

Alberta Conservation Association
2021/22 Project Summary Report

Project Name: Landowner Habitat Program

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Project Leader: Ed Kolodychuk

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Partnerships

Alberta Environment and Parks

Landowners

Key Findings

- Currently managing 37 Landowner Habitat Program agreements, conserving 6,715 acres (2,717.4 ha) of wildlife and fish habitat.
- Three agreements expired in 2021/22 and three agreements were renewed: one agreement in our Northeast Region conserving 305 acres (123.4 ha), one agreement in our Northwest Region conserving 175 acres (70.8 ha), and one agreement in our South Region conserving 157 acres (63.5 ha).
- One new agreement was completed in the Northwest Region conserving 220 acres (89.0 ha).
- One agreement in the Northeast Region conserving 80 acres (32.2 ha) was terminated.

Abstract

Privately owned lands in Alberta support a variety of natural habitats for wildlife including forest, wetlands, and native grasslands. These important habitats for wildlife continue to disappear as the need for more agricultural and municipal growth increases. Additionally, oil and gas development often lead to habitat loss or fragmentation. The Landowner Habitat Program

(LHP) was initiated to help conserve key habitats and reduce habitat loss and fragmentation 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. ACA staff complete annual inspections to ensure landowners are complying with the requirements of their agreement. We currently manage 37 LHP agreements across the province, which conserves approximately 6,715 acres (2,717.4 ha) of important wildlife and fish habitat.

Introduction

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic and unknown economic future, the population in the province increased to 4.44 million by the 3rd quarter in 2021, up from 4.43 million in 2020. 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. Although this pressure has slowed, this trend is expected to continue and even increase as Alberta's economy starts to recover and the demand for land resumes. 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 boundaries.

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.

The following steps are required to complete 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; and 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 (e.g., mortgages, liens, rights-of-way, and zoning).
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 values) 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, conserving 6,715 acres (2,717.4 ha) of wildlife and fish habitat across Alberta. Annual inspections are completed by ACA staff to ensure landowners are complying with the requirements of their agreement. We reviewed five agreements in 2021/22 that were prioritized for renewal, termination, or as a new agreement. 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. The five agreements included the following:

1. One expiring agreement in our Northeast Region conserving 305 acres (123.4 ha) was renewed.
2. One existing agreement in our Northeast Region conserving 80 acres (32.2 ha) was terminated.
3. One expiring agreement in our Northwest Region conserving 175 acres (70.8 ha) was renewed.
4. One new agreement in our Northwest Region conserving 220 acres (89.0 ha) was signed.

5. One expiring agreement in our South Region conserving 157 acres (63.5 ha) was renewed.

The number of agreements and overall protected acres increased in 2020/21 due to renewing three expired agreements and completing one new agreement. As of spring 2021, we managed a total of 37 LHP agreements (Figure 1) protecting a total of 6,574 acres (2,660.1 ha) (Figure 2). During 2021/22, three agreements expired and were renewed, one agreement was terminated, and one new agreement was completed. These changes resulted in no change to the number of agreements (37) and an increase in conserved area of 141 acres (56.9 ha).

