian Conservation Program, and landowners not wanting to idle habitat or provide reasonable foot access to the public.

## Conclusions

We continue to work with landowners to protect important wildlife and fish habitat on private lands in Alberta. We currently manage 46 LHP agreements across the province protecting approximately 7,982 acres of wildlife and fish habitat. These agreements include 19 agreements in our Central Region, 7 agreements in our Northeast Region, 4 agreements in our Northwest Region and 16 agreements in our Southern Region. LHP participants display *Use Respect – Ask First* signage on their properties as part of this program, which provides reasonable foot access to some excellent recreational opportunities throughout Alberta.

## Communications

- Featured an article on Parkland County and land-use activities in our *Meet the Landowner* section of our Spring/Summer 2014 issue of *Conservation Magazine*.
- Featured an article on the conservation efforts of the Bow River Irrigation District in our *Meet the Landowner* section of our Fall/Winter 2014 issue of *Conservation Magazine*.
- Presented the rationale and mechanics of the LHP to two landowners with agreements that expired in 2014/15 and three landowners with agreements expiring in 2015/16.
- Featured an article on the LHP in the Alberta Woodlot Association's publication, *The Logjam*.
- Circulated *Use Respect – Ask First* banners to Alberta Environment and Sustainable Resource Development and municipal offices to promote the program.

- Distributed *Use Respect – Ask First* signs to LHP participants and other interested landowners. Signage promotes responsible use and enhances recreational opportunities on privately owned lands.

### Literature Cited

N/A

### Photos



Unique habitat at a Landowner Habitat Program participant's property. Rocky shale cliffs with willow found along the cliff base and upland habitat consisting of white spruce (Central Region).  
Photo: Andy Murphy



Mixture of aspen, silver willow and grassland habitat on a Landowner Habitat Program participant's property (Central Region). Photo: Jim Potter



An example of a Landowner Habitat Program participant's habitat, showing the transition from central parkland to mixedwood boreal habitat (Northeast Region). Photo: Roy Schmelzeisen



Mixedwood boreal habitat, which provides essential cover for moose, found at a Landowner Habitat Program participant's property (Northwest Region). Photo: Garret Mcken



Landowner Habitat Program sign installed along the perimeter of a participant's property (Northwest Region). Photo: Ed Kolodychuk



Deer and moose tracks along the edge of field near an abandoned farm (Northwest Region).  
Photo: Garret Mcken



Dense grass and shrub cover for upland gamebirds along Pothole Creek (Southern Region).  
Photo: Randy Lee



Meandering coulee providing wildlife cover adjacent to the Bow River valley (Southern Region).  
Photo: Randy Lee