

**Alberta Conservation Association
2019/20 Project Summary Report**

Project Name: Landowner Habitat Program

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Partnerships

Alberta Environment and Parks

Landowners

Key Findings

- Currently managing 33 Landowner Habitat Program Agreements, conserving 5,789 acres (2,342.8 ha) of wildlife and fish habitat.
- Two agreements that expired in 2018/19 were renewed in 2019/20, conserving 244 acres (98.7 ha); one in our Central Region and one in our Northeast Region.
- Two agreements expired in 2019/20: one agreement was renewed, conserving 635 acres (257.0 ha) in our Northeast Region, and one agreement conserving 189 acres (76.5 ha) in our Central Region was not renewed.

Abstract

Alberta's ecosystems continue to shrink as our human footprint grows with development. Biodiversity is often the first casualty of increased and expanding development with habitat

alteration and wetland loss. The northern parts of the province have seen the most changes over the past decade. Approximately two-thirds of the province (62%) has been altered by industrial or agricultural development. Urban and rural development have also contributed to habitat loss, fragmentation, and degradation. The Landowner Habitat Program (LHP) was initiated to help conserve key habitat and 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 five to 20 years; a condition of the agreement is for landowners to provide reasonable public foot access. Participants in this program are acknowledged with a project sign and provided with *Use Respect – Ask First* signage to display along the perimeter of their property. We currently manage 33 LHP agreements across the province, which conserves approximately 5,789 acres (2,342.8 ha) of important wildlife and fish habitat.

Introduction

In 2019, Alberta's economy continued to struggle but made some gains. The oil and gas industry showed little signs of gaining strength and the unemployment rate remained high. Despite the unknown economic future, the population in the province increased to 4.37 million, up from 4.33 million in 2018. 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 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 that landowners 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.
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 Assessment 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 five-, ten-, 15-, and 20-year terms.
5. Complete draft LHP agreement.

- Include the following attachments: legal land title, aerial 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 ACA to control access.

Results

We currently manage 33 LHP agreements that conserves 5,789 acres (2,342.8 ha) of wildlife and fish habitat across Alberta. We reviewed four agreements that expired in 2018/19 and 2019/20 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. Two agreements previously expired in 2018/19, one in our Central Region and one in our Northeast Region, were renewed conserving 244 acres (98.7 ha). Two agreements

expired in 2019/20; one agreement was renewed conserving 635 acres (257.0 ha) in our Northeast Region, and one agreement covering 189 acres (76.5 ha) in our Central Region was not renewed.

The number of agreements and overall protected acres increased in 2019/20 due to renewing two previously expired agreements. During the spring of 2019, we managed a total of 32 LHP agreements (Figure 1) protecting a total of 5,737 acres (2,321.8 ha) (Figure 2). During 2019/20, two agreements expired, and one was renewed, and two agreements that expired in 2018/19 were also renewed. These changes resulted in a net increase of one agreement and an increase in conserved area of 51.9 acres (21 ha).

