

Alberta Conservation Association
2021/22 Project Summary Report

Project Name: Landowner Hunting Access Survey

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Partnerships

Alberta Beef Producers

Alberta Crop Sector Working Group

Alberta Environment and Parks

Alberta Fish & Game Association – Minister’s Special Licence Program

Alberta Professional Outfitters Society Wildlife Management Fund

Alberta Wheat & Barley Commissions

Cabela’s | Bass Pro Shops

Creative Motion Publishing

Glacier FarmMedia

Municipal district and county offices across the province

University of Alberta

University of Waterloo

Western Stock Growers’ Association

Key Findings

- Over 2,000 landowners responded to our survey: 65% were agricultural producers.
- Nearly 80% of survey respondents see providing habitat for plants and animals as an important function of their property.
- The majority of receptive landowners have hunters on their property between 1 and 19 days in a typical year, and it is most commonly 1 or 2 hunters at a time.
- Most landowners allow foot access. Far fewer allow motorized or other forms of access.

Abstract

A voluntary online survey was used to collect information from landowners' perspectives on allowing hunting access on private land. The study design was developed in partnership with social scientists at the universities of Alberta and Waterloo. Agriculture industry groups helped to refine survey questions and promoted the survey through their publications and social media. By the time the survey closed at the end of March 2021, over 2,000 surveys had been completed from across the province. The largest group of survey respondents was agricultural producers (65%), with an even split between livestock and crop production. Most of the landowners (78%) identified providing habitat for plants and animals as an important function of their property. Over half of the landowners who said they provide hunting access have hunters on their property between 1 and 19 days in a year, and they most typically have 1 or 2 hunters at a time. The number one concern for landowners was trespassing issues, and the number one issue that might cause them to provide more hunting access was increased property and feed damage from deer and elk. If a person that they did not know asked to hunt on their land, those who lived nearby were most likely to be given access.

Introduction

Over the past century, hunters have played a vital part in ensuring wildlife are managed sustainably in Alberta. Resident hunters, outfitters, and their clients have put millions of dollars a year into conservation activities through licence purchases and volunteer time. They are often the first to raise concerns regarding changes in wildlife populations and habitat, and their passion underlines the intrinsic and economic value that wildlife have for a segment of society.

Maintaining hunter numbers in Alberta supports the long-term conservation and management of wildlife in the province.

The declining number of hunters has been a major concern for wildlife managers and conservation organizations across North America (Ryan and Shaw 2011; Larson et al. 2013). While Alberta has fared better than many other jurisdictions (Sillars 2020), we remain committed to supporting the conditions necessary for ensuring that new hunters are being added to replace those who choose to no longer participate each year. One of the greatest barriers to developing and maintaining an interest in hunting is simply finding places to hunt, particularly places that are not overcrowded.

Alberta's rural landowners play an important role in providing quality hunting opportunities for those who do not have their own land, which indirectly influences hunter retention and recruitment. However, some have suggested that the hunter-landowner dynamic may be changing. The purpose of this project was to survey landowners to gain a better understanding of their perspective on the dynamics at play regarding hunter access on private lands.

Methods

We developed a survey to obtain information from landowners on whether hunters are allowed on their land, how they decide who will be allowed, and what issues cause them to restrict hunting access on their land. Provincial leased land was not included in this survey. Sampling was conducted using an online survey platform. Social science research collaborators at the University of Alberta (Dr. Howie Harshaw) and University of Waterloo (Dr. Jeremy Pittman) helped design the survey questions. Representatives from the agriculture and outfitting industries provided feedback on the survey as well.

Data collection took place from January through March 2021. Data processing and analysis was conducted in 2021/22. A series of general questions were summarized based on how the respondents answered. Statistical analyses were conducted to investigate variables associated with whether landowners allow hunting on their land, whether they allow members of the public to hunt on their land, and whether they allow outfitters and their clients to hunt on their land.

Results

After data cleaning, 2,036 surveys were available for analysis in FY2021/22. Results represent the pool of survey respondents who completed the online survey and, due to sampling bias, may not hold true for the general population of landowners across the province.

