

**Alberta Conservation Association
2020/21 Project Summary Report**

Project Name: Landowner Habitat Program

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Partnerships

Alberta Environment and Parks

Landowners

Parkland County

Key Findings

- Currently managing 37 Landowner Habitat Program Agreements, conserving 6,574 acres (2,660.5 ha) of wildlife and fish habitat.
- Five agreements expired in 2020/21 and three were renewed, one of these renewals was split into three agreements with the addition of family members added to the lands title creating five renewal agreements conserving 699 acres (282.9 ha); one in our Northeast Region, three in our Northwest Region and one in our South Region.
- Four new agreements were completed in 2020/21 with Parkland County: three agreements conserving 828 acres (335.1 ha) in our Central Region, and one agreement conserving 320 acres (129.5 ha) in our Northeast Region.
- Parkland County received recognition in ACA's Corporate Partner Program for waiving all annual payments for the ten-year term of four LHP agreements.

Abstract

Alberta's forest and native grasslands continue to disappear as our human footprint grows with agricultural, municipal, and industrial development. Wildlife and fisheries are often the first casualties of increased and expanding development with habitat alteration and wetland loss. The northern parts of the province have seen the most development 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. This has contributed to several wildlife and fish species being listed as endangered, threatened, or species of concern. Currently there are 42 known species listed in Alberta. The Landowner Habitat Program (LHP) was initiated to help conserve key habitat and reduce habitat loss on privately owned land. The program provides incentives for 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 37 LHP agreements across the province, which conserves approximately 6,574 acres (2,660.5 ha) of important wildlife and fish habitat.

Introduction

In 2020, the world struggled with the COVID-19 pandemic and the impacts to the economy when many businesses were shut down to control the spread of this virus. The oil and gas industry were not immune to this downturn in the economy and the unemployment rate remained high throughout Canada and Alberta. Despite the unknown economic future, the population in the province increased to 4.43 million, up from 4.37 million in 2019. 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 37 LHP agreements that conserves 6,574 acres (2,660.5 ha) of wildlife and fish habitat across Alberta. We reviewed five agreements that expired in 2020/21 which were prioritized 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. Five agreements expired in 2020/21, two in our Central Region that were not renewed, one in our Northeast Region that was renewed conserving 157 acres (63.5 ha), one in our Northwest Region that was renewed but in three separate agreements with family members being added to the certificate of titles conserving 504 acres (204.1 ha), and one in our South Region that was renewed conserving 38 acres (15.4 ha). Four new agreements were completed with Parkland County: three agreements in our Central Region conserving 828 acres (335.2 ha) and one agreement in our Northeast Region conserving 320 acres (129.5 ha). Parkland County waived the annual payments for all four agreements for their 10-year terms and these sites will be advertised in our *Alberta Discover Guide*. Parkland County will be recognized as a Corporate Partner with their involvement in our Landowner Habitat Program, waiving of annual payments and commitment to conservation and recreational enjoyment for all Albertans.

The number of agreements and overall protected acres increased in 2020/21 due to renewing three expired agreements and completing four new agreements. During the spring of 2020, we managed a total of 33 LHP agreements (Figure 1) protecting a total of 5,789 acres (2,342.8 ha) (Figure 2). During 2020/21, five agreements expired, and three were renewed, one of these renewals was split into three agreements and four new agreements were completed. These changes resulted in a net increase of four agreement and an increase in conserved area of 785.1 acres (317.7 ha).

