



Waterside Wonders: Protecting Riparian Areas with ALUS

By Maryjane McLaren

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The Alternative Land Use Services (ALUS) research project couldn't have come at a better time for producer Mark Gill. Gill, who farms in the RM of Blanshard, was debating making changes to some of his less-productive farmland when he heard about ALUS.

"I think it's a good program because for me, as a young farmer, I want to be able to improve my land," says Gill. "For people who are weighing what to do with their land, this gives farmers that extra incentive to help make the decision."

Through ALUS, producers can enroll lands that are ecologically sensitive, natural, wetland, or riparian. The registered lands are maintained or improved to provide some environmental benefits, for which the producer receives a per acre premium. On Gill's 4,100 acre operation, he's registered his riparian areas with ALUS, and will now receive roughly \$8,000 a year for taking the first step to protect all of the important ecological resources on his farm.

Melanie Dubois, senior riparian and biodiversity specialist with Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA), explains why riparian areas are important to the landscape, and the environmental benefits that they provide. These include trapping sediment, building and maintaining banks, storing water and energy, recharging ground water, filtering and buffering water, reducing and dissipating energy, maintaining biodiversity, and creating primary productivity.

"Riparian areas are pretty dynamic systems," said Dubois, explaining that a riparian area is considered the green zone around rivers, lakes, sloughs or creeks. "What we like to say is if your boots are dry you're in the upzone, if your boots are wet you're in the riparian zone and if your boots are full you're in the aquatic zone."

By naturally trapping the sediment or contaminants in water, the riparian area helps to build and maintain the riverbank, while also filtering the water that flows through it.

"A healthy riparian area balances erosion and trampling from humans, livestock, and floods," says Dubois. "Most riparian areas are just flood plains, but they serve a very distinct purpose. When water floods the river, the riparian area slows the water down, holds onto the riverbank and stores the energy and water."

Dubois is hopeful that farmers are ready to participate in programs like ALUS to protect and enhance these valuable waterside resources. For farmers who work near

riparian areas, Dubois is hopeful that the ALUS program will help them to recognize that there are options.

“I think it’s a matter of being proactive, and getting the education out there because there are options. ALUS is trying to do that,” says Dubois. “Finding a balance means everyone needs to have a hand in it.”

And Gill agrees that the ALUS program needs to work with farmers while also protecting the environment.

“I’ve had a lot of damage done on the farm by wildlife over the years, so if people want us to preserve wildlife, farmers should be paid to manage them,” says Gill. “If a program like this had come along 20 years ago, the countryside would look a lot different and we’d have a much healthier landscape.”

Dubois says, “I think producers are under pressure to make use of every single area to produce more. You can’t just say, ‘You can’t farm riparian areas.’ The riparian areas are at risk and, without a program like ALUS, we’re going to pay for it in the end with water quality.”

The Manitoba research 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 first year of the ALUS project, for a per-acre payment ranging from \$5 to \$25 per acre.

The ALUS research project receives its funding from the Advancing Canadian Agriculture & Agri-Food 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, the Little Saskatchewan River Conservation District, MAFRI, and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada - Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration. The ALUS concept was initially developed by Keystone Agricultural Producers and 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 lsr.cd.gis@inetlinkwireless.ca