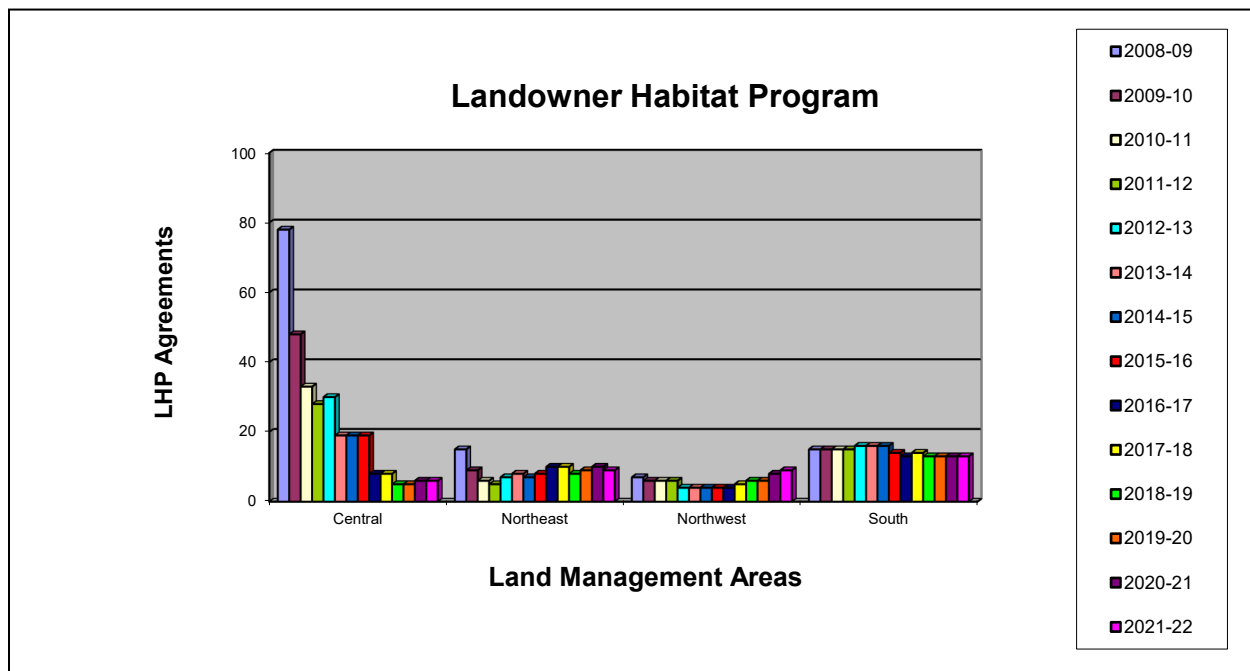


Figure 1. Landowner Habitat Program agreements in each ACA region, 2008 to 2022.

