



Strong feedback drives next generation of on-farm habitat planning service

Natural Advantage expands to a full-time program for Alberta farmers and ranchers seeking ways to integrate and protect wildlife habitat assets

After a successful pilot year, an innovative planning service for Alberta producers has been re-launched and expanded for 2008.

"Natural Advantage: The On-Farm Wildlife and Biodiversity Planning Service" has been designed for producers seeking a better understanding of the value of habitat and ways to capture its benefits. Launched in 2007 as a pilot project, the program quickly "sold out," with 62 farms and ranches representing over 90,000 acres throughout Alberta filling all available spots.

Central to the Natural Advantage process are the biologists who work directly with producers to deliver specific information about their on-farm habitat assets as well as recommendations on how to improve these important resources, explains program director Kim Schmitt of Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC). "Last year, a large

majority of our clients told us they were highly satisfied with the process and the biologists' recommendations, with several adding that both exceeded their expectations. This year, we intend to improve and grow that process."

With growing interest among agricultural producers to better understand their land resources, on-farm habitat planning has become one more tool to help producers manage their land resource, offers Schmitt. "For some habitat planning is about values and quality of life, while others may also have concrete business plans based on future land values, agri-tourism, eco-labeling or brand development focused on sustainability. Whatever the reason, the hope is that this initiative will add value by identifying and highlighting producers' habitat assets."

HOW FARMERS PARTICIPATE

Our goal is to have an even stronger year in 2008, says Schmitt. Currently accepting applications for this year's round of assessments, Natural Advantage has been expanded to reach more Alberta producers in more areas. "The number of biologists conducting assessments has increased from two to three in order to reach

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How to apply

Producers and other landowners interested in participating in Natural Advantage in 2008 should apply as soon as possible as there are a limited number of slots available, says Schmitt. Although details of this year's program are currently being finalized, Schmitt expects assessments to be completed over the summer and early fall of 2008 with most of the final reports delivered after the field season wraps up.

Producers with questions about participating in the program should contact DUC wildlife biologists Julie Pierce in Edmonton at (780) 930-1255, Sandy Elliott in Red Deer at (403) 872-5839, or Amber Robinson in Red Deer at (403) 342-1314.



the full range of farm sizes, operations and geographical regions throughout the province," adds Schmitt.

Natural Advantage is a simple process that does not require a major time commitment from producers, says Schmitt, and the format of the 2008 program will be similar to the one used in the pilot project.

Producer involvement starts by signing a simple letter of understanding which outlines in straightforward terms how the work is carried out. Biologists from DUC then analyze the habitat resources on the property, followed by a phone interview in which a biologist discusses the project with the participant.

From there, habitat is analyzed and classified using a visual-based system that employs aerial photography and Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping. Biologists then spend up to half a day meeting with the landowner to discuss their findings, also taking time to complete field verification and a rapid assessment of the condition of the areas identified. The final product for producers is a comprehensive written report based on the knowledge gathered, including



resource materials and contact information to assist with implementing the report's recommendations.

BUILDING PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS

The Natural Advantage program will continue to build on partnerships in the environmental area. Last year participation required the completion of an Environmental Farm Plan (EFP). "This year the EFP program is in transition but we are committed to working with the Alberta Environmental Farm Plan Company and its government partners until the next generation of on-farm environmental planning tools are introduced," says Schmitt.



Three new biologists for 2008 Natural Advantage season

Biologists with the Natural Advantage program offer clients technical expertise and links to resources to help producers get real, on-the-ground value from their wildlife habitat plans. For the 2008 season, Natural Advantage has hired three biologists to assist producers across Alberta in this process.

Julie Pierce. With a degree in Environmental and Conservation Sciences from the University of Alberta and several years of experience in the field of wildlife and rangeland conservation, Pierce believes the Natural Advantage program offers producers a valuable tool for habitat planning. "The process helps bring together an understanding of the farm's entire habitat resource and also identifies additional help for implementing stewardship actions," she says.

Sandy Elliott. Elliott, who holds a degree in Environmental Sciences from the University of Lethbridge, has worked in habitat and rangeland related positions with the Nature Conservancy of Canada, Bow River Irrigation District and others. She looks forward to working with producers to help them become aware of habitat resources and ways to integrate planned habitat management into their farm and ranch operations.

Amber Robinson. Robinson holds a Bachelor of Science with distinction from the University of Victoria, a Master of Science in Behavioural Ecology from the University of Manitoba, and has held several positions as a research biologist and educator. She believes the Natural Advantage program offers producers opportunities to learn the story of their wildlife habitat as well as means to help them achieve goals that can improve and capture the value of those resources.



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