

Land Conservation In Southern Alberta

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Habitat conservation is unquestionably made easier by having a variety of options or "tools" available for meeting specific needs. In southern Alberta, every farm, ranch and tract of land has a unique set of features and circumstances that need to be incorporated into a conservation plan. Agreements must be sensitive and adaptive to be successful for the land co-operator and to realize ecological goals. To address these complexities, conservation agencies will frequently partner with each other. These joint ventures make good business sense as mutual goals can be realized through the sharing of financial, staff and technical resources. This multi-faceted approach utilizing pooled versus individual resources also expands the number of options that can be considered by the landowner.

The urgency to protect sensitive areas from habitat loss is increased by the economic challenges currently facing most agriculture producers.

Potential for development in many areas, even those previously considered relatively remote, is now significant. Urban expansion in Alberta is also moving at an unprecedented pace. Fragmentation of habitat, including wetland loss, whether through the development of acreages, recreational properties or subdivisions is a complicated problem challenging land administrators, producers, wildlife managers, planners and conservation agencies.

Organizations such as Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC) understand that their conservation goals will only be realized by working harmoniously with both the agriculture and urban sectors. Recognizing this loss of habitat is likely to continue, a number of partnered, creative, and unique land conservation options are underway across southern Alberta.

An increasingly popular land

conservation tool in use by many organizations is the Conservation Easement (CE). By voluntarily relinquishing certain property rights in perpetuity such as prohibiting subdivision, no cultivation of native grassland and no draining of wetlands, a landowner might be compensated or be eligible to receive a tax benefit for the appraised value of those relinquished rights. The legal registration of the CE documents and protects the long-term interests of both the existing landowner and the conservation organization. This also ensures these stewardship wishes are carried forward with the land in perpetuity for any future landowners.

Each organization will have its own conservation easement criteria. DUC usually delivers two types of CE's. One is an "agriculture-use" CE, that allows for compatible agricultural uses of the land. Haying, grazing, selective timber harvesting and fence clearing is allowed, but breaking, cultivation, burning or conversion of upland or wetland lands is not allowed. The landowner remains responsible for land management. The other is a "no-agriculture use" CE where the land is managed primarily for waterfowl and wildlife habitat. Haying, grazing, cropping or timber harvest would be used to keep the habitat land in a robust and healthy state. In this case, DUC assumes responsibility for costs and management decisions.

Since each situation is unique, a full examination and discussion with DUC is imperative to ensure that the agreement is properly designed.

Landowners are also encouraged to seek legal and tax advice for determining the personal financial impact of granting this CE.

Land Trusts or Land Conservancies number in the thousands in the U.S.

In Canada there are relatively few, although more are being considered.

Each Trust has a specific

focus of activities and geographical area.

The soon to be launched Western Sky Land Trust Society is a good example of this and is a new and exciting initiative in southern Alberta. Their ambitious mandate is directed toward the establishment and conservation of integrated open or natural areas with an emphasis on agricultural, natural, heritage, scenic and recreational values. Conservation easements will be one of several program options. The geographic area includes the City of Calgary, Municipal District of Rocky View and Municipal District of Foothills. Other organizations include the Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC), the Southern Alberta Land Trust and the Foothills Land Trust.

The NCC and DUC have similar mandates in several areas of southern Alberta to assess and where possible, conserve critically important habitat. Both DUC and NCC are core program delivery partners for the Alberta North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP), an international program to restore waterfowl populations.

DUC and NCC may collaborate on various land conservation options in target areas that might include conservation easements, land purchase and other land management arrangements to ensure landscapes remain functional for both agriculture and wildlife. DUC might also provide livestock watering systems, grass seed, and restore wetlands that have been previously drained.

Now in their 67th year of operation, Canada's Conservation Company is staying the course with the mandate that, "DUC conserves, restores and manages wetlands and associated habitats for North America's waterfowl."

These habitats also benefit other wildlife and people."

For further information on any of DUC's programs, please contact the Calgary office at (403) 201-5577.