



New focus on wildlife habitat value

An innovative pilot project gives producers a fresh perspective on habitat

A new initiative for Alberta will help farmers and ranchers in the province build a comprehensive habitat plan for their operations. In the process, it will also offer them an opportunity to build a greater understanding of the diversity of wildlife habitat on their land and how it can be integrated into a successful farming operation.

“Natural Advantage: The On-Farm Wildlife and Biodiversity Planning Service” is currently being offered free of charge to help farmers and ranchers develop plans to protect and manage wildlife habitat on their property. Under the guidance of Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC), the initial goal of the project is to work with up to 60-80 producers on farms of different sizes and geographical areas over the coming year.

There are a number of reasons for producers to become involved. Some wish to differentiate their farm operations by demonstrating high stewardship and sustainability standards. In other cases, the knowledge of the link between

aesthetics, diversity, wildlife habitat and land value are drivers. Others are taking action out of a sense of commitment to stewardship values and quality of life in general. Whatever the reason, the Natural Advantage initiative will add value by highlighting producers’ habitat assets.

RETHINKING WILDLIFE HABITAT

Natural Advantage is designed to help producers take a new look at the value and types of habitat on their farms and ranches. With the assistance of trained biologists from DUC, producers can systematically identify, map and classify wildlife habitat on their property and develop a personalized plan for conservation and improvement. Through this, producers have an opportunity to come to a new understanding of the connection between effective habitat management and successful, sustainable farming and quality of life benefits.

BUILDING A HABITAT PLAN

The process is designed to be a simple, straightforward one for producers.

(continued on page 2)



How producers can participate

Although well underway, there are still spaces available for producers interested in participating in the Natural Advantage program. In order to be considered, producers should contact Brett Boukall at 403-348-5258 or Jolene Hillson at 780-439-5145 as soon as possible. A letter of understanding will get the process started, with assessments completed over the summer and early fall.



Ducks Unlimited Canada

Canada

The first step is to get involved in the Environmental Farm Plan (EFP) program, a free, confidential assessment of environmental strengths and risks on a farm operation. The next step is to sign a simple letter of understanding to start the habitat analysis component of the Natural Advantage process. A phone interview follows in which DUC biologists discuss the project with the participant.

From there, biologists will analyze and classify on-farm habitat using aerial photos and Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping. They then spend up to half a day meeting with the landowner on the farm to discuss their findings. Biologists also spend time completing field verification and a rapid assessment of the condition of the areas identified.

In the end, the producer will receive a comprehensive written report based on the data gathered, including resource materials and contact information to assist with the implementation of recommendations in the report.

MAJOR LONG-TERM IMPACT

Integrating this type of conservation management into farm operations can have significant environmental, social and economic advantages. In many cases, the value of land today is driven by aesthetics and diversity, including the quality of its wildlife habitat. Doing this today could well result in significant reward in short, mid and longer terms.

PARTNERS IN PROGRESS

Although habitat and biodiversity management plays a key role in the overall sustainability of a farm or ranch, it is ultimately part of a much larger effort. DUC's 65-year history as a supporting player in wetlands management means Natural Advantage is well positioned to become a larger effort. In turn, the goal is to build a network of conservation-minded farmers and ranchers that can help lead to the adoption of other beneficial management practices.



Funding support provided by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's Greencover Canada Program



A direct link to environmental farm planning

The Natural Advantage habitat plan is one of a number of beneficial management practices linked to the Environmental Farm Plan (EFP) program. A prerequisite to participation in the habitat plan, the EFP process begins by attending a half-day workshop in the local community in which the program is explained, followed by a second workshop.

The program is anchored by the EFP workbook, a simple guide which walks producers through a broad range of potential on-farm environmental improvements. One of these is the enhancement of wildlife habitat through the maintenance of riparian areas and restoration of wetlands.

Funding support available

Producers who complete an EFP are eligible for funding available through the Canada-Alberta Farm Stewardship Program (CAFSP). CAFSP offers up to \$50,000 per farm for a broad range of on-farm environmental improvements, including the enhancement of wildlife habitat.

Further information on the EFP program is available at the Alberta Environmental Farm Plan Company Web site at www.AlbertaEFP.com, or at the Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada Web site at www.agr.gc.ca. Information on CAFSP is available by calling the program office toll-free at 1-800-667-8567.



Ducks Unlimited Canada

Natural Advantage Office
No. 1, 5550 - 45 Street
Red Deer, AB T4N 1L1
Phone (403) 342-1314 Fax (403) 346-1211

Ducks Unlimited Canada

Provincial Office
#200, 10720 - 178 Street Edmonton, AB T5S 1J3
Phone (780) 489-2002 Fax (780) 489-1856
Toll Free 1-866-479-3825