Survey responses were received from landowners in 60 different municipal districts and counties, spread across the province (Figure 1). Agricultural use was identified most frequently as the primary purpose of the property (65%), followed by rural residential (22%), and recreational (10%). Approximately one third (34%) of the properties represented in the survey were primarily made up of annual crops, followed by 31% dominated by pasture/rangelands, and 7% mostly in permanent crops such as hay. In all, 18% of respondents indicated that their land was primarily non-agricultural use. When asked to identify the most important functions of their property, landowners listed “habitat for plants and wildlife,” “a place to live,” and “open space” as the top three answers.

When asked about how things had changed over the past few years, three times as many landowners said that hunting requests had increased as those who said that it had decreased. Almost seven times as many said that they had become less likely to grant permission as those who have become more likely to grant permission. However, over half the landowners said their approach to granting permission has not changed.

Roughly the same number of landowners said that the requests that they got were just about right (44%) as those who said they receive too many hunting requests (41%). Only 15% of landowners indicated that they could provide more hunting access than they are asked for. When asked about the amount of hunting occurring on their land, 31% of the respondents who allow hunting said that they typically have hunters on their property between 1 and 9 days per year, 27% have hunters between 10 and 19 days per year, and 16% have hunters between 20 and 29 days per year. The remaining 15% have hunters for 30 or more days per year. Over two thirds (68%) of respondents who allow hunting typically only have one or two hunters on their land at a time.

