

Alberta Conservation Association 2011/12 Project Summary Report

Project Name: *Landowner Habitat Program*

Land Management Program Manager: Darren Dorge

Project Lead: Ed Kolodychuk

Primary ACA staff on project:

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Partnerships

Landowners

Key Findings

- Currently manage 54 Landowner Habitat Program agreements protecting 8,609 acres of wildlife and fish habitat.
- Signed five new Landowner Habitat Program agreements protecting 214.9 acres riparian habitat along the North Raven River, Raven River and Clear Creek and renewed five expiring agreements that protect 1,259 acres of upland habitat.
- Revised one Landowner Habitat Program agreement to allow three of the quarter sections covered in the agreement to be purchased through ACA's Corporate Partners Program.

Introduction

Alberta's land base is under intense pressure from a variety of industries: oil and gas, agriculture, forestry, residential and recreational development, mining, etc. All of these activities reduce the quality and quantity of wildlife and fish habitat. In 1986, Alberta Fish and Wildlife Division launched the Landowner Habitat Program (LHP) to reduce the destruction of habitat on privately-owned land. The program compensates landowners who are willing to sign a legally-binding agreement and agree to retain habitat for a term of five to 20 years. Alberta Fish and Wildlife Division delegated responsibility of the program to Alberta Conservation Association (ACA) in 1997. We did not renew expiring LHP agreements from 2004 to 2007 while the Land Management Team (LMT) was reviewing the LHP guidelines and modifying the program. In 2008/09, we implemented the modified LHP. This program compensates landowners for conserving habitat. Agreements are only available to landowners who are willing to provide reasonable public foot access to recreational users.

Methods

Alberta Conservation Association has revitalized the LHP to conserve high-quality habitat and enhance sustainable recreational access for the general public and recreational users on privately-owned lands. The LHP strategy protects privately-owned lands through habitat retention agreements. ACA promotes habitat retention agreements with a 10-year term. In addition, 5, 15 and 20-year terms are an option 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 “deferred fund”. Payments are then withdrawn annually for the term of the agreement.

Steps for completing a Landowner Habitat Agreement:

1. 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.
2. Initial meeting with landowner.
 - Preliminary discussion of landowner's desire for property. Preliminary walk of property and assessment of resources, liabilities, hazardous waste, etc. Take photographs of property. Landowner expresses an interest in signing a LHP agreement.
 - Complete Habitat Assessment – Initial Site Visit Form.
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/acre.
 - The length of term for agreements can vary between 5, 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 new (LHP) agreements to the Land Program Manager for review and distribution to the LMT.
 - LMT ranks agreement (regarding Conservation & Recreational Value) and provides comments.
7. Land Program Manager forwards the LHP agreement to the President and CEO and Manager of Accounting for review.
8. If the LHP agreement is approved, the lead negotiator will present agreement, terms and costs to the landowner for review and signing.

9. If the agreement is accepted and signed by the landowner, the lead negotiator will update the LHP database to reflect the new project.

The process to handle LHP renewal agreements is the same as above. Recent updates to focus areas will assist staff in selecting the appropriate agreements to renew or let expire. We provide project signage identifying the landowner as a LHP participant. 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.

Results

We reviewed 16 agreements scheduled to expire in 2011/12 and prioritized them for renewal. Prioritization included the following criteria: 1) habitat quality, 2) recreational opportunity and reasonable foot access, and 3) likelihood that the landowner would idle the habitat. We approached landowners in various land management areas to renew the high-priority expiring agreements, including 12 in our Central region, two in the Northeast, one in the Northwest, and one in the South.

The number of agreements and protected acres declined in 2011/12. This downward trend is attributed to more agreements expiring than could be renewed. During the spring of 2011, we managed a total of 60 LHP agreements (Figure 1). These agreements protected a total of 13,039 acres (Figure 2). During the course of 2011/12, five new agreements were signed, 16 agreements expired with five of these being renewed, and one agreement was modified when three of the four quarters were removed from the LHP agreement to allow ACA to purchase them through the Corporate Partners Program. These changes resulted in a net loss of six agreements and reduced the protected area by 1,020.7 acres.

