

**Alberta Conservation Association
2022/23 Project Summary Report**

Project Name: Recreational Opportunity Enhancement

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Partnerships

Alberta Fish & Game Association

Government of Alberta

Landowners

Lethbridge Fish & Game Association

Key Findings

- Provided 15 participating landowners with recreational user sign-in access services for existing properties, totalling approximately 217,900.8 acres (88,184.5 ha) of access.
- Continued to meet with potential new landowners in the Southern Region, with two potential new landowners interested in the program.
- Enrolled one new landowner, that historically did not allow hunting access, to our access sign-in program in the Southern Region, totalling approximately ~14,160 acres (5,730.6 ha).
- Investigated opportunities to improve access to a candidate waterbody in the Central Region, near Stettler.
- Collaborated with provincial and municipal governments, conservation groups, and several landowners.

Abstract

ACA established the Recreational Opportunity Enhancement Project to improve opportunities for fishing and hunting, as well as other non-consumptive activities such as hiking, canoeing, or photography. The major focus of this project is to improve waterfowl hunter access to Crown waterbodies and improve upland and big game hunter access to private lands. In addition, the project will focus on initiatives that enhance access to major rivers and waterbodies such as the Bow and North Saskatchewan rivers for angling and other water-related recreational activities. Working with individual landowners has allowed us to improve hunter access to approximately 217,900.8 acres (88,184.5 ha) of private land across southern Alberta through a sign-in access system. Increasing access opportunities for hunters may provide the Government of Alberta additional options to use hunters as a management tool when managing game species. Not only will increased opportunities encourage hunter and angler recruitment, but it will also help maintain quality outdoor experiences by distributing hunters and anglers across the landscape.

Introduction

Government of Alberta has identified improvement of recreational access as a priority, and Alberta Conservation Association (ACA) sees this as an important benefit to our stakeholders. Increased recreational opportunities encourage hunter and angler recruitment as we attract new hunters and anglers every year, but it will also help maintain quality outdoor experiences by spreading hunters and anglers out across the landscape. 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 will not only encourage hunter and angler recruitment as we attract new hunters and anglers each year, but it will also help maintain quality outdoor experiences by distributing hunters and anglers across the landscape.

Methods

Connecting landowners and hunters

Each year, ranchers and farmers express concern over elk and deer depredation on hay reserves, grasslands, and other crops. The Government of Alberta 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 and the appropriate individuals within different levels of government. Working collectively 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. The pilot study ended in 2011. Since then, and through partnerships with Alberta Fish & Game Association (AFGA), several landowners in southern Alberta have adopted ACA's sign-in access system process, which provides recreational access (at no cost) to the public. Requirements for access is the completion of an information form, which is then submitted in an on-site 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 providing landowners with a tool to manage 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 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 continues to be 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 will remain open; however, no progress has been made in implementing the program. 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 15 landowners in southern Alberta with managing public access to private properties, totalling approximately 217,900.8 acres (88,184.5 ha) in southern Alberta. In 2022/23, we met with participating landowners and added one new landowner who historically did not allow hunting access totalling approximately 14,160 acres (5,730.6 ha). Sign-in cards and additional signage (where required) were supplied to the landowners enrolled in the program.

Lease or development opportunities to facilitate improved access to Crown waterbodies were investigated at a candidate waterbody within the Central Region, near Stettler. Locations were investigated to determine current access limitations and potential for improvements that could be made. The initial locations proposed required some adjustments to limit impacts to agricultural practices and will require further discussions with the landowner before a lease can be obtained to facilitate recreational access for the hunting and fishing community.

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 and balancing 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. In 2022/23, the amount of land enrolled in the sign-in access management program was similar to that in 2020/21. We currently assist in managing recreational access to 217,900.8 acres (88,184.5 ha) across the province, providing additional opportunities for hunting and fishing. One landowner who had previously opted out of the sign-in access system to utilize an app-based system for managing their access requested assistance with recreational access through ACA's program again.

In 2022/23, a candidate waterbody near Stettler was investigated further to determine access limitations and potential improvements or enhancements that would allow functional public access. Discussions have resulted in the landowner holding off on an access lease. Further discussions will occur with the landowner to facilitate public access and where feasible, dispositions, leases, or land acquisitions will be sought in 2023/24.

Communications

- Reaffirmed/presented the rationale and mechanics of the ROE Program to existing and new landowners.
- Distributed *Use Respect – Ask First* signs to participating landowners and other interested landowners. Signage promotes responsible use and enhances recreational opportunities on privately owned lands.

Literature Cited

Not applicable

Photos



Photo 1. Upland habitat on a participating landowner's property near Raymond.

Photo: Jeff Forsyth



Photo 2. Rolling native prairie habitat on a participating landowner's property near the Milk River. Photo: Jeff Forsyth