

Alberta Conservation Association
2022/23 Project Summary Report

Project Name: Landowner Habitat Program

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Partnerships

Government of Alberta

Landowners

Key Findings

- Currently managing 37 Landowner Habitat Program Agreements, conserving 6,710 acres (2,715.5 ha) of wildlife and fish habitat.
- Four agreements expired in 2021/22 and were renewed: one agreement in our Central Region conserving 512 acres (207.2 ha), two agreements in our Northeast Region conserving 475 acres (192.2 ha) and 159 acres (64.4 ha), and one agreement in our Northwest Region conserving 231 acres (93.5 ha).

Abstract

Privately owned lands in Alberta have a significant role in sustaining healthy wildlife and fish populations. There are approximately 65 million acres of private land in Alberta and over 52% of this land has been cultivated (The Western Producer, 2013). Private lands that have not been cleared or excessively altered provide a variety of natural habitats for wildlife. Protecting these natural habitats, including forest, wetlands, and native grasslands, help maintain threatened ecosystems. 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. We currently manage 37 LHP agreements across the province, which conserves approximately 6,710 acres (2,715.5 ha) of important wildlife and fish habitat.

Introduction

In 2022, Alberta continued to struggle with different strains of COVID-19, high inflation, rise in interest rates and unknown economic future, yet the population in the province increased to 4.60 million by the third quarter of 2022, up from 4.44 million in 2021. International immigration was the biggest contributor to this record growth in Alberta's population. As Alberta's population grows, pressure from a variety of sources, including agricultural, municipal, and industrial development, impacts wildlife and fish habitat. All these pressures and cumulative effects reduce the quality and quantity of habitat. The Landowner Habitat Program (LHP) was established to help reduce habitat loss on privately owned land. In 2022, we reviewed and updated our criteria to help prioritize potential lands for this program. 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. In 2022/23, we reviewed and revised the ranking criteria to better align with our priorities. 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 include the following:

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 Alberta Conservation Association (ACA) to control access.

Results

We currently manage 37 LHP agreements (Figure 1) that conserve 6,710 acres (2,715.5 ha) (Figure 2) of wildlife and fish habitat across Alberta. We reviewed four expiring agreements in 2022/23 which 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 four agreements included the following: one expiring agreement in our Central Region conserving 512 acres (207.2 ha) was renewed, two expiring agreements in our Northeast Region conserving 475 acres (192.2 ha) and 159 acres (64.4 ha) were renewed, and one expiring agreement in our Northwest Region conserving 231 acres (93.5 ha) was renewed. The number of agreements did not change in 2022/23, but the overall protected acres decreased by five acres due to a new subdivision on the renewal agreement in the Northwest Region.

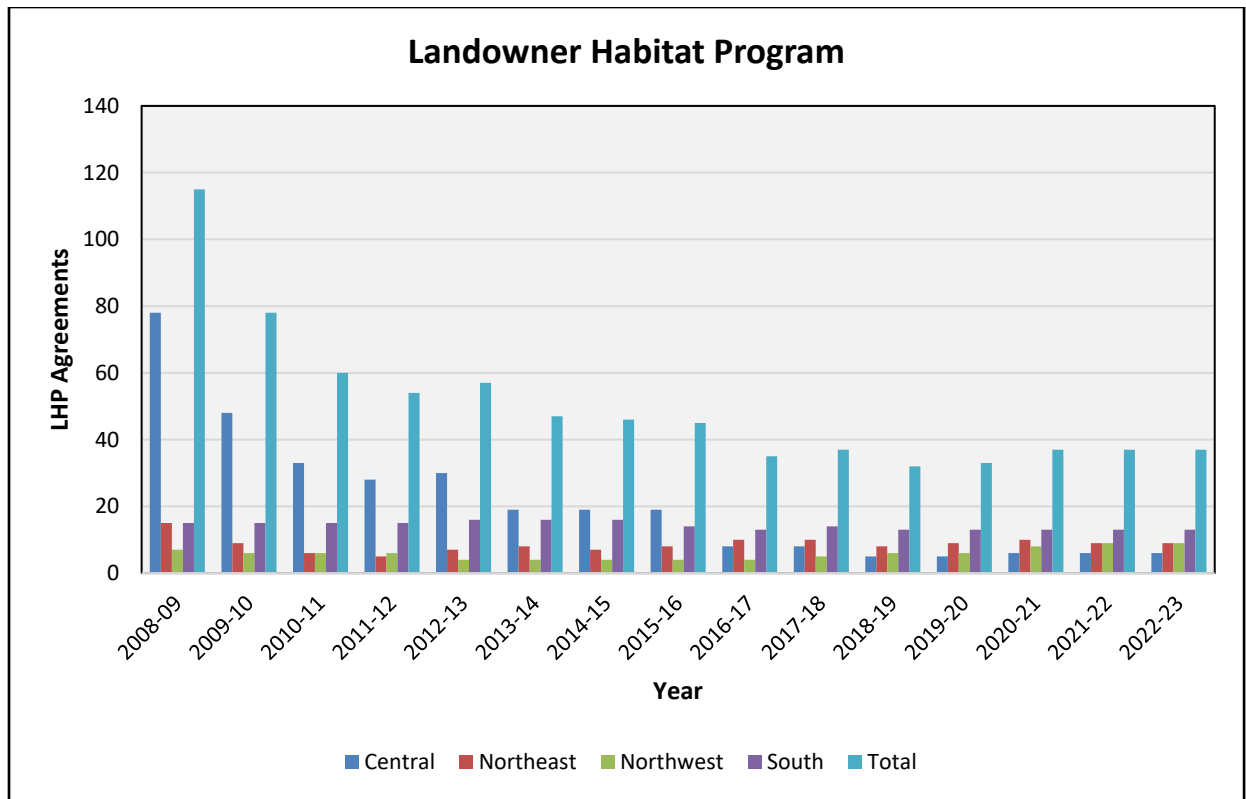


Figure 1. Landowner Habitat Program agreements in each ACA region, 2008 to 2023.

