

Investing in Manitoba's Wetlands

By Maryjane McLaren

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While some farmers don't appreciate them, others – like Terry Espey – prefer to protect wetlands even if they're located on his farm.

Now farmers in the Rural Municipality of Blanshard have an opportunity to protect the wetlands and wildlife that call them home by enrolling their wetlands under a new pilot project, Alternative Land Use Services (ALUS).

“This ALUS project was a really good fit for me because I had started trying to do this sort of land rehabilitation stuff on my own,” says Espey. “I think it's great.”

Wetlands are natural features that hold spring-season, semi-permanent or permanent water. The majority of wetlands in the project area are marshes, but could also include land features like sloughs, bogs, or swamps, since their saturated soils are ideal for water-loving vegetation and wildlife.

While Espey says his motivation to help rebuild the wildlife habitat on his land was due to his own love for the environment, he hopes others will be inspired not only because of the financial incentives offered by the program, but also through an increased understanding of the benefits that wetlands can have for agriculture.

Of course it's not all about the money.

Robert Sopuck of Delta Waterfowl, an international conservation organization that has partnered on the ALUS project, says that the program helps farmers to take a fresh look at the waterfowl and wetlands that are on the property.

“Manitoba's private wetlands are very much threatened,” says Sopuck. “Technology is powerful and is lined up to intensify production on today's farms, so things that wouldn't have been possible to farm ten years ago now can be because of new technology and machinery.”

Efficiencies on the farm can often come at the expense of habitat. Larger equipment may mean that it's more economical for a farmer to fill in a wetland rather than farm around it. While it's difficult to pin down an exact number, numerous conservation groups – including Delta Waterfowl – are extremely concerned about the number of wetlands that have been lost, and the high cost to redevelop them. Waterfowl populations have been on a general decline as a result.

With ALUS, Sopuck says that farmers will be able to see wetlands and waterfowl as a resource that will add value to the farm because they have value to society.

“The wetlands create things that we call public goods, like clean water, flood protection, wildlife habitat, aquifer renewal,” says Sopuck. “These little bits of land do a lot for us, and that's pretty cool.”

The various microorganisms, plants, and soil in the wetlands help to filter the water that flows through, cleaning it as it goes. By holding back run-off water in the spring, wetlands also help to prevent flooding in larger bodies of water. They also help to recharge precious groundwater aquifers.

“At some point, groundwater had to come from the surface,” says Sopuck. “The wetlands are also important internationally because of the migratory birds and other species that live there,” says Sopuck.

The ALUS pilot project in the RM of Blanshard is just the first step, in the minds of Sopuck and Espey. If it becomes a national agricultural conservation program, Canada could show itself as a country that pays to protect the natural resources found on farmland.

“In terms of these programs, Canada has some real catching up to do,” says Sopuck. “The U.S. spends over \$5 billion dollars each year in federal funds on these sorts of programs because they’ve learned that farmers have the best opportunity to improve the environment.”

Sopuck hopes the RM of Blanshard is just the start.

“The project will help us to show the value of creating environmental benefits by investing public dollars on public land, and that will make it easier for governments to invest in ALUS,” says Sopuck. “We’re talking about conserving wetlands, buffering streams and creating wildlife abundance. We’re talking about a program that assists farmers and the environment. I think we have a winner here.”

Espey is confident that if the ALUS project goes national, many farmers would be happy with it.

“ALUS helps to change your mindset,” says Espey. “Now you stand back, look at your land, and say, *Sometimes things should just be left the way nature intended it.*”

“I would encourage government and farmers to continue to spread this program to the rest of Manitoba and Canada. I sincerely hope it continues,” says Espey.

The Manitoba pilot project was launched in 2005 and is expected to run for three years in the RM of Blanshard, located north-west of Brandon, Manitoba. Seventy-five percent of farmers and landowners in the RM voluntarily enrolled some of their wetlands, natural areas, riparian areas, and ecologically sensitive lands in the ALUS program in its first year for a per-acre payment ranging from \$5 to \$25 per year.

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.

For more information on ALUS in the RM of Blanshard, contact project manager Steve Hamm at (204) 566-2270 or lsrkd.gis@inetlinkwireless.ca