

Alberta Conservation Association
2018/19 Project Summary Report

Project Name: Landowner Habitat Program

Land Management Program Manager: Darren Dorge

Project Leader: Ed Kolodychuk

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Partnerships

Alberta Environment and Parks

Landowners

Key Findings

- Currently managing 32 Landowner Habitat Program Agreements, conserving 5,737 acres (2,321.8 ha) of wildlife and fish habitat.
- Five agreements expired in 2018/19, agreements previously conserved 450 acres (182.1 ha).
- Two expired agreements will be renewed 2019/20, one in our Northeast Region and one in our Central Region conserving 244 acres (98.7 ha).
- Terminated one agreement in our Northeast Region that previously conserved 100 acres (40.5 ha).
- Signed one new agreement in our Northwest Region conserving 202 acres (81.7 ha).

Introduction

In 2018, Alberta's economy continued to recover, the oil and gas industry showed some signs of recovery and the unemployment rate remained high and above the national average. Despite the unknown economic future, the population in the province increased to 4.33 million, up from 4.31 million in 2017. Alberta's natural land base continues to be 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. All of these cumulative effects 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 five to 20 years. In 2008/09, we modified the LHP agreement to include the provision of landowners willing to provide reasonable public foot access to recreational users. As part of the agreement, we acknowledge LHP participants with project signs and *Use Respect – Ask First* signs to be displayed on their property.

Methods

The LHP is structured to protect privately owned lands using term habitat-retention agreements. Agreements with five-, ten-, 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.

1. 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.
2. 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.).
3. 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 five-, ten-, 15- and 20-year terms.
4. Complete draft LHP agreement.
 - Include the following attachments: legal land title, air photo, photographs, term length, and costs.
5. 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.
6. Land Management Program Manager forwards the LHP agreement to the President and CEO and Manager of Accounting for review.
7. If the LHP agreement is approved, the lead negotiator will present agreement, terms, and costs to the landowner for review and signing.
8. 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 ACA to control access.

Results

We currently manage 32 LHP agreements that conserves 5,737.2 acres (2,321.8 ha) of wildlife and fish habitat across Alberta. We reviewed five agreements that expired in 2018/19 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. Three agreements expired in our Central Region and one will be renewed in 2019/20, one agreement expired in our Northeast Region and will be renewed in 2019/20, and one agreement expired in our South Region and will not be renewed. The two agreements planned for renewal in 2019 conserve 244 acres (98.7 ha). One agreement was terminated in our Northeast Region and one new agreement was completed in our Northwest Region.

The number of agreements and overall protected acres decreased in 2018/19 due to not renewing several agreements. During the spring of 2018, we managed a total of 37 LHP agreements (Figure 1) protecting a total of 6,085 acres (2,462.7 ha) (Figure 2). During the course of 2018/19, five agreements expired, one agreement was terminated, and one new agreement was signed. These changes resulted in a net decrease of five agreements and a decrease in conserved area of 348 acres (140.8 ha).

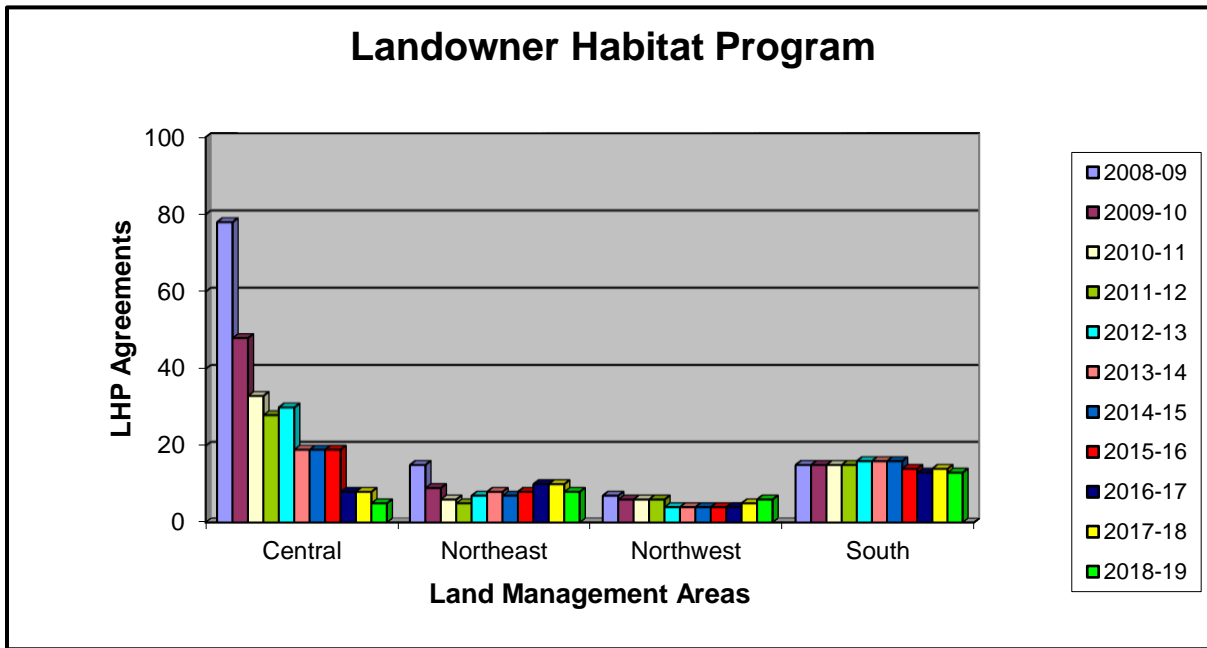


Figure 1. Landowner Habitat Program agreements in each ACA region, 2008 to 2019.

