

**Alberta Conservation Association
2009/10 Project Summary Report**

Project Name: *Landowner Habitat Program*

Land Management Program Manager: Darren Dorge

Project Leader: Andy Murphy

Primary ACA staff on project:

Andy Murphy (East Slopes Parkland), Roy Schmelzeisen (Northeast) and Brad Taylor (South Prairie)

Partnerships

Landowners

Key Findings

- Secured two landowner agreements. One agreement protects 189 acres in the Parkland (ES) and the other protects 640 acres in the Boreal (NE). Each agreement protects important wildlife habitat from disturbance and provides reasonable public foot access to the habitat lands for a 10-year term.

Introduction

Alberta's land base is under intense pressure from a variety of industries, such as oil and gas, agriculture, forestry, residential and recreational development, and mining. All of these activities reduce the quality and quantity of habitat available to wildlife. In 1986, Alberta Fish and Wildlife Division launched the Landowner Habitat Program (LHP) to reduce the destruction of privately-owned wildlife habitat. The LHP strategy made payments to landowners who agreed to retain wildlife habitat on their private land for a term of five to 20 years. Alberta Fish and Wildlife Division delegated responsibility for the LHP to Alberta Conservation Association (ACA) in 1997. Expiring LHP agreements were not renewed from 2004 to 2007 while our Land Management Team (LMT) was reviewing the LHP guidelines and making modifications to the program. In 2008/09, the modified LHP was implemented. This program compensates landowners for conserving habitat, but agreements are only available to landowners who are willing to provide reasonable public access to recreational users.

Methods

We have revitalized the LHP to conserve vital wildlife habitat and enhance recreational access for the general public and outdoor enthusiasts on privately-owned lands. The LHP strategy secures privately-owned lands through habitat retention agreements. We promote habitat retention agreements with a 10-year term. In addition, five, 15 and 20-year terms can be made— with the approval of the LMT. The maximum payment under this strategy is \$10/acre. Landowners joining the program are provided 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 ‘endowment fund’. Payments are then withdrawn annually for the term of the agreement.

The following process is used by our Land Management staff to secure lands through our Habitat Securement Fund.

1. Initial assessment of property – Determine if property is within our conservation priorities for land securement. If the property does not fit, advise the landowner and refer the landowner to other possible conservation organizations.
2. 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.
3. Obtain the legal land title of the property – Confirm ownership and identify encumbrances or other interests registered against title (mortgages, liens, rights-of-way, zoning, etc.).
4. Negotiate price and length of term for the agreement – The maximum price LMT has set for any agreement is \$10.00/acre. The length of term for agreements can vary between five, 10, 15 and 20-year terms.
5. Complete draft (LHP) agreement – Include the following attachments: legal land title, air photo, photographs, term-length and costs.
6. Send (LHP) agreement to the Land Management Program Manager for review and distribution to the LMT. The LMT ranks agreement (regarding Conservation and Recreational Value) and provides comments.
7. If the LHP agreement is approved by the LMT, the lead negotiator will then present agreement, terms and costs to the landowner for review and signing.
8. If the agreement is accepted and signed by landowner, the lead negotiator will update the LHP database to reflect the new project.

The process to handle LHP renewal agreements will be the same as above. Recent changes to priority focus areas will assist staff in selecting the appropriate agreements to renew or let expire. Project signage identifying the landowner as a LHP participant is provided by ACA. We also provide Use Respect – Ask First signage to identify contact information for access. Landowners are given the option of either controlling access themselves, or allowing ACA to control access.

In total, 40 agreements were scheduled to expire in 2009/10. We reviewed these agreements and prioritized them for renewal. Prioritization included the following criteria: 1) habitat quality, 2) recreational opportunity, and 3) likelihood that the landowner would idle the habitat and provide reasonable public foot access. We approached 22 landowners in the Parkland (East Slopes) and 12 landowners in the Boreal (Northeast) to renew the high priority expiring agreements. Many of the landowners had concerns with providing public foot access, and those who had previously been grazing their land were unwilling to idle the habitat.

Results

On April 1, 2009 there was a total of 114 LHP agreements in place (Figure 1). Together these agreements protected a total of 16,715 acres (Figure 2). During the course of 2009/10, 40 agreements expired, and two of these were renewed under the new LHP. The renewed agreements conserve 829 acres of quality wildlife habitat and provide recreational opportunities for the public. Overall, the change in agreements resulted in a net loss of 38 agreements and reduced the protected area by 3,676 acres (Figures 1 and 2).

