

Alberta Conservation Association 2017/18 Project Summary Report

Project Name: Recreational Opportunity Enhancement

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Partnerships

Agricultural Financial Services Corporation (AFSC)
Alberta Environment and Parks
Alberta Fish & Game Association
Canadian Land Access Systems
Landowners
Lethbridge Fish & Game Association

Key Findings

- Provided six participating landowners with recreational user sign-in services for existing properties, totaling approximately 51,000 acres (20,655 hectare) of access.
- Added five new landowners to our program in our Southern Region, totaling approximately 40,320 acres (16,317 hectare) of access.
- Collaborated with Agricultural Financial Services Corporation (AFSC) in northern Alberta to examine elk depredation issues faced by landowners and possible solutions.
- Collaborated with provincial and municipal governments, one conservation group, and several landowners.

Introduction

Alberta's population is steadily increasing and has now reached over 4.31 million people in 2017, up from 4.27 million in 2016. Despite the occurrence of an economic downturn in recent years, Alberta continues to be on par with the national average for population growth rate. 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, municipalities, Agricultural Financial Services Corporation (AFSC), and Canadian Land Access Systems (CLAS) to determine where depredation issues are an ongoing problem. ACA's primary role will be to foster relationships between CLAS and the appropriate individuals within different levels of Government as well as individual landowners where applicable. As a group, we will identify potential landowners and determine their willingness to participate in a program to allow controlled hunter access onto their lands to potentially increase hunter harvest and reduce elk depredation issues. The access program will be implemented and managed by CLAS. Local provincial and municipal government staff as well as AFSC will be integral to promoting the pilot project to landowners and facilitating the connection between landowners and CLAS. We will work as a group and with landowners, to determine the best methods to connect landowners experiencing depredation issues with hunters interested in harvesting an animal.

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 add to the list of properties that already use this process. Landowners willing to participate will be provided with custom signage (as needed), 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. ACA 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 2017/18, we facilitated a meeting between CLAS and AFSC to create a path of communication between an agency with real time data on wildlife depredation issues (AFSC) and the lead agency on the hunter access management system (CLAS). Following the meeting, AFSC agreed to display CLAS information pamphlets at their Peace Region offices and field representatives obtained approval to distribute CLAS information and pamphlets onto clients experiencing wildlife depredation and interested in permitting hunting as a mitigation tool.

We also opened a dialogue with Mckenzie County in the northwestern part of the province based on feedback from AFSC. Mckenzie County is receptive to CLAS delivering a presentation to council on their current program and assessing the feasibility of incorporating such a program within their municipality.

We currently assist six landowners with managing public access to private properties totaling ~51,000 acres (~20,655 hectares) in southern Alberta. In 2017/18, we met with seven participating landowners and one new potential landowner. Of those landowners, one declined to continue with the program, while the remaining six participating landowners chose to continue with the program. New sign-in boxes were installed for each participating landowner. Sign-in cards, and additional signage (where required), were supplied to the landowners enrolled in the program. In addition, one damaged sign was replaced. The landowner who declined to continue with the program indicated they chose to join another program with a more suitable service for their specific needs.

A landowner workshop was held in Foremost, to facilitate some discussions and possible solutions related to trespassing and poaching in the southeast portion of Alberta. The meeting was a joint effort between ACA, Alberta Hunter Education Instructors' Association (AHEIA), and landowners to address the access issues landowners face, and discuss options to prevent further private lands from being shutdown to public recreational access.

Conclusions

Ungulate depredation continues to be a concern, particularly for producers in northwestern Alberta where elk herds tend to concentrate in the winter and feed on deeded pasture lands, and damage bale yards or grain stocks stored in the open. This trend is also increasing in other areas of the province, such as southern Alberta, where elk populations have grown. We continue to work with municipalities and other partners in highly affected areas to develop 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 ~51,000 acres (~20,655 hectares) 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 other private enterprises 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 throughout the province.

In 2017/18 we began discussions with Clearwater County to assess the feasibility of improving a road allowance that would facilitate better recreational access to the North Raven River for the angling public. We were unsuccessful in finding an opportunity to develop public angler access to Bearspaw Reservoir near Calgary. We also initiated preliminary investigations of land ownership and lease options for two large waterbodies near Stettler to provide increased waterfowl hunting opportunities. Discussions also continue with Capital Power west of Edmonton to create a new pheasant release site under ACA's Pheasant Release Program, which may generate other recreational hunting opportunities in the future.

Communications

- Reaffirmed/presented the rationale and mechanics of the ROE program to existing and new landowners.
- Held a townhall meeting in Foremost with members of ACA, AHEIA, and private landowners to address concerns landowners have with trespassing and poaching from recreational users.
- Met with CLAS and AFSC in northern Alberta to discuss elk depredation issues and mitigative measures including ways to improve hunter access to private land experiencing crop damage.

Photos



Road allowance in need of improvements for safe and reliable acces to the North Raven River.
Photo: Marco Fontana



View of a coulee on O.K. Colony currently registered under sign-in access program . Photo: Jeff Forsyth



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