



natural advantage:

THE ON-FARM WILDLIFE AND
BIODIVERSITY PLANNING SERVICE

Producers and industry embrace Natural Advantage program

First two years of program lay the foundation for future on-farm habitat management efforts and more

The numbers tell the story of the success of the first two years of the Natural Advantage program. One hundred and fifty-seven farms and ranches participated in the on-farm wildlife and biodiversity planning service in 2007 and 2008. Together, these operations represent over 230,000 acres of agricultural land throughout Alberta that were assessed for habitat assets and opportunities to improve habitat areas.

"These numbers tell us several things," says program director Kim Schmitt. "They tell us that management of wildlife habitat is one of the fastest growing fields of environmental stewardship in the agricultural community today. They tell us that producers are coming to a better understanding of the role of these areas in their land and water management practices, product differentiation and possibly even land value. They also tell us that our program approach is on track and may well serve as a model for expanded efforts."

Perhaps most important, in a world where there is a greater disconnect and a growing tendency to think cynically of agricultural producers as exploiters of the land, Schmitt says the success of the Natural Advantage program is growing evidence that many producers have a passion

for stewardship of their natural resources that often exceeds potential for financial return. "It's an element that's hard to measure, but the recognition of this situation is a result of direct contact with hundreds of producers and direct engagement in helping them achieve their stewardship goals."

EMBRACED BY PRODUCERS


While the majority of program participants continue to be mixed operations and livestock producers, the Natural Advantage program has been an unqualified success in terms of participation and feedback. A great deal of this, says Schmitt, can be credited to the program's role as a facilitator for improvements many producers already want to make, but lack the stimulus and confidence that technical know-how and experience can provide.

"We see everywhere the success of coaching in business and personal life, everything from fitness training and health to business management. In many ways, Natural Advantage is the coaching system for producers wanting to fully integrate their lands' natural assets into the operation. The process offers them a clear foundation for practice improvement.

(continued on page 2)



A snapshot of the Natural Advantage process

- Participants sign a simple letter of understanding outlining the process.
- Biologists from Ducks Unlimited Canada analyze habitat resources on the property, and discuss the project with the client.
- Habitat is analyzed and classified using aerial photography, geographic information, and on-site observation.
- The final product for producers is a comprehensive written report, including resource materials and contact information to assist with implementing the report's recommendations. 

WATCH FOR 2009 NATURAL ADVANTAGE

For details on the upcoming season of the Natural Advantage on-farm wildlife and biodiversity planning service, contact Kim Schmitt at 403-342-1314, or Julie Pierce at 780-930-1255.



As participants record their goals and actions in their final reports, we're seeing a renewed or newfound sense of pride in the way they manage their farm's habitat areas."

STRONG INDUSTRY SUPPORT

The success of the Natural Advantage program is based in large part on the support of industry, says Schmitt. A notable example from the past year was an advisory session in which a panel representing a broad range of participants including industry, producers, science, research and others were offered the chance to provide feedback on the program. "In many ways, the input we received formed the basis for the 2008 season of Natural Advantage."

Natural Advantage has also received positive response from government in terms of how it can work in coordination with existing or in-development programs. "When we presented the results from the pilot program to key staff from Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development, the response we received indicated that they see Natural Advantage as complementary to Growing Forward's future initiatives around grazing management and integrated crop management," says Schmitt.


"Our new connection with Alberta's existing and expanding extension system opens up new opportunities for marketing and

communications with a much larger network of specialists dedicated to environmental stewardship."

REACHING OUT

From the very beginning, Natural Advantage has been driven by an adaptive management approach. This means it has been designed to be responsive to the needs of producers, related industry and science-based learning, says Schmitt. The past year has been a strong indicator of opportunities for future direction.

"It's been a year of communication and outreach. We've been getting several invitations to speak to watershed groups looking to use the Natural Advantage process as part of the stewardship component of the watershed planning process. It's a whole new and exciting market area for us. We've also been asked to speak to the Alberta Stewardship Network as well as several farm and rural community-based organizations."

The bottom line, says Schmitt, is that there is strong interest in the Natural Advantage service as well as room for growth. "We're working on a range of ideas which will go through the same advisory and planning process used to adjust the direction for the past year's efforts." 

Biologists tell the story of Natural Advantage success


Program biologists appreciate the growing interest in the value of wildlife habitat

Biologists with the Natural Advantage program are integral to the success of the service. They are the people who meet with the producers, assess their needs and work with them to find opportunities for progress. In many ways, they are the anchors of the client service component of Natural Advantage.

The 2008 season saw the hiring of three biologists: Julie Pierce, Sandy Elliott and Amber Robinson. The past year gave them a clear perspective of the potential of the program. Here are some examples.

Julie Pierce. "Most producers appreciate and enjoy nature. As landowners working and living closely with their environment, we find they like to share their experiences. The Natural Advantage program gives landowners more tools to maintain and enhance habitat so that they can continue to benefit from wildlife for years to come."

Sandy Elliott. "We know more producers are recognizing the value of natural habitat on their property. However, finances to fund improvements are always a consideration. We've been pleased with the commitment of producers to get started, even in a small way, if funding is an obstacle. It means more land is in a natural state with all the benefits that can bring landowners."

Amber Robinson. "A particularly rewarding project this past year was one in which a producer signed up to have one of his larger wetlands restored. He was getting 110 bales of hay off of that land, but when it's restored it will be three to four feet deep in water and will connect to a larger water body as well. It was rewarding to see the producer take that initiative based on the technical information in his Natural Advantage report." 

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