Landowner Habitat Program

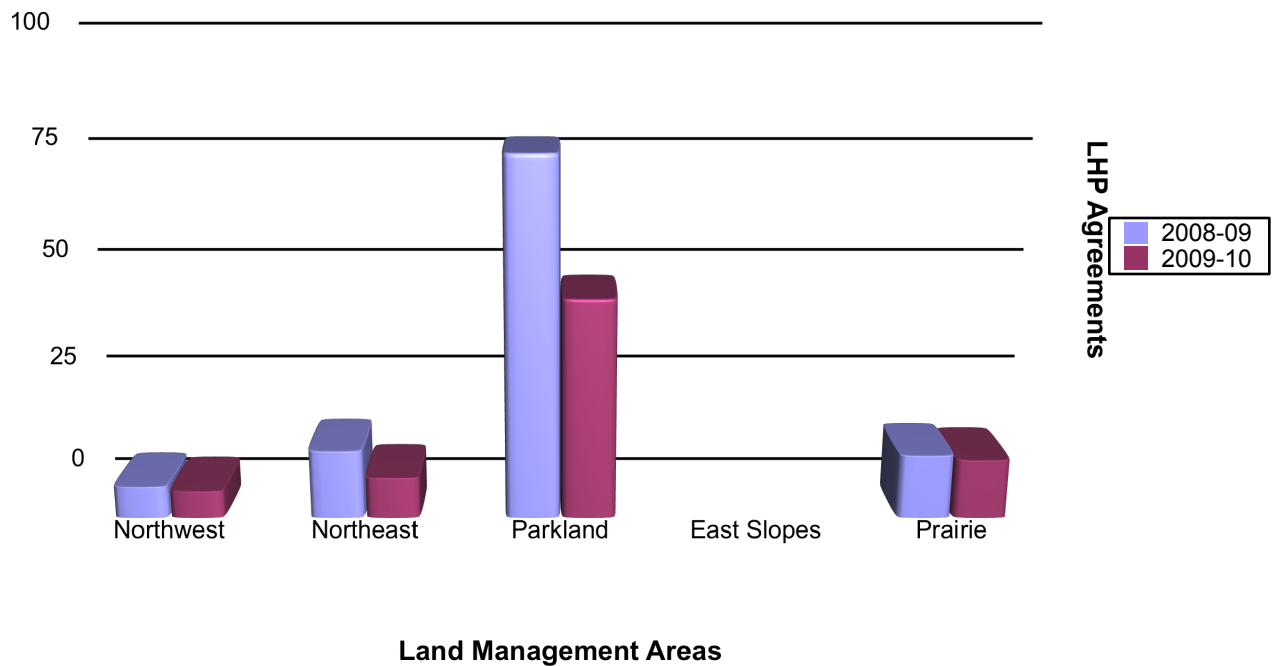


Figure 1. Number of Land Habitat Program (LHP) agreements in each land management area, 2008 to 2010.

Landowner Habitat Program

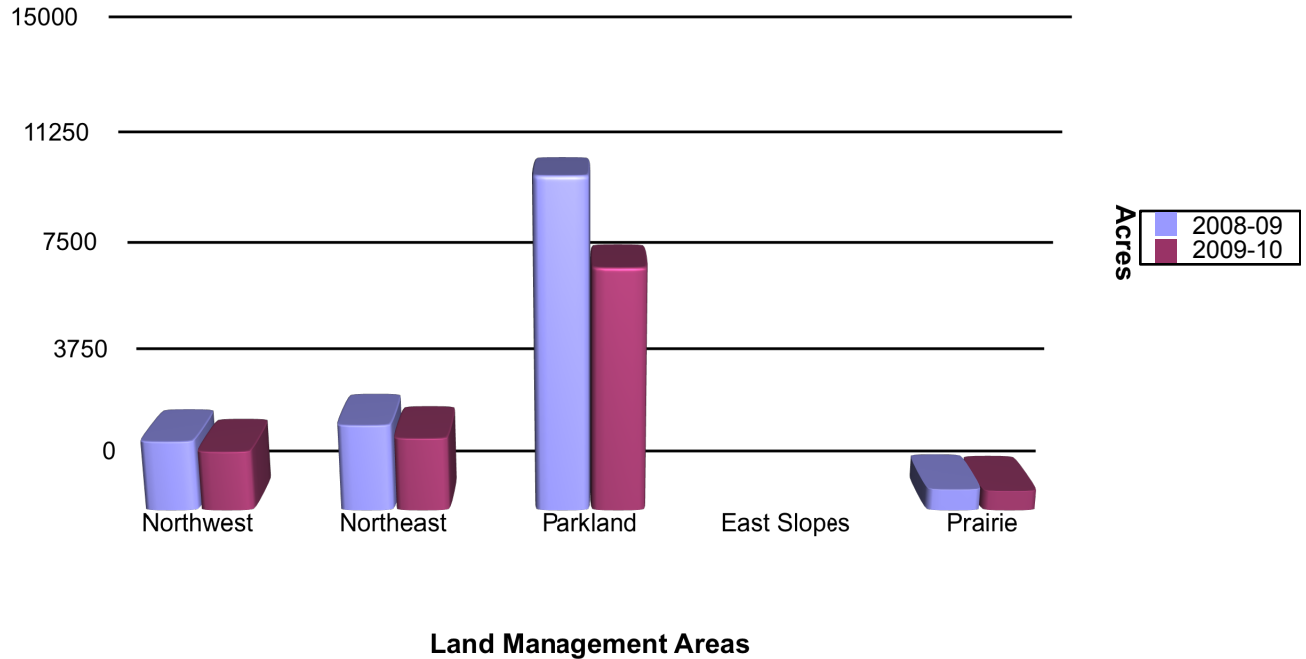


Figure 2. Number of acres conserved by Landowner Habitat Program agreements in each land management area, 2008 to 2010.

Conclusions

We renewed two of the 40 expiring LHP agreements conserving 829 acres. The LHP continues to conserve important wildlife habitat and increase recreational opportunities.

Communications

- Explained the rationale and mechanics of the LHP to 34 landowners. We only contacted landowners with the highest quality habitat whose LHP agreements were expiring. We targeted this very select group because the available budget could only fund agreements for roughly 850 acres.
- Distributed Use Respect – Ask First signs to participating and other interested landowners. These signs will help increase and promote recreational opportunities on privately-owned lands.

Literature Cited

n/a



The “Awe” Landowner Habitat Program project on Spruce Coulee. (Photo: Andy Murphy)



Alberta Conservation Association technician, Dan Sturgess, examining scat and tracks at the “Awe” Landowner Habitat Program project. (Photo: Andy Murphy)



A Use Respect – Ask First sign on a Landowner Habitat Program property. (Photo: Darren Dorge)