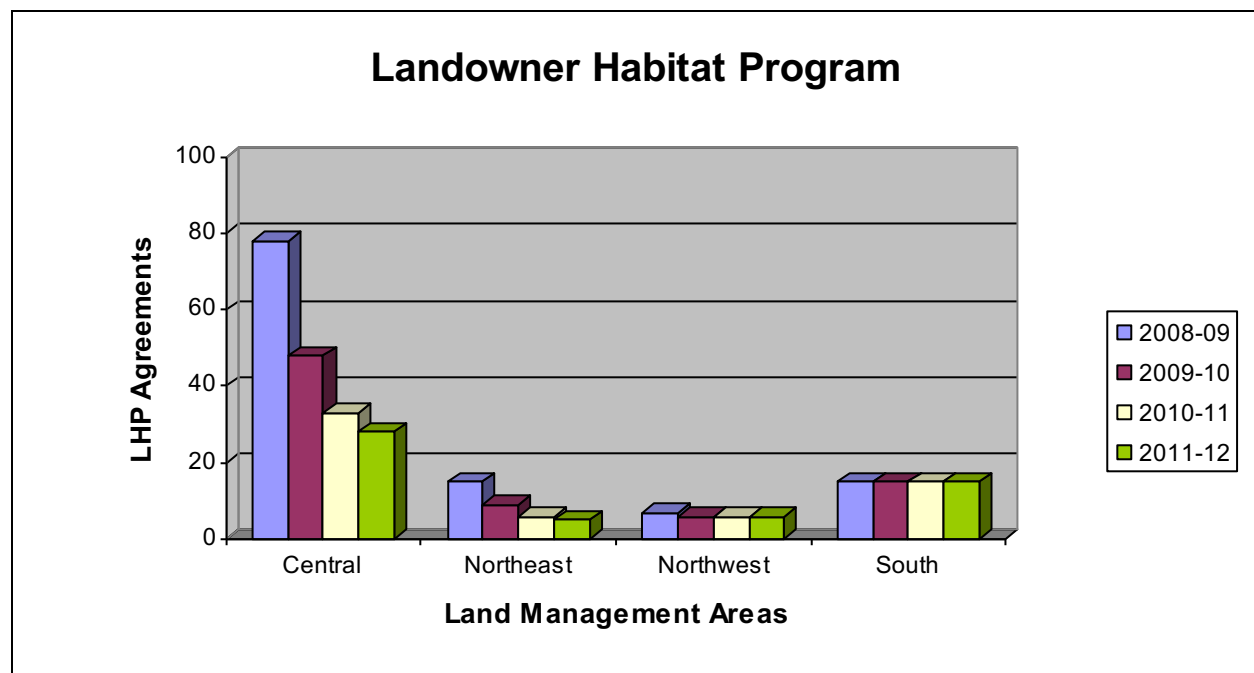


Figure 1. Number of Landowner Habitat Program agreements in each Alberta Conservation Association land management area, 2008 – 2012.

