



Growing Roots – ALUS' Regenerative Agriculture Pilot Program

Phase 1 – Final Report

Prepared for General Mills Inc.



April 2024

Cover Photo: ALUS national and community staff, partnership advisory committee (PAC) members, and Growing Roots participants visit a Growing Roots project. In contrast to the neighbours, this project utilized cover crops and ALUS AWWD's crimper-roller to maintain soil armour and living roots moving into the fall season.



Executive Summary

ALUS is an innovative **community-developed** and **farmer-delivered** program that produces, enhances, and maintains ecosystem services on agricultural lands. As of 2024, our network includes more than 1,600 farmers and ranchers who maintain ecosystem services on 46,000+ acres. By partnering directly with organizations in the rural communities that we serve, ALUS is uniquely positioned to deliver high impact results with local context and regional priorities at the forefront.

Growing interest in regenerative agriculture from producers, consumers, corporations, and governments heralded the launch of Growing Roots – ALUS’ Regenerative Agriculture Pilot Program in 2022. Since that time, ALUS has applied our adaptable model to pilot regenerative agriculture programming on the landscape in three established ALUS communities - ALUS Assiniboine West (ALUS AWWD), ALUS Seine Rat Roseau (ALUS SRRD), and ALUS Saskatchewan Assiniboine Project (ALUS ASAP).

We are approaching the end of the planned pilot phase of program delivery having achieved all key program milestones, developed and refined program resources and data management systems, and collected valuable feedback and lessons learned to inform future expansion and growth of Growing Roots. The program reach has extended well beyond the 113 participants who have established projects rooted in the principles of regenerative agriculture.

National program staff and community delivery partners have connected with hundreds of prairie farmers, partner organizations, and potential program funders at more than 45 events and outreach opportunities. Program staff, local PACs, and community agricultural leaders have been engaged and provided training, educational, and networking opportunities to foster a value chain transition to a more regenerative agriculture system in their communities. Program resources including peer-to-peer knowledge exchange have been developed and disseminated to support regenerative agriculture implementation both in program delivery communities as well as in neighbouring communities – those that deliver ALUS programming and beyond. Feedback from the Growing Roots network indicates that the ability to incorporate learning and experience in future project years continues to be a unique and invaluable program feature - a feature only possible due to the administrative and technical support offered by national and community program staff, farmer coaches, and the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC).

GMI’s continued support of Growing Roots boosts ALUS’ efforts to address local environmental challenges while working collaboratively with local stakeholders to regenerate landscapes and communities. We look forward to continuing our partnership to support a scalable and robust transition to a more regenerative agricultural system - rooted in local context and with a global impact.



Program Report

This report includes updates from Q3 and Q4 of program year two (October 2023 – March 2024). Growing Roots met all key milestones during the reporting period in accordance with the timeline included in the project proposal. These key milestones include:

October – December

- ✓ Implement projects
- ✓ Monitor and verify projects
- ✓ Hold local workshops and learning exchanges

January – March

- ✓ Collect community and participant feedback
- ✓ Hold local workshops and learning exchanges
- ✓ Prepare final pilot program report

ALUS met or exceeded all overall program targets within the timelines included in the project proposal:

Program Target	% Complete	Notes
80 farmers engaged in regenerative agriculture projects	144%	115 producers have enrolled in Growing Roots
120 projects enrolled	195%	234 projects representing more than 12,600 acres have enrolled in Growing Roots
Creation of regenerative agriculture Technical Advisory Committee (TAC)	100%	Six prairie producers with experience in regenerative agriculture have joined the TAC
Hiring program staff	100%	One Growing Roots Program Manager hired, three Community Coordinators hired or appointed
Hiring and training regenerative agriculture farmer coaches	100%	Farmer coaches have been hired in each community and training is ongoing, community delivery partners will continue to find and engage new potential farmer coaches

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Implementation of Projects Rooted in Regenerative Principles

The last of the fall projects wound up in Q3 with the arrival of winter on the prairies (**figure 1**). Participants from the 2022 cohort wrapped up project year 2 and participants from the 2023 cohort finished the first year of project implementation. In total, **115 participants** enrolled **234 projects** representing **more than 12,600 acres** in the first two years of the Growing Roots program, exceeding program targets. Participants identified a number of lessons learned ranging from adapting seeding strategies, managing weed control, and taking

advantage of timing/weather windows. The flexible nature of Growing Roots participant agreements allows each participant to apply these lessons learned to subsequent project years, with technical advice and support from Program Coordinators, farmer coaches, and the TAC. Program Coordinators will follow up with each participant prior to next spring to confirm project details and connect participants with relevant resources to support implementation.