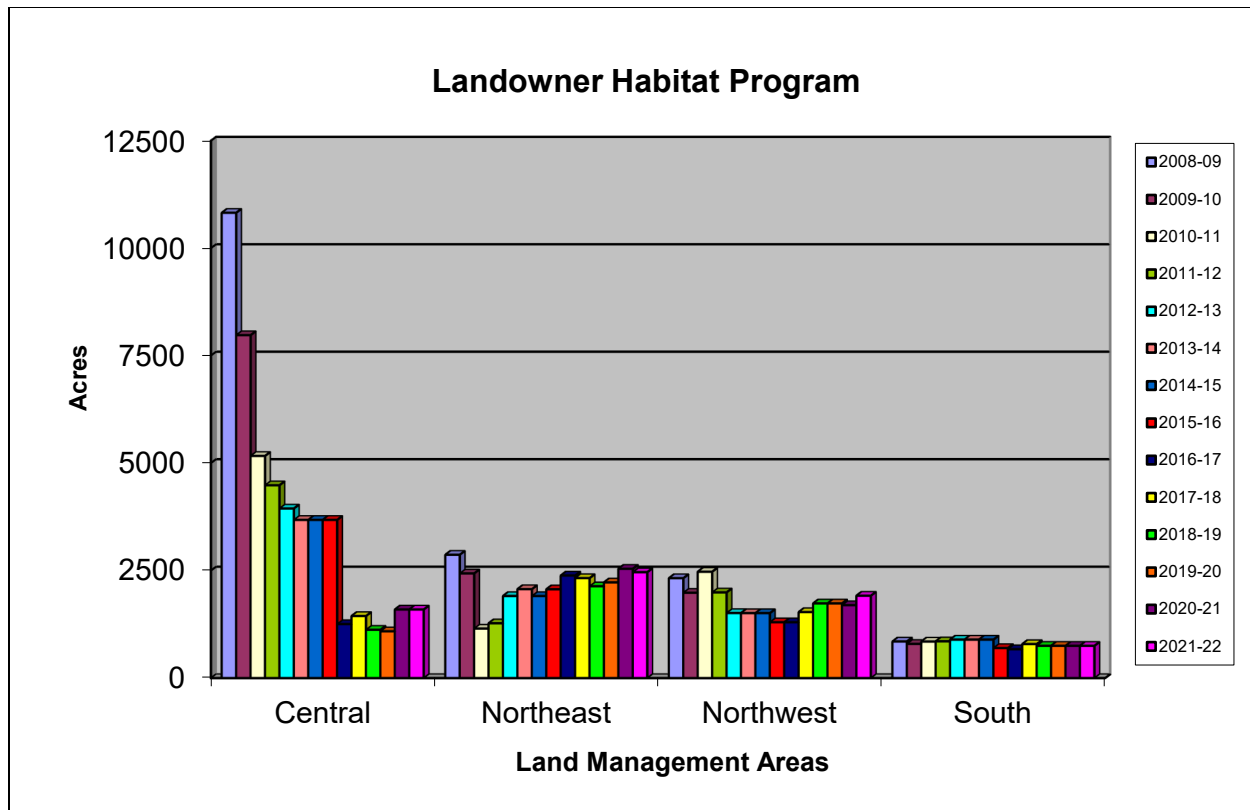


Figure 2. Conserved acres in each ACA region, 2008 to 2022.

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 ACA pays to landowners (considered low), 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 6,714.7 acres (2,717.39 ha) of wildlife and fish habitat. These agreements include six in our Central Region, nine in our Northeast Region, nine in our Northwest Region, and 13 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 2021/22.
- Featured an article, “Rekindling an Old Partnership,” about the importance of partnerships with municipalities in our Fall/Winter 2021 issue of *Conservation Magazine*.
- 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



Photo 1. Project sign on an LHP participant's property (Central Region).

Photo: Roy Schmelzeisen



Photo 2. Pembina River adjacent to an LHP participant's property (Central Region).

Photo: Roy Schmelzeisen



Photo 3. Trail on an LHP participant's property (Central Region).
Photo: Roy Schmelzeisen



Photo 4. Wetland on an LHP participant's property (Northeast Region).
Photo: Roy Schmelzeisen



Photo 5. Large ravine on an LHP participant's property (Northwest Region).
Photo: Ed Kolodychuk

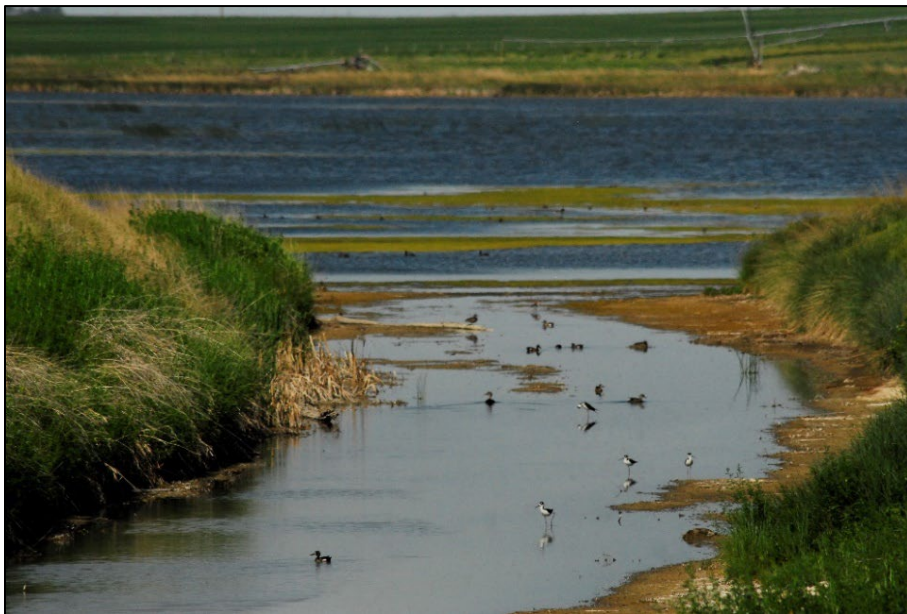


Photo 6. Wetland and shorebirds on an LHP participant's property (South Region).
Photo: Jeff Forsyth



Photo 7. View of Badger Lake in the background from an LHP participant's property (South Region). Photo: Jeff Forsyth



Photo 8. Small wetland on an LHP participant's property (South Region). Photo: Jeff Forsyth