

Alberta Conservation Association 2016/17 Project Summary Report

Project Name: Recreational Opportunity Enhancement

Land Management Program Manager: Darren Dorge

Project Leader: Stefanie Fenson

Primary ACA staff on project: Stefanie Fenson, Jeff Forsyth and Jon Van Dijk

Partnerships

Alberta Environment and Parks
Alberta Fish & Game Association
Landowners
Lethbridge Fish & Game Association
Municipal District of Greenview

Key Findings

- Provided recreational user sign-in services for existing properties, totaling approximately 9,941 acres (4,023 ha) of access.
- Added one new landowner to our program in our Southern Region, totaling ~420 acres (170 ha) of access.
- Collaborated with provincial and municipal governments, one conservation group and several landowners.
- Improved waterfowl hunting opportunities and access to 1,260 acres of habitat by securing eight properties through our Habitat Securement Program.

Introduction

Alberta's population grew by 1.6% in 2015 to reach over 4.27 million in 2016; this growth is slightly higher than the national average. Despite experiencing an economic downturn in recent years, Alberta ranks second in the country for year-to-year population growth. This trend is expected to continue as Alberta's economy starts to recover, the population grows, and demand for land continues. Growth in sectors including agriculture and forestry, as well as urban and rural expansion, increase demand for land and potentially reduce the quality and quantity of wildlife and fish habitat. The Recreational Opportunity Enhancement (ROE) project was created to increase public access to private and public lands for the purposes of hunting, fishing and other non-consumptive uses. The project also provides opportunities for landowners experiencing ungulate depredation issues to connect with hunters, and it supplies landowners with materials and resources to manage hunter access. Increased access to recreational opportunities not only will encourage hunter and angler recruitment as we attract new hunters and anglers on a yearly basis, but also will help maintain quality outdoor experiences by distributing hunters and anglers across the landscape.

Methods

Connecting landowners and hunters

Each year, ranchers and farmers express concerns over elk and deer depredation on hay and other crops. Alberta Environment and Parks (AEP) has attempted to deal with these issues by releasing more antlerless elk/deer tags and/or allowing for late-season antlerless elk draws; however, hunters have expressed concern over lack of access to potential hunting areas or lack of knowledge about where ungulate-landowner conflicts are occurring. Beginning in northwest Alberta, we will collaborate with local AEP staff and municipalities to determine where depredation issues are an ongoing problem. We will identify potential landowners and determine their willingness to participate in the program and allow controlled hunter access onto their lands to potentially increase hunter harvest and reduce elk depredation issues. Local provincial and municipal government staff will be integral to promoting the pilot project to landowners and facilitating the connection between landowners and ACA. We will work with landowners to determine the best methods to connect landowners experiencing depredation issues with hunters interested in harvesting an animal. Based on the results, we will develop an online system where participating landowners within a particular Wildlife Management Unit (WMU) can be connected to hunters who have hunting licences valid in the same WMU.

Expanding access sign-in process

In 2009, the Government of Alberta started the Recreational Access Management Program (RAMP) pilot study to create an access-management partnership between landowners and hunters and anglers with a goal to improve public recreational hunting and fishing access opportunities on private land. Since the pilot study ended in 2011, and through partnerships with the Alberta Fish & Game Association (AFGA), a number of landowners in southern Alberta have adopted an access sign-in process that provides open access (at no cost) to the general public if an information form is filled out and submitted in an onsite receptacle. This process appears to significantly reduce the amount of time required by landowners to deal with access requests from hunters and anglers, while at the same time provides landowners with some ability to monitor the number of people entering their lands and when they are entering. When desired by the landowner, site-specific conditions or restrictions are identified on the signage and sign-in cards to enhance user safety and enjoyment without compromising farm operations.

