

Alberta Conservation Association 2016/17 Project Summary Report

Project Name: Landowner Habitat Program

Land Management Program Manager: Darren Dorge

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Primary ACA staff on project:

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Partnerships

Landowners

Key Findings

- We currently manage 35 Landowner Habitat Program agreements, conserving 5,602 acres (2,267.1 ha) of wildlife and fish habitat.
- We reviewed 12 agreements that expired in 2016/17, which previously conserved 2,422 acres (980.2 ha).
- We signed two new agreements in our Northeast Region in 2016/17, conserving 320 acres (129.5 ha).
- One expiring agreement in our Southern Region is scheduled for renewal in 2017/18.

Introduction

Alberta's population reached 4.27 million in 2016, with a growth of 1.6% despite a slumping economy. Alberta's natural land base is under intense pressure from a variety of sources related to its population growth, including agricultural, municipal and industrial development. This trend is expected to continue as Alberta's economy starts to recover, the population grows and demand for land continues. This staggering growth has put intense pressure on the land from a variety of sources, including industry, agriculture, forestry, and urban and rural expansion. Cumulative effects of these land uses 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 to retain habitat for a term of 5 to 20 years. In 2008/09, we modified the LHP agreement to include a provision that landowners provide reasonable public foot access to recreational users. As part of the agreement, we acknowledge our participants with an LHP participant project sign and "Use Respect – Ask First" signs to be displayed on their properties.

Methods

The LHP protects habitat on privately owned lands using habitat-retention agreements with terms of 5, 10, 15 or 20 years. The maximum payment under this program is \$10/acre. Landowners who join the program may choose 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 Payments are then withdrawn annually for the term of the agreement. The following steps are used to complete 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 (mortgages, liens, rights-of-way, zoning, etc.).
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 & Recreational Value) and provides comments.
7. Land Management Program manager forwards the LHP agreement to the President & 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 renew LHP agreements is the same as above. Recent updates to focus areas help staff select the appropriate agreements to renew or let expire. We provide project signage that identifies the landowner as an LHP participant. We also provide “Use Respect – Ask First” signs to identify contact information for access by recreational users. Landowners may choose to control access themselves or allow ACA to control access.

Results

We currently manage 35 LHP agreements that conserve 5,602 acres (2,267.1 ha) of wildlife and fish habitat across Alberta. We reviewed 12 agreements that expired in 2016/17 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. Eleven agreements expired in our Central Region and were not renewed. One agreement expired in our Southern Region and is scheduled for renewal in 2017/18. Two new agreements were completed in our Northeast Region.

The number of agreements and overall protected acres decreased in 2016/17 due to expiring agreements. During the spring of 2016, we managed a total of 45 LHP agreements (Figure 1) protecting a total of 7,731 acres (3,128.7 ha) (Figure 2). During the course of 2016/17, 12 agreements expired and were not renewed, and 2 new agreements were signed. These changes resulted in a net loss of 10 agreements and a decrease in the conserved area of 2,129 acres (861.6 ha).

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.

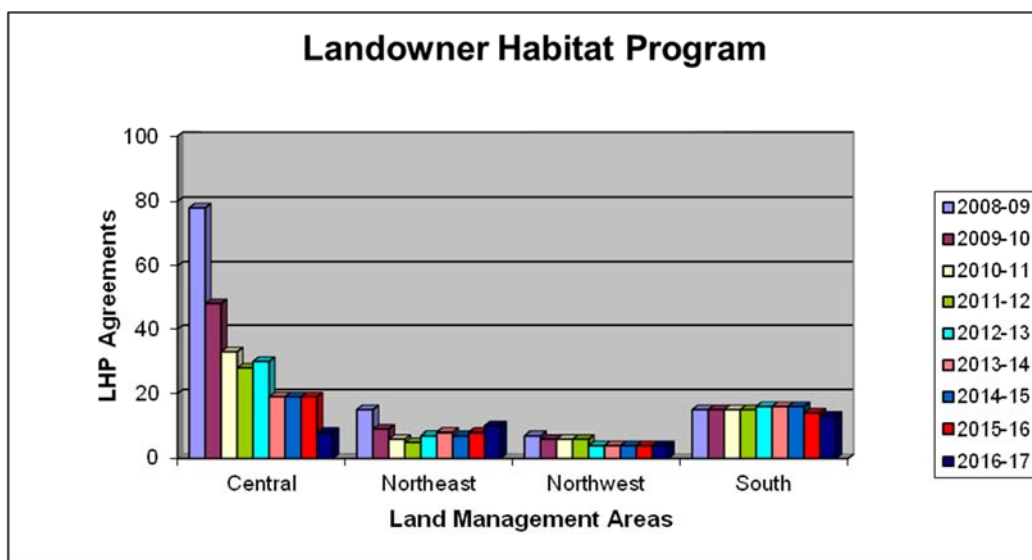


Figure 1. Landowner Habitat Program agreements in each Alberta Conservation Association region, 2008 to 2017.