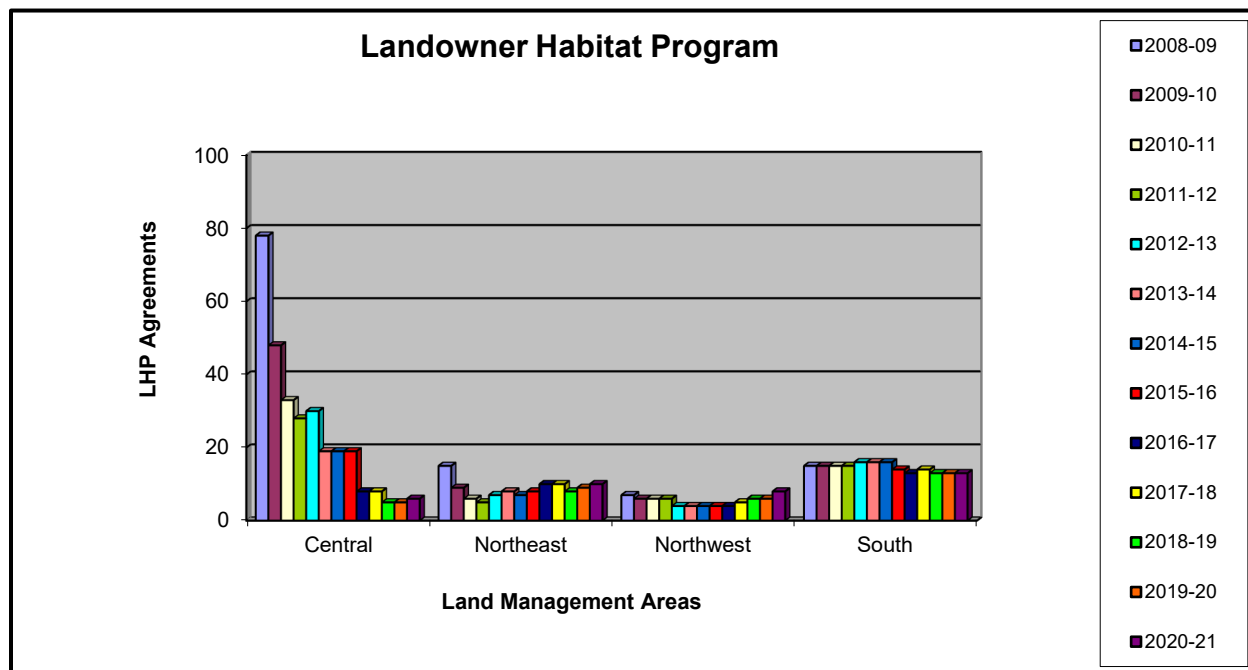


Figure 1. Landowner Habitat Program agreements in each ACA region, 2008 to 2021.

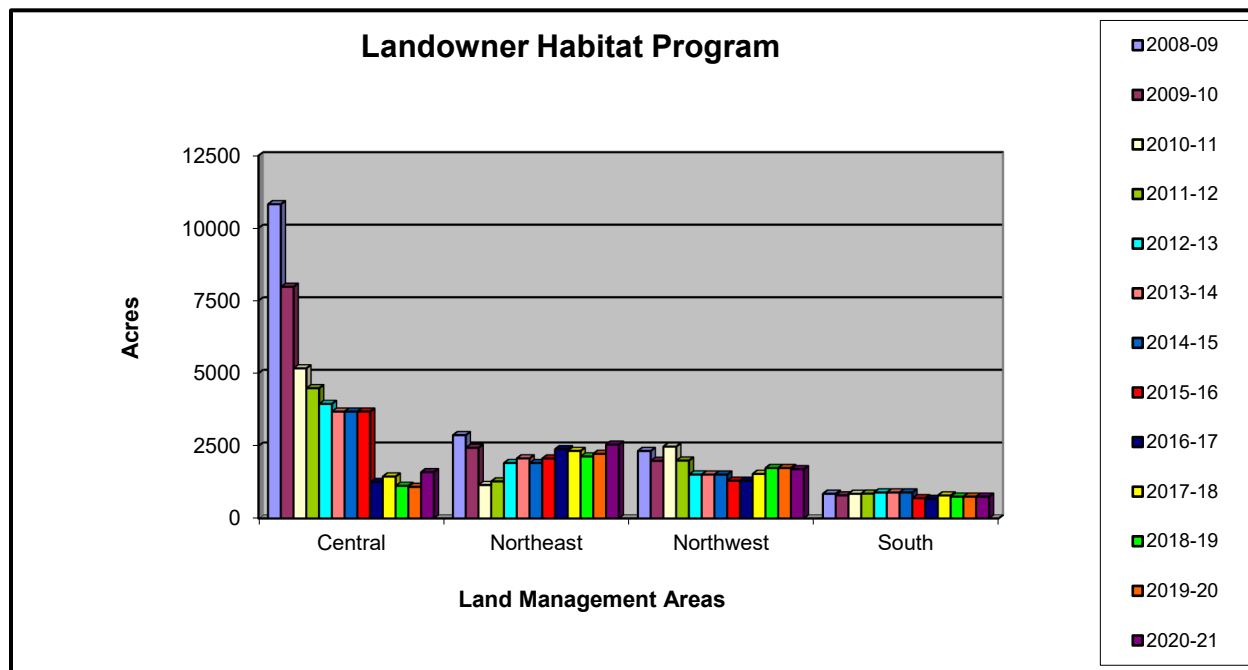


Figure 2. Conserved acres in each ACA region, 2008 to 2021.

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 37 LHP agreements across the province conserving approximately 6,574 acres (2,660.5 ha) of wildlife and fish habitat. These agreements include six agreements in our Central Region, ten agreements in our Northeast Region, eight 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 five landowners with agreements that expired in 2020/21.
- 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

Not applicable

Photos



Coniferous forest stand on an LHP participant's property (Central Region). Photo: Roy Schmelzeisen



Use respect sign on a LHP participant's property (Central Region). Photo: Marco Fontana



Small creek flowing on a Landowner Habitat Program participant's property (Northeast Region).
Photo: Garret McKen



Project sign on an LHP participant's property (Northeast Region). Photo: Garret McKen



Habitat on an LHP participant's property (Northeast Region). Photo: Garret McKen



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



View of Scope Reservoir on an LHP participant's property (Southern Region). Photo: Jeff Forsyth



View of a wetland associated with the LHP Program partnership with BRID in the prairie region (Southern Region). Photo: Jeff Forsyth