



Farmers thanked for Natural Advantage project support

Project success a significant symbol of growing interest in on-farm habitat

Sixty-two Alberta farmers and ranchers have become a lot more familiar with habitat and biodiversity on their operations over the past year. In the process, they may have opened a door to a new level of interest in on-farm wildlife habitat.

These producers participated in Natural Advantage, a pilot project focusing on habitat analysis and management on farms and ranches.

"When we started this project, we didn't expect it to attract so much interest so quickly," says Kim Schmitt, project director. "But that's what happened. What we've learned sets the stage for this effort to be considered as a program worthy of 'scaling up' to meet what we see as a growing market demand."

Schmitt says the results speak first and foremost to the willingness of producers to look at the attributes of their operations in a new way. "It is also a good indication that the program design and delivery was on track in many ways."



A final report for the pilot project has just been completed, says Schmitt. Here's a snapshot.

PROGRAM GOALS

"Although more and more producers today have a sense of the role that biodiversity and wildlife habitat plays in farm production, aesthetics, and even resale value, not all of them know what to do to maintain or get the most value from their habitat assets," says Schmitt, noting that on-farm management practices can have a significant impact on habitat conditions.

The Natural Advantage program, which was managed by Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC) with funding provided by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's Greencover Canada Program, was designed to 1) help producers develop a more solid technical foundation on which to build progress, and 2) link producers to the resources that could help them make changes identified in the process.

As part of its development, those responsible for designing the Natural Advantage program set out to meet three key goals: to develop an on-farm habitat and biodiversity planning process along with supporting communications and products; test the service on at least 60 farm operations; and issue a final report summarizing the experience.

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Natural Advantage by the numbers

Number of farms participating – 62

Total number of acres assessed – 90,398

Eco-regions reviewed

- Prairie – 15
- Central Parklands – 32
- Peace Parkland – 5
- Boreal Transition – 7
- Foothills – 3

Farm type

- Grain – 10
- Hobby – 9
- Ranch – 21
- Mixed – 22

Number involved in cattle grazing – 69%

Farm size

- Small – 31 (< 4 quarters)
- Medium – 16 (4-10 quarters)
- Large – 15 (> 10 quarters)



"The fact that nearly 100 producers asked to participate in the program is strong evidence we were on the right track with these goals," says Schmitt.

PROCESS

In many ways, the Natural Advantage program was a natural extension of the Environmental Farm Plan (EFP) program for many producers. The EFP creates significant awareness and interest about the environment and the Natural Advantage process digs down into the habitat and biodiversity component of the on-farm environment.

First, trained biologists from DUC analyzed and classified habitat on the property. This process was followed by a consultation with the landowner to identify opportunities. The final product for producers was a comprehensive written report based on the knowledge gathered, including resource materials and contact information to assist with implementing the report's recommendations.

The habitat classification process was rooted in a rapid visual-based system that employed geographical information system (GIS) mapping and aerial photography.

"The goal was to develop a classification system that would be capable of assessing the major habitat types found on farms and ranches throughout Alberta," says Schmitt. "We wanted it to be a process that was relatively quick, objective, and most importantly, one that would result in valuable data our clients could understand and relate to intuitively. Overall, the classification system served the intended function."

COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING

The Natural Advantage project was designed as a call to action to Alberta producers, one that required capturing the hearts and minds of the industry. Natural Advantage's communication efforts were designed with a twofold purpose in mind, says Schmitt: to create awareness of the program in the industry and to spur interest among individual producers.

"A variety of media tools, including articles, news releases and newsletters were developed for this purpose," he says. "We also promoted

the program directly to various representatives of the EFP program in Alberta, which served as a valuable tool for spreading awareness of the project. The response from media and our stakeholders was gratifying."

COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCE

It's one thing to deal with people individually, but in this case collective experience played a particular role, says Schmitt. Response to the project, which was delivered on a limited first-to-apply, first-to-be-served basis, was strong and immediate. Ultimately, the program maxed out at 62 farms representing over 90,000 acres throughout Alberta.

"Together, these clients represented the broad range of farm sizes, farm types, and geographical challenges found throughout the province," says Schmitt. "What's more, the majority of responses indicated that clients were most impressed with the information and professionalism of the final personal report, with several saying that it exceeded their expectations.

"Not surprisingly, clients also liked the fact the service was free, but they also felt that the on-farm visits and dialogue were very beneficial aspects. The opportunity to recover costs for projects emerging from the on-farm habitat plan through the Canada-Alberta Farm Stewardship Program (CAFSP) was frequently identified as an incentive for taking action."

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Natural Advantage also served as a learning experience for DUC and its partners as to how the program could be improved.

"The feedback we received from our clients will no doubt play a key role in any efforts to develop a more permanent on-farm habitat analysis program," says Schmitt.

Key recommendations from clients included:

- Simplifying the classification system for clarity.
- Improving communications between all linked agencies and organizations.
- Putting in place a single call centre to improve the efficiency of program delivery.
- Training program biologists in all aspects of the program.
- Monitoring to measure the success of client efforts.

TOWARDS THE FUTURE

The Natural Advantage program strongly suggests there is a growing interest in protecting and enhancing on-farm wildlife habitat in Alberta, says Schmitt.

"We are confident that what we have learned from this experience will serve as an anchor for the next generation of on-farm habitat sustainability in the province," he says.



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Measuring success

A final step in the Natural Advantage pilot program is a survey-based assessment of the program. Ducks Unlimited Canada has asked Calgary-based research firm Praxis Group to conduct the survey of project participants to gain candid insight into the DUC initiative and to generate some useful information on how to adapt this or similar programs in the future.

There are four parts to the brief telephone survey. First is to find out what motivated participants to get involved in the program; second, their reaction on the initial meeting with program biologists will be gauged. The survey will then ask about the final report – to see what participants liked, and what changes they would like to see. And finally, participants will be asked how they plan to use their report, and what shape they'd like the program to take in the future.



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