

Alberta Conservation Association 2015/16 Program Summary Report

Project Name: Landowner Habitat Program

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Primary ACA staff on project:

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Partnerships

Landowners

Key Findings

- We managed 45 Landowner Habitat Program agreements conserving 7,731 ac (3,129 ha) of wildlife and fish habitat.
- We reviewed three agreements that expired in 2015/16 and four agreements that will expire in 2016/17.
- We signed one new agreement in our Northeast Region protecting 157 ac.
- We renewed one agreement that expired 2015/16 in our Northwest Region protecting 257 ac (104 ha).
- Two agreements that protected 196.5 ac (79.5 ha) expired in our Southern Region in 2015/16.
- Four expiring agreements are scheduled for renewal in 2016/17.

Introduction

Alberta's population grew by over 800,000 in less than 10 years. This staggering growth has put intense pressure on land use from a variety of sources, including industry, agriculture, forestry and urban and rural expansion. These combined activities reduce the quality and quantity 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 must be willing to provide reasonable public foot access to recreational users. As part of the agreement, we acknowledge our LHP participants on a project sign and provide them with *Use Respect – Ask First* signs to display 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/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 Payments are then withdrawn annually for the term of the agreement.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 an LHP 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 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.
3. 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).
4. Negotiate price and length of term for the agreement.
 - The maximum price for any agreement is \$10/acre.
 - The length of term for agreements can vary between 5, 10, 15 and 20 years.
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 Management Program manager for review and distribution to the Land Management team.
 - The team ranks agreement (regarding Conservation and Recreational Value) and provides comments.
7. Land Management 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 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 access. Landowners are given the option of either controlling access themselves or allowing us to control access.

Results

We currently manage 45 LHP agreements that protect 7,731 ac (3,128.7 ha) of wildlife and fish habitat across Alberta. We reviewed seven 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 in our Northwest Region, and two agreements expired in our Southern Region and were not renewed. One new agreement was completed in our Northeast Region. Four agreements are scheduled for renewal in our Central and Southern regions in 2016/17.

The number of agreements and overall protected acres decreased in 2015/16 due to expiring agreements. During spring 2015, we managed a total of 46 LHP agreements (Figure 1) protecting a total of 7,982 ac (3,230.3 ha) (Figure 2). During the course of 2015/16, one agreement was renewed, two agreements expired and were not renewed, and one new agreement was signed. These changes resulted in a net loss of one agreement and a decrease of 251.5 ac (101.8 ha) in the amount of protected land.

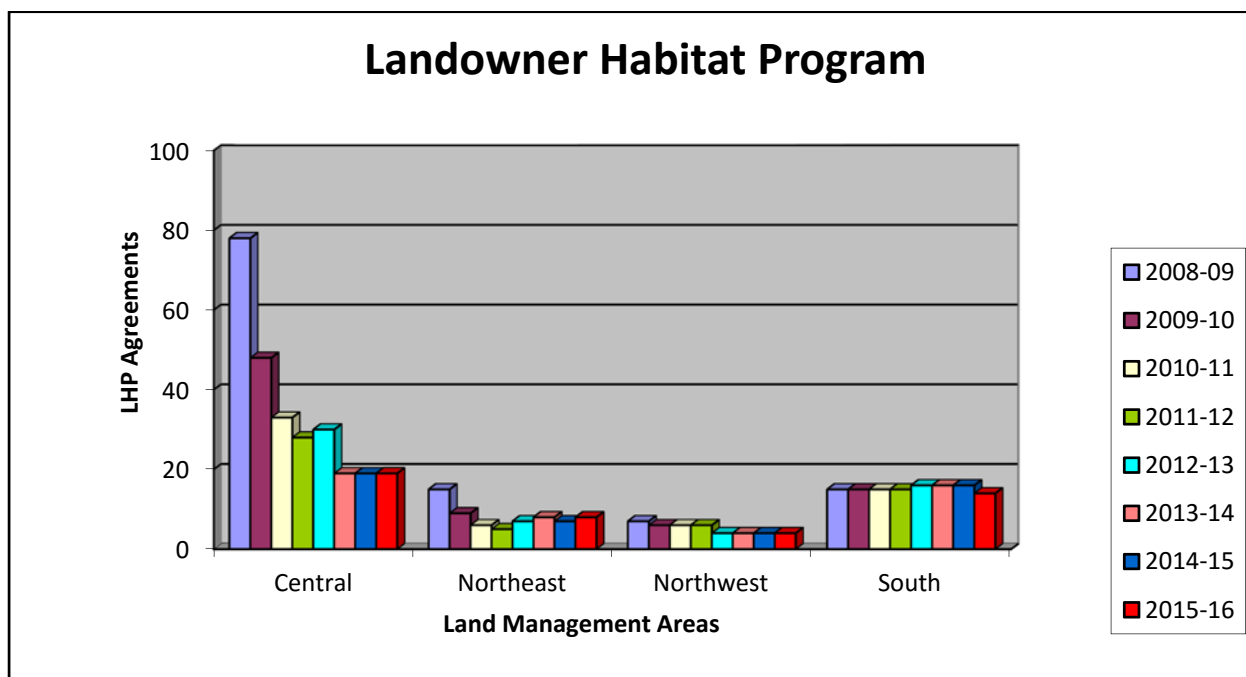


Figure 1. Landowner Habitat Program agreements in each Alberta Conservation Association region, 2008 to 2016.

