

**Alberta Conservation Association  
2018/19 Project Summary Report**

**Project Name:** Species Habitat Assessments and Ranching Partnerships (SHARP)

**Wildlife Program Manager:** Doug Manzer

**Project Leader:** Brad Downey

**Primary ACA staff on project:** Brad Downey, Mike Ranger, Corey Rasmussen, Amanda Rezansoff, and Ken Wright

**Partnerships**

Alberta Environment and Parks  
Canadian Agricultural Partnerships  
Landholders

**Key Findings**

- Received three-year funding commitment through the Canadian Agricultural Partnership's funding stream.
- Received letters of support from Canadian Roundtable for Sustainable Beef and Prairie Conservation Forum.
- Promoted and discussed the project with 14 Alberta Environment and Parks staff in the North Saskatchewan Region.
- Signed Letters of Intent to work with three landowners in 2019, on properties totaling ~16,000 acres.

## **Introduction**

The Species Habitat Assessments and Ranching Partnerships (SHARP) project is a voluntary collaborative project designed to aid in improving the quality and quantity of wildlife habitat available upon the landscape. The objective is to make conservation straightforward and cost-effective for producers through education and cost-sharing agreements for habitat enhancements. The project can also provide producers with a plan and resources that can assist them in meeting the goals identified for the Natural Resource components of the Canadian Roundtable for Sustainable Beef Production Standards. The project employs an adaptive approach whereby data collected on each participating property will be monitored and used to evaluate the success of any habitat enhancements that are implemented, as well as guide future management recommendations. SHARP consist of three primary components: 1) Habitat Conservation (e.g., species and habitat inventories, habitat conservation strategies, and habitat enhancements); 2) Education, Outreach, and Awareness (e.g. development and distribution of Beneficial Management Practices, brochures and guides, etc.); and 3) Monitoring (e.g. monitoring of enhancements and changes in grazing practices and how they relate to improvements in wildlife habitat, water quality, etc.).

A Habitat Conservation Strategy (HCS) is a detailed voluntary plan that identifies Beneficial Management Practices and habitat improvement recommendations to encourage sustainable ranching operations. We develop these strategies after first completing in-depth range and riparian health assessments, and wildlife surveys. We evaluate these results with the needs of targeted species like sharp-tailed grouse, ruffed grouse, or species groups like amphibians and waterfowl, and balance the plan with the needs and objectives of the ranching operation. Mutually agreed solutions are adopted and integrated into these strategies with priorities listed along with a monitoring plan to assess progress. After reviewing the plan (HCS) and signing a five-year stewardship agreement, we assist the producer with implementing the agreed to enhancements and grazing strategies by providing advice and/or resources. Progress is re-assessed every five years with adjustments incorporated into the existing HCS for the operation. A landowner questionnaire is also completed to identify what is or isn't working from their perspective, which helps us adjust the plan going forward. Another five-year stewardship

agreement may be signed for continued implementation of the HCS. Producers sign an agreement clarifying that they allow reasonable public access for recreation on their ranch.

## **Methods**

The first ranches participating in the project are located in the North Saskatchewan Watershed, with hopes to expand into portions of the Athabasca and Peace Regions in future years. Range site polygons were identified for each property to stratify the location of range health assessments, and identify plant communities. Wildlife survey point count and transect locations are established and tied to the range site polygons in order to relate species observed to the habitat condition associated with the polygon. Wildlife inventories will follow standard methods for select species (ASRD 2010). Staff will also employ song and bat meters for specialized species and to supplement wildlife inventory data in unique habitats or difficult to reach areas. Vegetation assessments will follow the standard protocol developed by Alberta Public Lands (Adams et al. 2005). A combination of detailed transects and range/forest health assessments will be completed for each property. Riparian health assessments will be completed following the protocols outlined by the Riparian Health Authority (Cows and Fish 2018a, 2018b). Observations will be entered into the Alberta Fish and Wildlife Management Information System and vegetation data for crown land will be entered into the Ecological Site Information System database.

A large part of our efforts in 2018/19 went toward securing funding for SHARP as well as developing partnerships and seeking landowners wanting to participate in the project.

## **Results**

In 2018/19, we secured baseline funding for the SHARP project over the initial four years and signed Letters of Intent to work with three landowners on properties, totaling ~16,000 acres. We completed pre-planning for all properties enrolled in the project. This included the development of all range site polygons, wildlife survey point count and transect locations and locations for all riparian health assessments. We hired a new biologist with an agrology background to assist with

the range components of the project. We promoted SHARP to numerous Alberta Environment and Parks staff that support the project and received letters of support from Canadian Roundtable for Sustainable Beef and the Prairie Conservation Forum.

## **Conclusions**

Long-term relationships built on mutual respect and trust between conservation groups and landowners are the key to effective on-the-ground conservation efforts. Using a collaborative, voluntary approach allows all members of a team to provide ideas and discuss options. This allows for greater interactions and potential uptake by producers who can see win-win situations where both their operations and wildlife habitat can benefit. We will follow the same process that has been used with the MULTISAR Program in southern Alberta, where we have been successfully collaborating with producers for 17 years. Using what we have learned, we hope to build new partnerships in central and northern Alberta through the SHARP project that foster mutually beneficial relationships with the agriculture community and improve wildlife habitat on this land base.

## **Communications**

### *ACA*

- Discussed the SHARP Project with 14 AEP Staff in the North Saskatchewan Watershed, and had positive discussion with ALUS Canada and Ducks Unlimited Canada about interest in partnering on the project. Brad Downey.

## **Literature Cited**

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Cows and Fish. 2018a. Alberta Lotic Assessment for Streams and Small Rivers (survey) User Manuals. Online: <http://cowsandfish.org/riparian/health.html> . Accessed February 12, 2019.

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