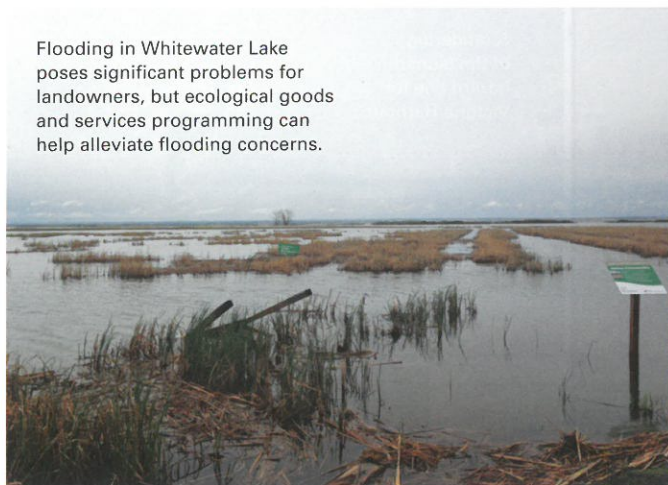


Credit: Stephanie Woltman

Flooding in Whitewater Lake poses significant problems for landowners, but ecological goods and services programming can help alleviate flooding concerns.



Public Benefits

The creation of an ecological goods and services program in Manitoba will put landowners front and centre. BY STEPHANIE WOLTMAN

THE MOST VALUABLE LAND in the Prairies is generally the land used for agricultural development, which unsurprisingly, also produces the most ecological benefits for the public. One challenge is to accurately distinguish a monetary value adequate enough to incent private landowners to produce these public benefits.

Ecological goods and services (EG&S) programming transforms the natural capital that exists on private land into functions that are beneficial for the public at large. The natural capital benefits produced include water purification, flood and drought protection, soil-erosion protection, climate regulation, maintenance of biodiversity, and habitat creation. The value of natural capital is one that is difficult to define and it is difficult to evaluate the current monetary benefits provided by an ecosystem. As part of my master's thesis project, I plan to categorize EG&S program components from across Canada and the United States and examine EG&S policy functions in Manitoba and Canada.

Whitewater Lake is located in Southwestern Manitoba, and as a lake with no natural outlet, it is a terminal basin in the watershed. Flooding of agricultural land around the lake's periphery has posed significant problems for surrounding landowners, but EG&S programming is a possible option to

alleviate flooding concerns in the area by providing incentives for landowners to retain water in the upper reaches of the watershed. The Whitewater Lake area currently has various EG&S programming in place and has implemented innovative concepts like conservation auction incentives to implement land purchases, conservation agreements, or beneficial management plans.

Landowners will respond to a questionnaire to indicate where they wish to see EG&S funding appropriated. EG&S programs can be delivered in a variety of approaches including governmental regulations, cross-compliance approaches, voluntary actions, environmental marketing, and additional programs which provide remuneration. Remuneration for EG&S can be provided to landowners through direct payments (one-time payments and annual payments), payments as part of a market transaction, and payments in the structure of tax credits.

The area is also looking at developing a municipal watershed fund—an approach that's been modelled successfully in British Columbia through its regional conservation fund. This type of fund requires all landowners to pay a fee based on the acreage of their land, which is then directed into a specific conservation fund. The money in the fund can be used to pay landowners undertaking

EG&S programming on their land. The development of this type of fund in the Whitewater Lake area will create a disincentive for landowners because it encourages landowners to avoid negative actions to their environment, allowing them to receive a larger return payment from the funding. Ideally, all landowners will pay into the fund, and the return will be provided to landowners who take actions to conserve or restore wetlands.

The Prairie pothole region in North America expands over 715,000 square kilometres of agricultural land, and the research to develop conservation incentives to preserve and restore wetlands is essential. The most successful policy solutions are developed at the grassroots level, and this project aims to develop an understanding of landowner preferences to guide the most efficient use of EG&S funding. Focusing on the Whitewater Lake area may deliver a valuable understanding of landowner perspectives, and this knowledge can hopefully be utilized across the region. **wc**



Stephanie Woltman is a Master of the Environment student in the Clayton H. Riddell Faculty of Environment, Earth and Resources at the University of Manitoba.