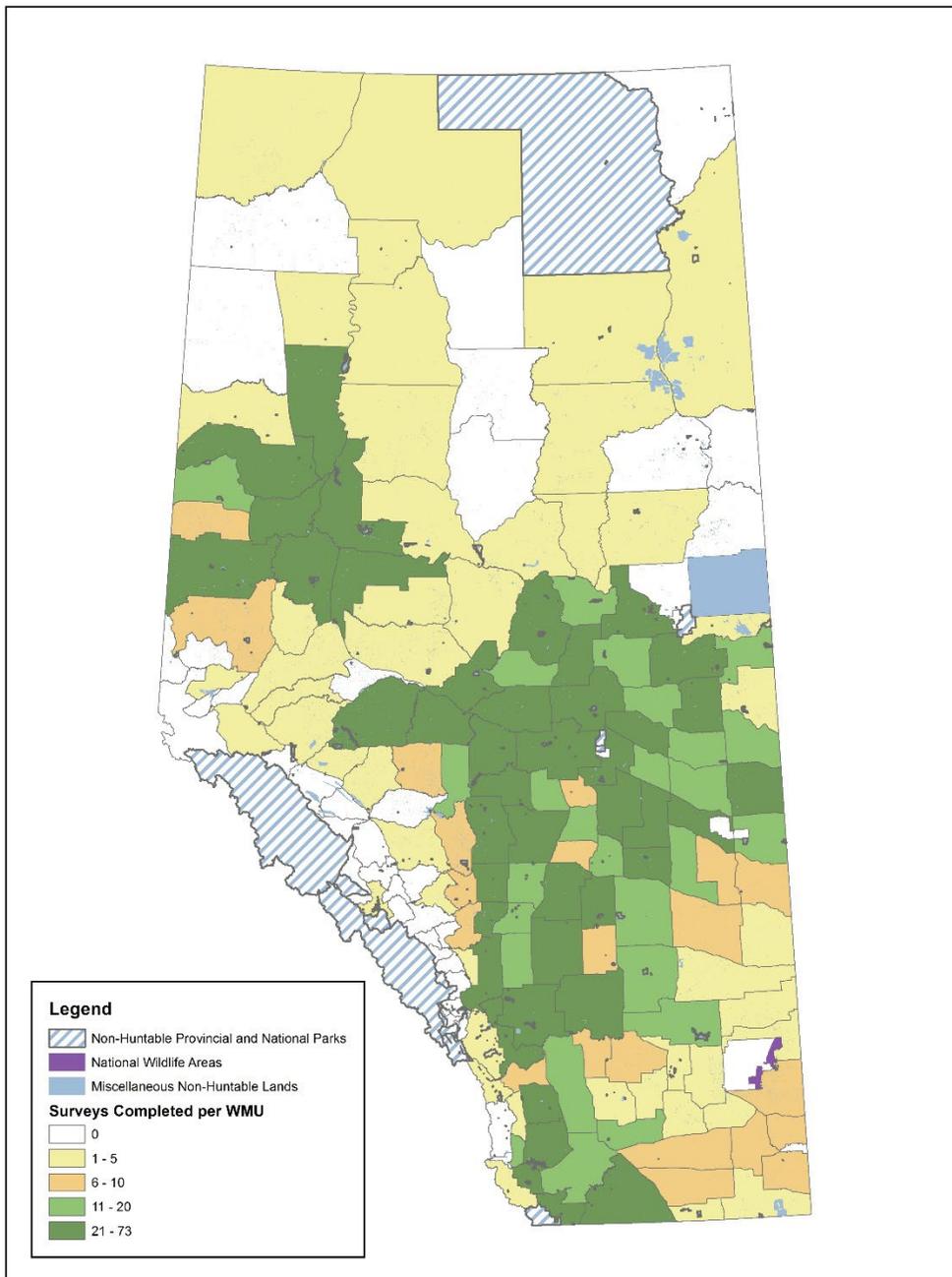


Figure 1. Survey responses were received from across the province, representing landowners in 60 different municipalities.

The most common concerns among landowners who completed our survey were issues associated with trespassing. Safety, property damage, and poaching were also common concerns.

Increased crop and feed damage from elk and deer was the most common issue identified as something that might motivate a landowner to allow hunting (if they do not currently) or to allow more hunting (if they do currently). Programs aimed at youth and disabled hunters were the second and third most identified motivating factor. However, 61% of those who do not currently allow hunting said that nothing would motivate them to begin allowing hunting on their land. The availability of tools, such as online reservation systems or sign-in kiosks, which can reduce the need to interact directly with hunters, was the least motivating factor identified by survey respondents.

When landowners who allow hunting were asked about the types of people who they give access to, family, close friends, and neighbours were the most identified. Members of the public who have built a relationship with the landowner were the next most common type of hunter allowed. If a new member of the public approached a landowner asking for hunting permission, they would most likely be granted access if they were from the area. Most landowners who responded that they allow hunting indicated that they would allow foot access. Motorized access (e.g., all-terrain and off-highway vehicles), horse, and bicycle access were less commonly allowed.

The top three reasons that landowners gave for what they thought were appropriate reasons to hunt on their land were to feed your family, to spend time with friends and family, and to get exercise and fresh air. One third (33%) of landowners who allow hunting said that access may be influenced by the sex of what the hunter was looking for (e.g., buck vs. doe). One third (32%) said that access may be influenced by the species that a hunter was looking for (e.g., deer vs. moose vs. geese). One half (51%) of the respondents who allow hunting indicated that they are not influenced by the sex or species that a hunter is interested in.

Statistical analysis indicated that the type of land owned by a survey respondent was a good predictor of whether they allowed hunting on their land. The greater the percent of their land in non-agricultural use, the less likely they would allow hunting in general or members of the public to hunt.

Conclusion

More landowners were willing to participate in our voluntary online survey than we expected. These landowners, from across the province, were keen to share their thoughts on allowing hunting access on private land. Two primary themes appear to be associated with the data. First, many landowners are open to allowing hunting, but they are selective in who they allow; and they have concerns about trespassing, property damage, and a lack of respect. Second, agricultural producers play a key role in providing hunting access in Alberta. Land used for purposes other than agriculture have lower odds of being made available for hunting. Conversion of agricultural land to rural residential and recreational land may pose challenges for maintaining hunting access in the future. Therefore, this survey has highlighted the value of programs that support sustainable agriculture.

During the coming year, we will work with our academic partners toward publishing these results more fully in a scientific journal that will be openly available for everyone.

Communications

- Four infographics were produced to share survey results with the public. These infographics were also shared with survey respondents who had indicated that they were interested in hearing about the results of the survey.

Literature Cited

- Larson, L.R., D.J. Decker, R.C. Stedman, W.F. Siemer, M.S. Baumer, and J.W. Enck. 2013. *Hunter Recruitment and Retention in New York: A Framework for Research and Action*. Human Dimensions Research Unit Series Publication 13-04. Department of Natural Resources. Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, United States of America. 72pp.
- Ryan, E.L., and B.R. Shaw. 2011. Improving Hunter Recruitment and Retention. *Human Dimensions of Wildlife* 16(5): 311-317.
- Sillars, J. 2020. *Hunting is Declining across North America—except in Alberta*. Here’s How. MeatEater, Inc. Available online at www.themeateater.com/hunt/whitetail-deer/hunting-is-declining-across-north-america-except-in-alberta-heres-how (accessed February 11, 2022).

Photos

Not applicable