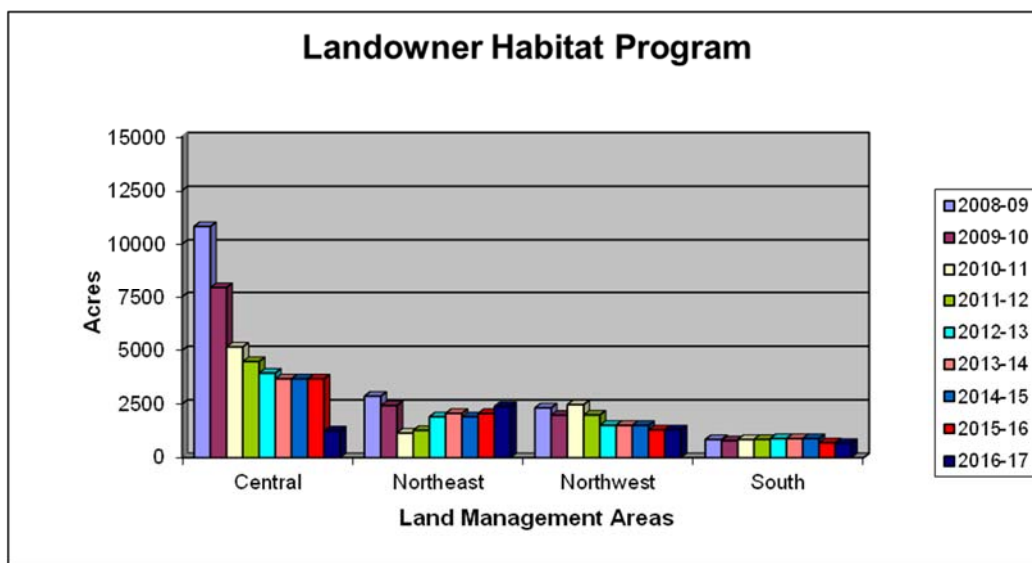


Figure 2. Conserved acres in each Alberta Conservation Association region, 2008 to 2017.

Conclusions

We continue to work with landowners to protect important wildlife and fish habitat on private lands in Alberta. We currently manage 35 LHP agreements across the province, conserving approximately 5,602 acres (2,267.1 ha) of wildlife and fish habitat. These agreements include 8 agreements in our Central Region, 10 agreements in our Northeast Region, 4 agreements in our Northwest Region and 13 agreements in our Southern Region. LHP participants display “Use Respect – Ask First” signs on their properties as part of this program, which provides reasonable public foot access to some excellent recreational opportunities throughout Alberta.

Communications

- Presented the rationale and mechanics of the LHP to 12 landowners with agreements that expired in 2016/17 and 2 landowners with new agreements.
- 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. Signage promotes responsible use and recreational opportunities on privately owned lands.
- Featured an article in our Fall/Winter 2016 issue of *Conservation Magazine* about a family in our Northwest Region that has participated in the LHP for over 20 years.

Literature Cited

None

Photos



Landowner Habitat Program sign on a participant's property in our Central Region. Photo: John Hallett



Large meadow with willow and deciduous forest on a Landowner Habitat Program participant's property in our Central Region. Photo: John Hallett



Seismic line reverting back to native vegetation on a Landowner Habitat Program participant's property in our Northeast Region. Photo: Roy Schmelzeisen



Alberta Conservation Association staff installing a Landowner Habitat Program sign on a new participant's property in our Northeast Region. Photo: Roy Schmelzeisen



View of Smoky Creek valley on a Landowner Habitat Program participant's property in our Northeast Region. Photo: Roy Schmelzeisen



Fallen trees from recent beaver activity at Badger Lake on a participant's property in our Southern Region. Photo: Jeff Forsyth