CONSERVATION

CONSERVATION PLANNING IS ABOUT MORE THAN THE ENVIRONMENT

ALUS project numbers continue to grow across the province

Ed Roodzant has found lower insect pressure in his fields next to the wetland. PHOTO: MATT MCINTOSH

BY MATT MCINTOSH
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Is it possible to grow better crops by removing specific areas from production? Some Ontario farmers participating in Alternative Land Use Services conservation programs think so.

They say they also see conservation projects as beneficial to the overall profitability of their farm business.

WHY IT MATTERS

On-farm conservation is expensive, but given the right partners, they can also bring ecological and business benefits to farmers.

ALUS Canada, a national charitable organization mobilizing private and publicly sourced funding to develop on-farm conservation projects, hosted a tour of several initiatives in Elgin County late this summer.

ALUS regional representatives said the projects highlighted on the tour offered examples of their efforts to change marginal or unprofitable farm acres into sustainable agricultural and wildlife spaces.

For some of the farmers participating in projects, the construction of more natural wildlife ecosystems on their farms has brought agronomic and soil health, as well as clear ecological benefits.

Erosion prevention

Ed Roodzant, a cash crop farmer from the area, says erosion control has been the main benefit of transforming a 3.5-acre creek-side section of his farm into a four-section native grass wetland. Much of Roodzant's converted land was previously pasture, with some sections used as a dirt-bike trail.

"We lost a little production land in order to make a straight line and incorporate a berm," says Roodzant. "Our (soil types) are all mixed. The corn definitely grows better on that side."

Andrew McCallum, another farmer participant, also cited erosion control as one of the main benefits of converting a seven-acre plot, a farm section comprising two small, enclosed fields between large gullies, to a grassland prairie ecosystem.

Erosion problems in the two fields were so severe to begin with, that McCallum says the decision to take the land out of production and use it to support their pheasant-hunting business with new grassland habitat was not difficult.

After installing drainage tile and laying filter cloth, gravel and recycled concrete to build up the edge of the field and create rock chutes for directed water flow, specifically in perimeter areas prone to washouts, his erosion problems have all but ceased.

"Financially. you don't make too much off the first 15 feet," says McCallum.

For Roodzant, the incorporation of a wetland habitat has also reduced insect damage to crops planted in adjacent fields. He attributes this to the wetland environment attracting and retaining insects that would otherwise forage in the field.

According to Aleksandra Dolezal, insect expert and masters student with the University of Guelph's Department of Integrated Biology, Roodzant's observation that his wetland system reduces pest-pressures in nearby crops follows some of the conclusions drawn in her research at other ALUS farm sites.

Dolezal says her research, conducted by randomly sampling areas of a corn field located next to another wetland project, shows natural wetland and grassland habitats "increase the abundance of beneficial insects on the farm. There is also evidence to suggest such environments are indeed acting as a trap, or more attractive living space, for harmful insects.

"The beneficial insects go deeper into the field rather than just staying on the perimeter," says Dolezal. "There's about half the crop damage you would have if you didn't have that area."

In a separate interview, Ian Grant, a farmer from Lambton County, says the ALUS projects on his farm have eliminated much of the damage caused by wildlife to his corn crops.

He says a grassland buffer barrier between his fields and the nearby river has greatly reduced beaver damage.

"We used to have beaver leaving the river to mow down our corn. The damage is much lower than it was," he says.

"The buffer was put on a floodplain. We're trying to stop some water runoff, which is good agronomic practice."

Casey Whitelock, eastern hub manager for ALUS, says the organization does not look to take good production land out of use. They generally look for underperforming growing areas.

Farmers who sign on to projects are also compensated for the time required to manage and maintain each project, on a per-acre basis.

Funding for ALUS comes from a range of sources, most significantly the W. Garfield Weston Foundation.

Ed Roodzant created a four section native grass wetland along a creek. PHOTO: MATT MCINTOSH

However, a common theme expressed during the tour of Elgin County ALUS sites was the necessity of securing project-specific funding partners.

The cost of starting and maintaining farm conservation projects can be arduous. Establishing a grassland prairie habitat can cost upwards of $500 per acre, for example.

ALUS representatives and farmer participants expressed gratitude for co-operation between ALUS Canada, Ducks Unlimited, farm organizations and regional conservation authorities.

"I don't care how rich you are, you can't do this yourself," says Vince Amlin, an Elgin County horse farmer and ALUS participant speaking during the tour.

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Since its initial inception in 2006, ALUS Canada has a presence in six provinces, with about 20,000 project acres and 1,000 farmer participants, says Bryan Gilvesy, chief executive officer of ALUS Canada and Norfolk County beef farmer.

ALUS organizers want to reach 75,000 acres in 30 communities over the next seven years.

Gilvesy says the organization hopes to expand beyond environmental stewardship to the point where ALUS farm projects can be used to generate data that can inform infrastructure decisions. An example can be found near Edmonton, where efforts are being made to measure the effectiveness of wetland areas in filtering municipal waterways.