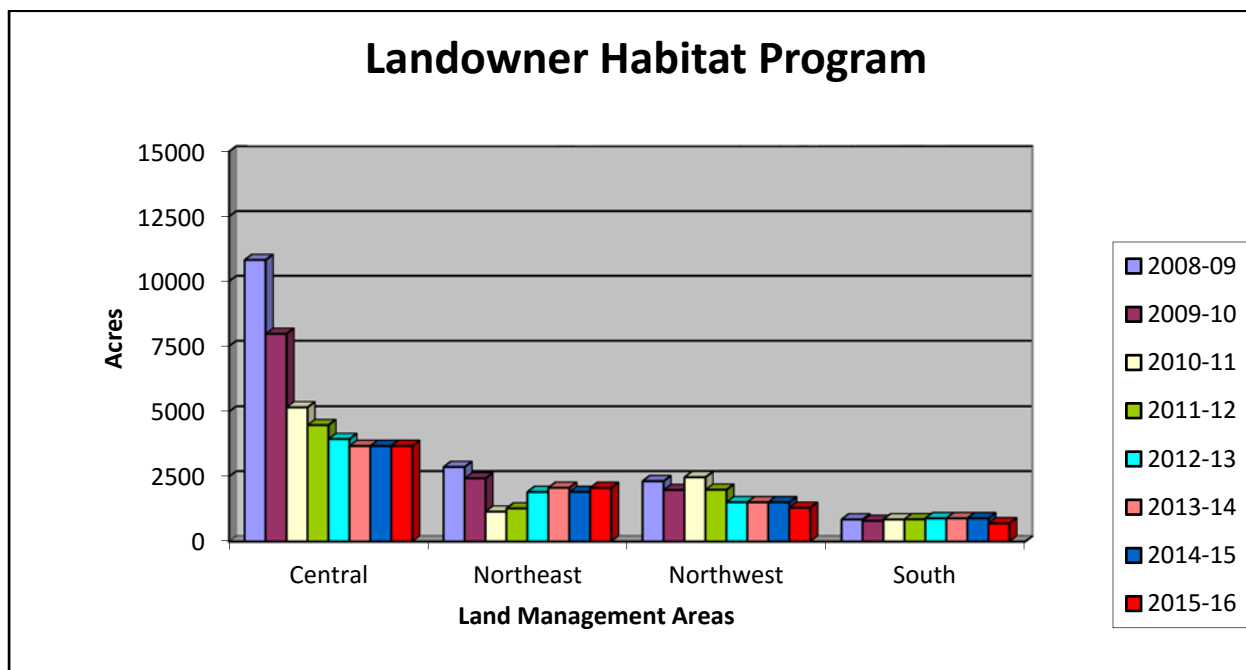


Figure 2. Conserved acres in each Alberta Conservation Association region, 2008 to 2016.

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) that Alberta Conservation Association 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 45 LHP agreements across the province, which protect approximately 7,731 acres (3,129 ha) of wildlife and fish habitat. These agreements include 19 agreements in our Central Region, 8 agreements in our Northeast Region, 4 agreements in our Northwest Region and 14 agreements in our Southern Region. LHP participants display *Use Respect – Ask First* on their properties as part of this program, which provides reasonable foot access to some excellent recreational opportunities throughout Alberta.

Communications

- Presented the rationale and mechanics of the LHP to three landowners with agreements that expired in 2015/16 and four landowners with agreements expiring in 2016/17.
- Circulated *Use Respect – Ask First* banners to Alberta Environment and Parks and municipal offices to promote the program.
- Distributed *Use Respect – Ask First* signs to LHP participants and other interested landowners. Signs promote responsible use and enhance recreational opportunities on privately owned lands.

Photos



Parkland and riparian habitat on a Landowner Habitat Program participant's property in our Central Region. Photo: John Hallett



Unnamed Creek flowing through healthy riparian habitat on a Landowner Habitat Program participant's property in our Northwest Region. Photo: Ed Kolodychuk



Small wetland surrounded by willow and black spruce on a Landowner Habitat Program participant's property in our Northwest Region. Photo: Ed Kolodychuk



Ask First – Use Respect sign installed along the perimeter of a wildlife-friendly fence in our Northwest Region. Photo: Ed Kolodychuk



Ring-necked pheasant tracks in the snow on a Landowner Habitat Program participant's property in our Southern Region. Photo: Randy Lee



Landowner Habitat Program sign installed along the fence line of a participant's property in our Southern Region. Photo: Tyler Johns



Coulee with dense grass and shrub cover for upland gamebirds on a Landowner Habitat Program participant's property in our Southern Region. Photo: Randy Lee