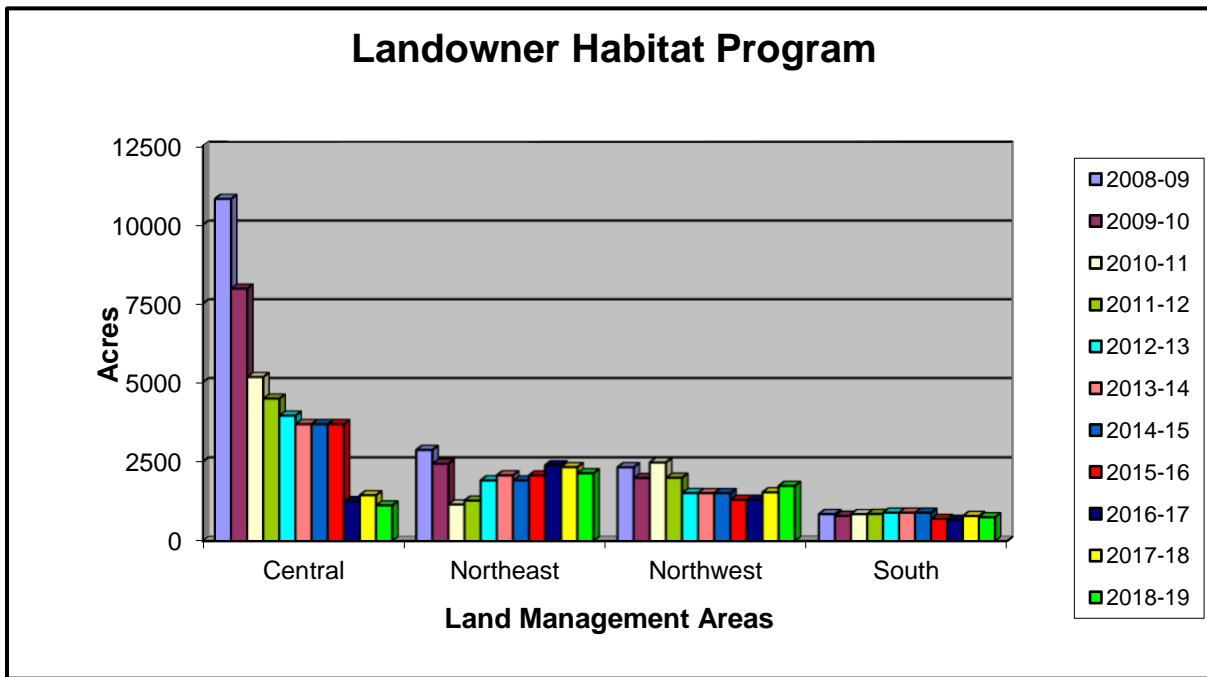


Figure 2. Conserved acres in each ACA region, 2008 to 2019.

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.

Conclusions

We continue to work with landowners to protect important wildlife and fish habitat on private lands in Alberta. We currently manage 32 LHP agreements across the province conserving approximately 5,737 acres (2,319.8 ha) of wildlife and fish habitat. These agreements include five agreements in our Central Region, eight agreements in our Northeast Region, six agreements in our Northwest Region and 13 agreements in our South Region. LHP participants display *Use Respect – Ask First* signage on their properties as part of this program to provide reasonable foot access to some excellent recreational opportunities throughout Alberta.

Communications

- Featured an article highlighting ACA projects and programs directed at working with private landowners including our Landowner Habitat Program in our Spring/Summer 2018 issue of *Conservation Magazine*.
- Presented the rationale and mechanics of LHP to five landowners with agreements that expired in 2018/19 and one landowner with a new agreement.
- 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 enhances recreational opportunities on privately owned lands.

Literature Cited

N/A

Photos



Aspen dominated parkland habitat on a Landowner Habitat Program participant's property (Central Region). Photo: John Hallett



Small wetland and aspen habitat on a Landowner Habitat Program participant's property (Central Region). Photo: John Hallett



View of habitat and LHP sign on a Landowner Habitat Program participant's property (Northeast Region). Photo: Roy Schmelzeisen



Small wetland on a Landowner Habitat Program participant's property (Northeast Region).
Photo: Roy Schmelzeisen



Peace Parkland habitat on a Landowner Habitat Program participant's property (Northwest Region). Photo: Ed Kolodychuk



Project sign recently installed at a Landowner Habitat Program participant's property (Northwest Region). Photo: Ed Kolodychuk



Prairie wetland on a participant's property (Southern Region). Photo: Aiden Bateman



Mule deer running in Badger Lake along a participant's property (Southern Region). Photo: Jalen Hulit