



The ALUS Basics

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Producers in the RM of Blanshard are giving more than just food and fibre to their community.

With the introduction of the new *ALUS: An Ecological Goods & Services Research Project ~ Manitoba*, farmers are also providing environmental benefits. The research project, commonly called ALUS (Alternative Land Use Services), provides an economic incentive for producers to become better landscape managers, and environmental sustainability is now part of production in the fields.

“Farmers are getting mixed messages. On one hand they hear about increasing efficiency and production, but then there’s also an environmental message about preserving trees and water. They’re facing the gun from both directions,” says Steve Hamm, ALUS program manager in the RM of Blanshard.

“Quite a few producers have said they’re pleased that society is recognizing their efforts to preserve these areas. Generally, the program has been well received.”

Through the ALUS program, producers are encouraged to enroll any ecologically sensitive, natural, wetland, or riparian areas. They are given a choice whether these lands are left in their natural state with no agricultural use, or maintained with some level of haying or grazing, for which the producer receives a variable per acre payment.

With a 74 percent participation rate in the first year, producer and RM of Blanshard councilor Roy Greer is hopeful the program will take off across the province and country.

“We see that producers can’t go on the way we’re going, and there won’t be any wildlife because the habitat won’t be there. ALUS is a phenomenal idea, and hopefully it’ll catch on across the province,” says Greer.

Greer calls the pilot project brilliance at work considering the many factors facing farmers today and hopes the small percentage of folks who didn’t sign up, will reconsider.

“I had some areas that were too hilly, and I knew I shouldn’t seed them, but I had little choice if I wanted to make some money on that section,” says Greer. “ALUS is giving me a small incentive, but one that’s enough for me to leave that land alone.

Over \$300,000 will be paid to the 162 enrolled landowners in the first year of the ALUS pilot project alone.

“When my cheque comes in I’ll go tease some of the folks who didn’t sign up, and take them for coffee,” says Greer, with a laugh.

RM of Blanshard producer Jon Crowson thinks the ALUS concept is a unique one, especially considering the challenges in geography throughout the RM of Blanshard, which has been named “Pothole Country” by locals.

“We haven’t seen anything like this program before. This deals with land we can’t produce crops on. I can’t see much on the down side. There’s nothing to lose, essentially,” says Crowson, estimating his cheque will be enough to cover a significant portion of his land taxes.

The project is expected to run for three years in the RM of Blanshard. Similar projects are being developed across Canada, with the goal of evaluating ALUS as a way to achieve national agri-environmental goals. With the belief that the majority of farmers are good land stewards, Crowson says he hopes things will fall into place for a long term program.

“It’s nice to see the wildlife, and everyone has a part to play in water stewardship, and this program deals with things that you try to take into account when producing,” says Crowson. “It’ll be interesting to see the outcome, and if the funding is there to be a continuous program. I think there’s interest from other municipalities and I’d certainly urge others to take a look at ALUS. I think producers are becoming more aware of land management.”

Crowson says, “It’s a whole different way of looking at farming, and it’s a growing movement.”

The ALUS research project receives its funding from the Advancing Canadian Agriculture & Agri-Food (ACAAF) program, the Delta Waterfowl Foundation, the Manitoba Rural Adaptation Council, Manitoba Agriculture, Food & Rural Initiatives (MAFRI), and the RM of Blanshard, with technical expertise provided by Manitoba Habitat Heritage Corporation, LSRCD, MAFRI, and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada - Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA). The ALUS concept was initially developed by Keystone Agricultural Producers (KAP). The project is being administered by the Manitoba Agricultural Services Corporation.