We will collaborate with AFGA and the local Fish & Game clubs that initiated this process and work with them to compile a list of properties that already use this process. Based on this list and with the help of AFGA, a list of up to 12 new landowners will be developed. Landowners willing to participate will be provided with custom signage, maps, sign-in cards and a sign-in box. As part of the program, we will acknowledge our participants with a ROE participant project sign and provide “Use Respect – Ask First” signs to be displayed on perimeter fencing of their properties. Alberta Conservation Association will monitor the process to determine if any issues arise and what could be improved to solve these issues.

Use of permanent and/or seasonal lease agreements

The Government of Alberta owns the bed and shore of most large ponds, lakes, rivers and streams in Alberta. As such, these waterbodies have the potential to provide recreational opportunities to all Albertans; however, gaining access to the bed and shore of these waterbodies

can be difficult because private lands often surround them. We will start by examining available lease options and potential legal issues with these options regarding public access across private land. We will identify waterbodies where public access would provide significant recreational opportunities and identify potential properties where access could be achieved. While this project will concentrate on the potential for leasing, we may also examine fee-simple securement where opportunities arise.

Results

In 2016/17, we attended meetings with AEP and the Municipal District of Greenview staff in northwest Alberta to continue to identify potential landowners willing to participate in the pilot study in order to connect landowners experiencing ungulate depredation issues with hunters looking for access to hunting opportunities.

We currently assist two landowners with managing public access to private properties totaling 10,361 acres (4,193 ha) in southern Alberta. In 2016/17, we met with five existing participants and two new potential landowners. Of those landowners, four declined to continue, one declined to join, and one new landowner joined the program. A sign-in box, sign-in cards and signage were supplied to the landowner who joined the program. In addition, one damaged sign-in box was replaced at a participating landowner's property. Landowners who declined to join or continue with the program indicated reasons such as choosing to join another program with a more suitable service or wanting to maintain direct personal connections with hunters, something that would be lost if hunters need only sign in at a box and not contact the landowner directly.

We secured eight properties with significant wetlands through ACA's Habitat Securement Program (Coulson, Birch Coulee, Lac Emelien, Musidora Expansion, North Cornerstone, Beaton Wetland, East Deadwood and Tiger Lily), which improved waterfowl hunting opportunities and access to major waterbodies. Combined, these Conservation Sites provide access to 1,260 acres of habitat for waterfowl or upland hunting, and angling opportunities. For more information on the Habitat Securement Program, please visit www.ab-conservation.com.

Conclusions

Ungulate depredation continues to be a concern, particularly for producers in northwest Alberta where elk herds tend to concentrate in the winter and feed on pasture lands, and to damage bale yards or grain stocks stored in the open. We continue to work with municipalities and other partners in highly affected areas and have developed a pilot program linking landowners with hunters. By understanding the needs of producers, conservationists, wildlife and habitat management biologists, and municipalities, we hope to alleviate some wildlife pressures while increasing hunting opportunities.

We continue to work with landowners in southern Alberta and other groups interested in improving the amount of recreational access to private lands. While we currently assist in managing recreational access to 10,361 acres (4,193 ha) across the province, providing additional opportunities for hunting and fishing, we did not sign up as many new landowners as anticipated. Several factors contributed to the difficulties in having landowners continue with the

program or join the program, including the presence of a new private enterprise offering a similar service, whereby landowners are assisted with managing access requests from users such as hunters and industry. In southern Alberta, Canadian Land Access Systems (CLAS) currently offers a smartphone app and electronic sign-in system for recreational and industrial users seeking access to privately held lands included in their program. We will continue to collaborate with CLAS and identify future partnership opportunities whereby we can continue to meet stakeholder needs. In 2017/18, updates will be made to signage and improvements will be made to the design of the sign-in box.

Communications

- Reaffirmed/presented the rationale and mechanics of the ROE program to existing and new landowners.

Literature Cited

None

Photos



Willow Creek flowing through the property of a landowner involved in the sign-in access program in southern Alberta. Photo: Jeff Forsyth



Project sign for a landowner participating in the sign-in access program. Photo: Jeff Forsyth