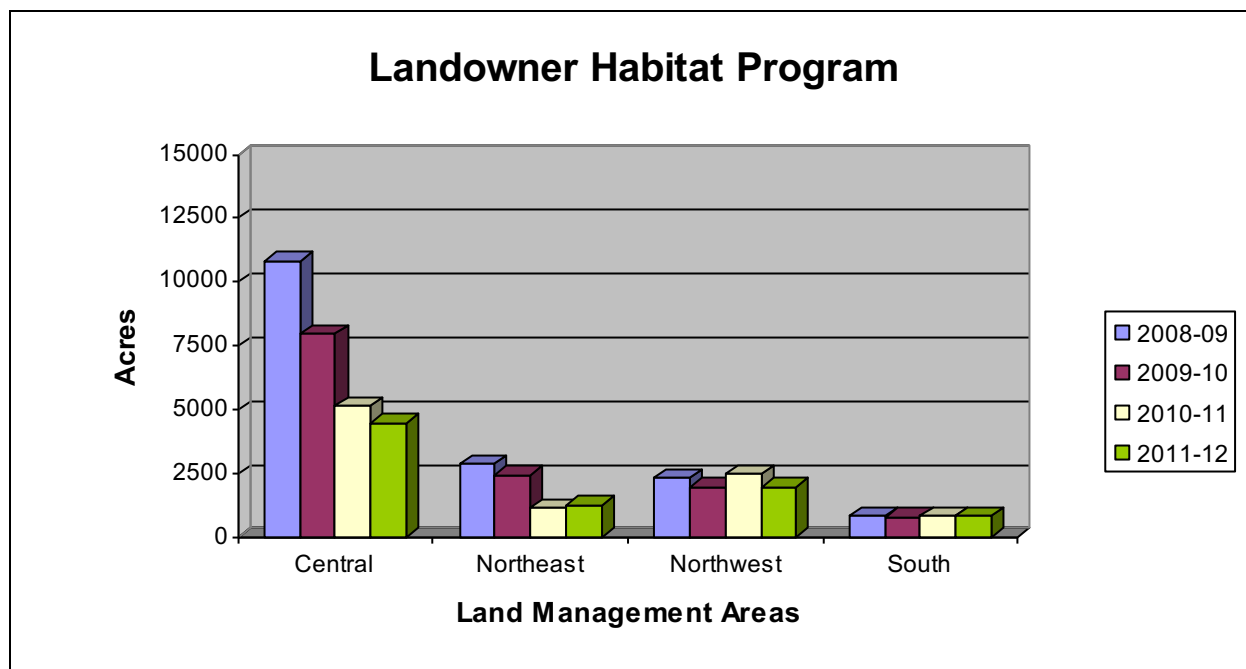


Figure 2. Number of conserved acres in each Alberta Conservation Association land management area, 2008 – 2012.

Several factors contributed to the trend of declining agreements since 2008/09; the two main factors are available funds and the number of agreements expiring within a short time span. Other factors included landowners not wanting to renew agreements after a lengthy 20 to 25 year agreement; others would not idle habitat or provide reasonable access to the public.

Conclusions

We signed five new agreements with landowners along the North Raven River, Raven River and Clear Creek that protect 214.9 acres of important riparian habitat and provide foot access to some excellent angling opportunities. In 2011/12, 16 LHP agreements expired, and we renewed five of these agreements. The five renewed agreements continue to protect 1,247 acres of high-quality habitat. Four more agreements are planned for renewal in 2012/13, which will protect an additional 981 acres.

In total, we managed 54 active LHP agreements that protect a total of 8,609 acres. The LHP continues to protect important habitat and increase sustainable recreational opportunities across Alberta.

Communications

- Presented the rationale and mechanics of the LHP to 16 landowners with expiring agreements.
- Circulated *Use Respect – Ask First* banners to Alberta Fish and Wildlife, Alberta Public Lands and municipal offices to promote the program.
- Distributed *Use Respect – Ask First* signs to LHP participants and other interested landowners. Signage increases and promotes responsible use and enhances recreational opportunities on privately-owned lands.

Literature Cited

N/A



Habitat along the Raven River southeast of Rocky Mountain House. The landowner signed a Landowner Habitat Program agreement to protect this important riparian habitat in our Central region. (Photo: Andy Murphy)



The new Landowner Habitat Program participant signage. The landscape in the background reveals the type of habitat protected in our Northeast region. (Photo: Roy Schmelzeisen)



Marvin and Donna Zaozirny posing with their new Landowner Habitat Program sign in our Northeast region. (Photo: Roy Schmelzeisen)



Riparian and upland habitat protected along an unnamed creek on the Shewchuk property. A Landowner Habitat Program agreement was renewed for this property, which occurs in our Northwest region. (Photo: Cali Seater)



A great grey owl on a fence post along the perimeter of the Shewchuk property, which is under a Landowner Habitat Program in our Northwest region. (Photo: Cali Seater)



Photograph of the Landowner Habitat Program (LHP) participant signage. This LHP agreement involves the Bow River Irrigation District and Prenevost Family and occurs in our South region. (Photo: Randy Lee)



Native grassland and riparian habitat along a small drainage flowing through a Landowner Habitat Program participant's land in our South region. (Photo: Randy Lee)