Early in Q3, Program Coordinators finalized monitoring and verification at Growing Roots sites. In-person monitoring provides Coordinators the opportunity to meet with program participants in person to discuss project challenges and successes, lessons learned, and plans for project implementation the following year. Project monitoring in the second year of program delivery looked different from monitoring conducted in year one. As program staff and Coordinators deepen their own understanding of the principles of regenerative agriculture and what they look like on their local landscapes they moved from a simple and prescriptive “checklist” monitoring approach to a more holistic monitoring approach that relates to and evaluates against the principles of regenerative agriculture.



Figure 1. Growing Roots project sites.

Overall, participants identified as relatively new to regenerative agriculture, with more than 80% indicating that they had less than 5 years of previous experience. When surveyed about their motivations for applying to the program the top responses focused on soil health, with nearly 90% of respondents indicating that building soil health was a motivation for them (**figure 2**). Tailoring program outreach messaging to target the priorities

identified by current participants proved to be an effective engagement tool to recruit new participants in the region, a strategy that communities will continue to employ moving forward.

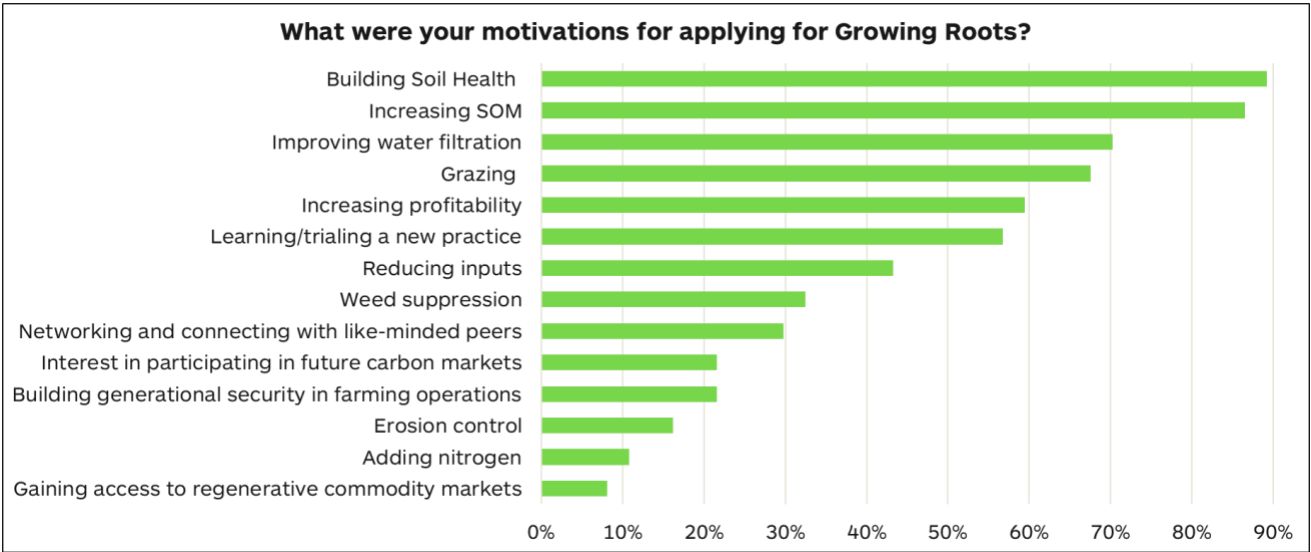


Figure 2. Participant survey results outlining individual motivations for applying to the Growing Roots program.