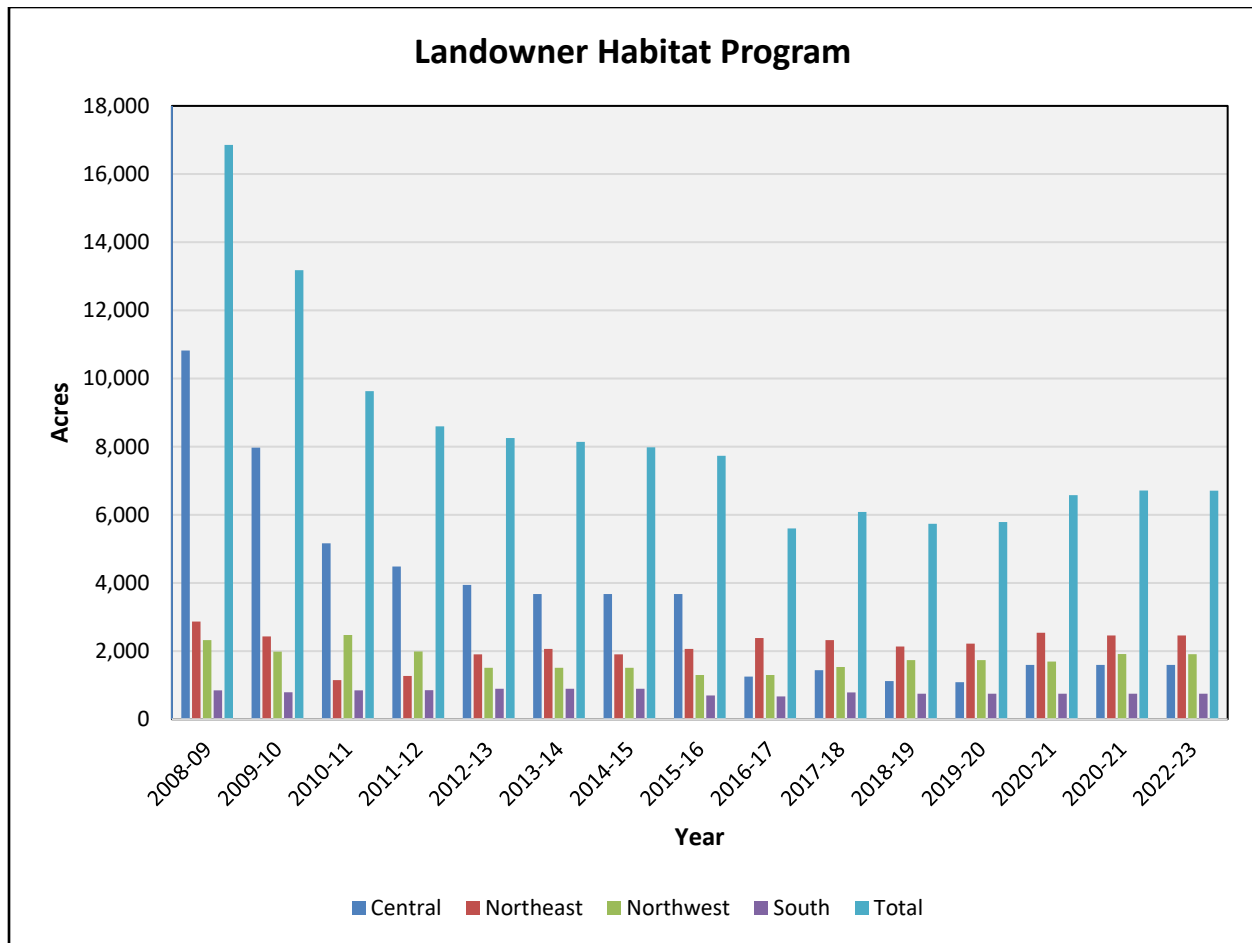


Figure 2. Conserved acres in each ACA region, 2008 to 2023.

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 6,710 acres (2,715.5 ha) of wildlife and fish habitat. These agreements include six agreements in our Central Region, nine agreements in our Northeast Region, nine 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 2022/23.
- Circulated *Use Respect – Ask First* banners to Alberta Environment and Protected Areas 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

Glen, B. 2013. *Farmland in short supply across Alberta*. The Western Producer Newsletter. Published March 1, 2013.

Photos



Photo 1. Ferns on an LHP participant's property (Central Region). Photo: Marco Fontana



Photo 2. Open meadow on an LHP participant's property (Central Region).
Photo: Marco Fontana



Photo 3. Project sign on an LHP participant's property (Central Region).
Photo: Marco Fontana



Photo 4. Project sign on an LHP participant's property (Northeast Region).
Photo: Stephen Nadworny



Photo 5. Creek on a LHP participant's property (Northwest Region). Photo: Ed Kolodychuk



Photo 6. LHP participants with their project sign (Northwest Region). Photo: Ed Kolodychuk



Photo 7. Shoreline habitat on an LHP participant's property (Southern Region).
Photo: Jeff Forsyth



Photo 8. Waterfowl on Badger Lake at a LHP participant's property (Southern Region).
Photo: Jeff Forsyth



Photo 9. View of Badger Lake from an LHP participant's property (Southern Region).
Photo: Jeff Forsyth