

Alberta Conservation Association
2018/19 Project Summary Report

Project Name: Recreational Opportunity Enhancement

Land Management Program Manager: Darren Dorge

Project Leader: Jeff Forsyth (Stefanie Fenson)

Primary ACA staff on project: Stefanie Fenson, Marco Fontana, Jeff Forsyth, Joe Hopkins, Stephen Nadworny, and Jon Van Dijk

Partnerships

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, totalling approximately 91,000 acres (36,826 ha) of access.
- Added one new landowner to our access sign-in program in the Southern Region, totalling approximately ~40,000 acres (16,187 ha).
- Continue to meet with potential new landowners in the Southern Region interested in the program, with three potential new landowners interested.
- Collaborated with provincial and municipal governments, one conservation group, and several landowners.

Introduction

Alberta's population is steadily increasing and has now reached over 4.33 million people in 2018, up from 4.31 million in 2017. 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 lands for the purposes of hunting, fishing, and other non-consumptive uses. An objective of the program is also to provide 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 reserves, grasslands and other crops. Alberta Environment and Parks 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. ACA's primary role will be to foster relationships between individual landowners, Canadian Land Access Systems (CLAS), and the appropriate individuals within different levels of Government. 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. 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 implemented 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 recreational access (at no cost) to the general public. Requirements for access is the completion of an information form which is 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 farming or ranching operations.

We will collaborate with AFGA 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

Our plan of connecting landowners and hunters in the Northwest Region has been stalled. Previous meetings and plans put in place have not resulted in the desired outcome of facilitating solutions for landowners experiencing depredation, or increasing opportunity for hunters. Communication lines were left open; however, no movement occurred on implementing the program between the municipal districts and CLAS. Project partners in the Northwest Region appear to have lost interest in moving forward with the program, and other regions will be sought out if traction cannot be gained in the Northwest Region.

We currently assist seven landowners with managing public access to private properties totalling approximately 91,000 acres (36,826 ha) in southern Alberta. In 2018/19, we met with seven participating landowners and three new potential landowners. A new sign-in box was installed for the new 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.

Conclusions

Ungulate depredation continues to be a concern, 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 ~91,000 acres (~36,826 ha) 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 2018/19, plans to develop a county road allowance and improve angler access to the North Raven River were abandoned, when a previously amenable neighbouring lessee withdrew his support for the project. We initiated investigations of land ownership and access development options for a large waterbody near Rocky Mountain House. We also proposed a leasing project to the Flagstaff County to secure access to a quarter section of land they acquired from a former participant of ACA's Landowner Habitat Program.

Communications

- Reaffirmed/presented the rationale and mechanics of the ROE program to existing and new landowners.
- Article highlighting ROE program printed in fall/winter edition of *ACA Conservation Magazine*.

Photos



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



View of a coulee on a property currently registered under the sign-in access program.
Photo: Jeff Forsyth