Information Transfer and Knowledge Sharing

Participants, farmer coaches, and program staff continue to take advantage of Regen Ag 101 online course enrollments that were donated by UnderstandingAG, a Growing Roots program partner. To date, 34 people have enrolled in the course through Growing Roots (**figure 3**) including program staff, PAC members, participants, and extended farm networks (farming partners, family members, farm employees, and student apprentices/interns, etc.).

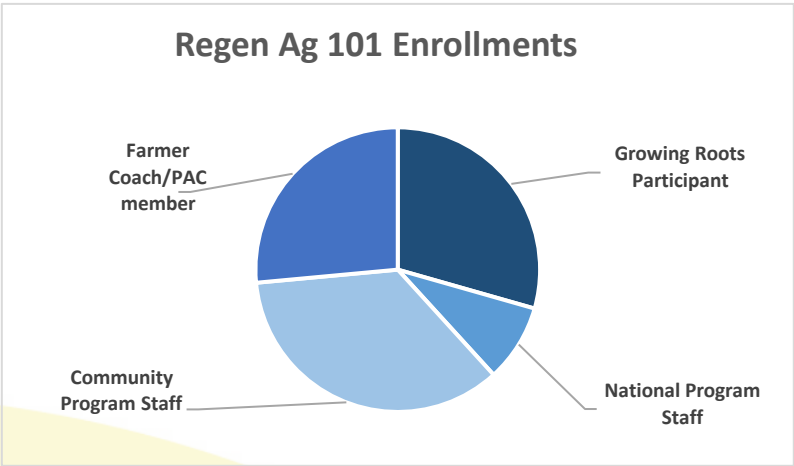


Figure 3. Breakdown of enrollments in UnderstandingAG’s Regen Ag 101 online course.

Peer to peer knowledge transfer *within* communities has been a program strength to date, with participants from the 2022 cohort indicating that they implemented lessons learned from friends, neighbours, and/or local events into the design of year 2 project. As the program continues to grow and network connections between communities strengthen, there have been a number of opportunities for knowledge transfer *between* delivery communities as well. Some examples from Q3 and Q4 included:

- Community Program Coordinators collaborated on a joint webinar event featuring Rick Clark, a well-known regenerative farmer who had been requested by a number of Growing Roots participants. More than 110 program participants, as well as staff and PAC members, tuned into the event with nearly 60 joining from a participant dinner and watch party hosted by ALUS ASAP.
- ALUS SRRD hosted their second annual “Regen Ag Days” event in March which featured a keynote presentation from one of ALUS AWWD’s Growing Roots participants. The Coordinator at ALUS SRRD had connected with the participant at ALUS’ annual Prairie Hub Field Conference and identified some of the strategies that he employed as being of particular interest to participants in SRRD.
- National program staff, TAC members, and Program Coordinators collaborated on a project evaluation rubric to apply lessons learned from two years of program delivery into a document to support PACs from new Growing Roots delivery communities as they evaluate their first regenerative agriculture projects.

Moving forward, facilitating knowledge exchange both within and between Growing Roots communities will continue to be a program focus. These efforts, a key feature of the ALUS model, leverage resources, build on existing infrastructure, and lower program implementation barriers to contribute to a meaningful and scalable landscape impact.

ALUS continues to refine our online database to capture regenerative agriculture project data efficiently and accurately. In Q3, ALUS national staff across functional groups and our database developer conducted a review of how the database has captured information from the first two years of program delivery and have begun planning for extensive updates to the current reporting system. The timeline for a new data reporting system for on-field regenerative agriculture projects is approximately one to two years and will incorporate feedback from all users including ALUS’ community reporting team, quantification team, operations team, and community Coordinators. These updates will ensure that ALUS continues to offer relevant and high-quality data reporting both internally and externally to funders, stakeholders, and the public.