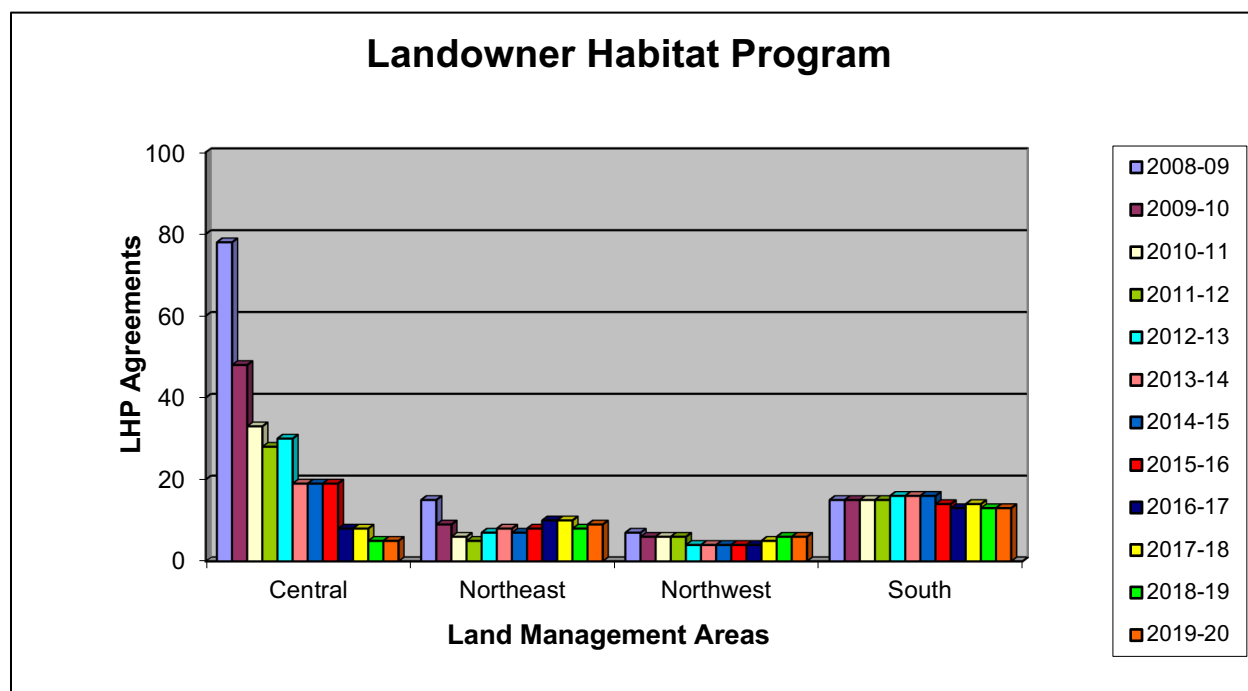


Figure 1. Landowner Habitat Program agreements in each ACA region, 2008 to 2020.

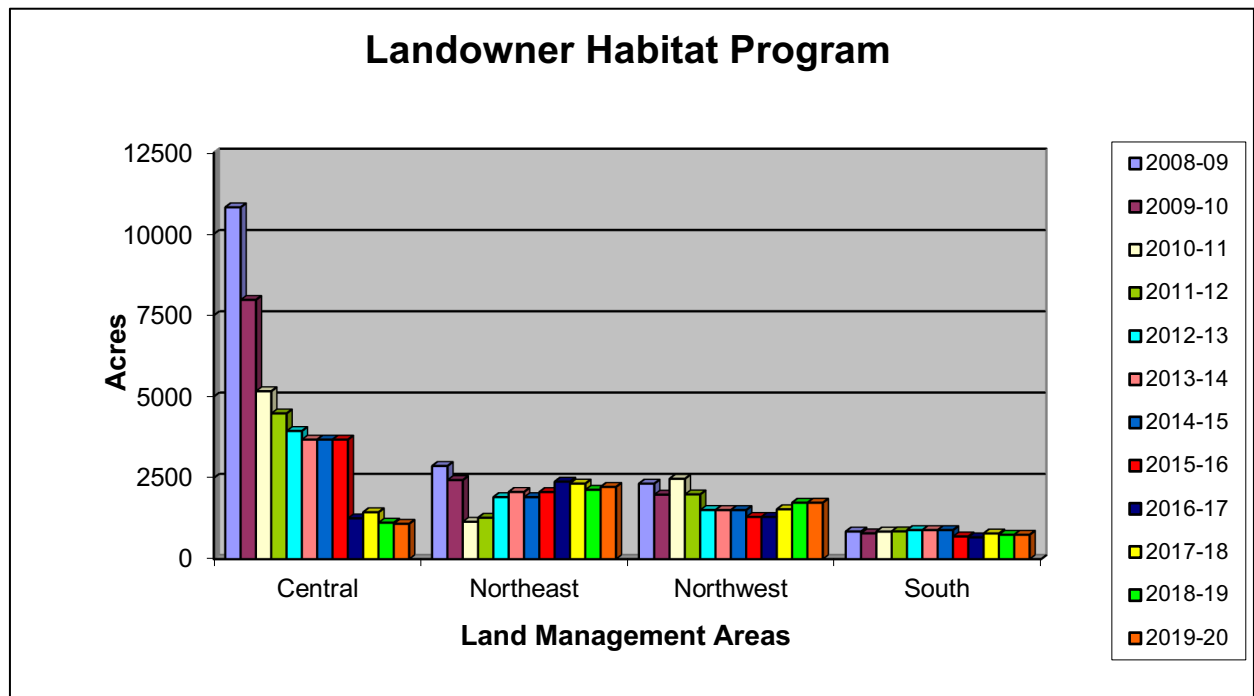


Figure 2. Conserved acres in each ACA region, 2008 to 2020.

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 33 LHP agreements across the province conserving approximately 5,789 acres (2,342.8 ha) of wildlife and fish habitat. These agreements include five agreements in our Central Region, nine 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

- Presented the rationale and mechanics of LHP to four landowners with agreements that expired in 2018/19 and 2019/20.
- 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



Coulee habitat in the aspen parkland on an LHP participant's property (Central Region).
Photo: Andy Murphy



Deer tracks on a LHP participant's property (Central Region). Photo: Andy Murphy



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



View of parkland habitat in the fall on an LHP participant's property (Northeast Region).
Photo: Roy Schmelzeisen



Landowner participant standing next to his LHP project sign (Northwest Region).
Photo: Ed Kolodychuk



Small unnamed creek flowing through mixedwood forest on an LHP participant's property (Northwest Region). Photo: Ed Kolodychuk



Project sign on an LHP participant's property (Southern Region). Photo: Jeff Forsyth



A healthy wetland and shoreline habitat in the prairie region on an LHP participant's property (Southern Region). Photo: Jeff Forsyth



Shoreline habitat on Badger Reservoir along an LHP participant's property (Southern Region).
Photo: Jeff Forsyth