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Building a Supportive and Interactive Community of Producers

Each delivery community continued to offer various events and engagement opportunities in their watersheds in Q3 and Q4:

- 4 October 2023, ALUS/ALUS AWWD, ALUS Prairie Hub Field Conference, 36 attendees
- 6 October 2023, ALUS AWWD, Fall Field Tour, 55 attendees
- 25 October 2023, ALUS SRRWD, Fall Cover Crop Tour, 20 attendees
- 13 November 2023, ALUS AWWD, MFGA Regen Ag Conference Booth, 280 attendees
- 13 November 2023, ALUS, Growing Roots Participant Lunch, 30 attendees
- 27 November 2023, ALUS SRRWD, Growing Roots Participant Lunch, 25 attendees
- 28 November 2023, ALUS AWWD/ALUS ASAP/ALUS SRRWD, Growing Roots Webinar with Rick Clark, 113 attendees
- 5 December 2023, ALUS SRRWD, MAW Conference Growing Roots presentation, 350 attendees
- 6 March 2024, ALUS SRRWD, Regen Ag Day, 82 attendees

In-person, community-based events continue to be one of the most effective strategies to engage and connect local producers, Growing Roots participants, community members, and representatives from a wide range of local organizations (**figure 4**). Program staff regularly receive feedback from event participants about the impact of seeing the principles of regenerative agriculture translated into projects on local landscapes – it is great to hear from an expert or producer with experience from another region but seeing projects with a local lens “proves that it can work here, too”. In addition to benefitting event participants, producers that host events and field tours indicate that they appreciate the opportunity to crowd source ideas and gather feedback from attendees, although inviting constructive criticism can be intimidating!



Figure 4. ALUS national and community staff, PAC members, and program participants gather at a Growing Roots site near Onanole, Manitoba for ALUS’ annual Hub Field Conference. This annual event allows participants, Coordinators, and PAC members to showcase projects in their region, connect with the wider ALUS network, and share successes and lessons learned. ALUS national staff are provided an opportunity to visit project sites in regions that they don’t have a chance to visit regularly.

In addition to events and outreach opportunities, Program Coordinators have employed several strategies to facilitate supportive and interactive networks of producers in their communities including WhatsApp chat groups and “open house” days at their office. As we approach the end of program delivery year 2, participants continue to highlight the networking and community building aspects as program strengths.

“It’s been an all-around great experience and paradigm shift for me. The friends and relationships alone which I have gained through this experience will last me a lifetime and have made the extra work and learning experiences worth it.”

– ALUS AWWD Growing Roots participant

Development of Program Resources and Guidelines

The annual Growing Roots participant survey was distributed in Q3 to capture experiences and feedback from program participants in both cohorts. Results from this survey will be used to develop materials and resources, inform future outreach and engagement efforts, and ensure that program offerings align with the needs of current and prospective participants. Some notable insights from this year’s participant survey include:

- **70% of respondents have not worked with ALUS before enrolling in Growing Roots.** Each of the three pilot communities have undertaken extensive outreach and are well established and well known in their region. These results suggest that we are engaging a new audience through Growing Roots (Figure 5A).
- **62% of respondents indicate that they would participate in future regenerative and “edge-of-field” programming with ALUS.** This included nearly 60% of participants who indicated they had not previously worked with ALUS in their community. These results suggest that, once a producer enters the ALUS network, they are interested in taking steps towards a more holistic approach that marries on-field management practices rooted in regenerative principles with stewardship of nature at the margins. Viewing the entire operation as a system is a more fulsome regenerative approach to land management and will provide greater benefit to the producer, the landscape, and the community over the long term (Figure 5B).
- **Participants are seeing results from their participation in Growing Roots.** Top reported outcomes to date included learning/trialing a new practice and networking and connecting with like-minded peers – both outcomes that are not prioritized in some other funding programs currently operating on the landscape. Both allow Growing Roots participants to apply lessons learned (their own and their peers’) to subsequent project years to determine the best fit for their individual operation. This approach is likely to lead to better outcomes on the landscape as opposed to a “one-off” approach that incentivizes an individual management change for a short period of time without investing in knowledge or understanding (Figure 5C).
- **Growing Roots participants are learning from a variety of sources.** Nearly 80% of respondents from the 2022 cohort indicated that they applied lessons learned during year 1 to their year 2 projects, with 78% of those indicating they picked up information from an event or workshop in their region. Community Program Coordinators meet with participants annually to confirm project details and update agreements. This is a uniquely powerful aspect of the community-developed ALUS model – having the flexibility to change project details based on learnings and the local administrative support to capture those changes annually provides participants with the opportunity to learn as they go (Figure 5D).

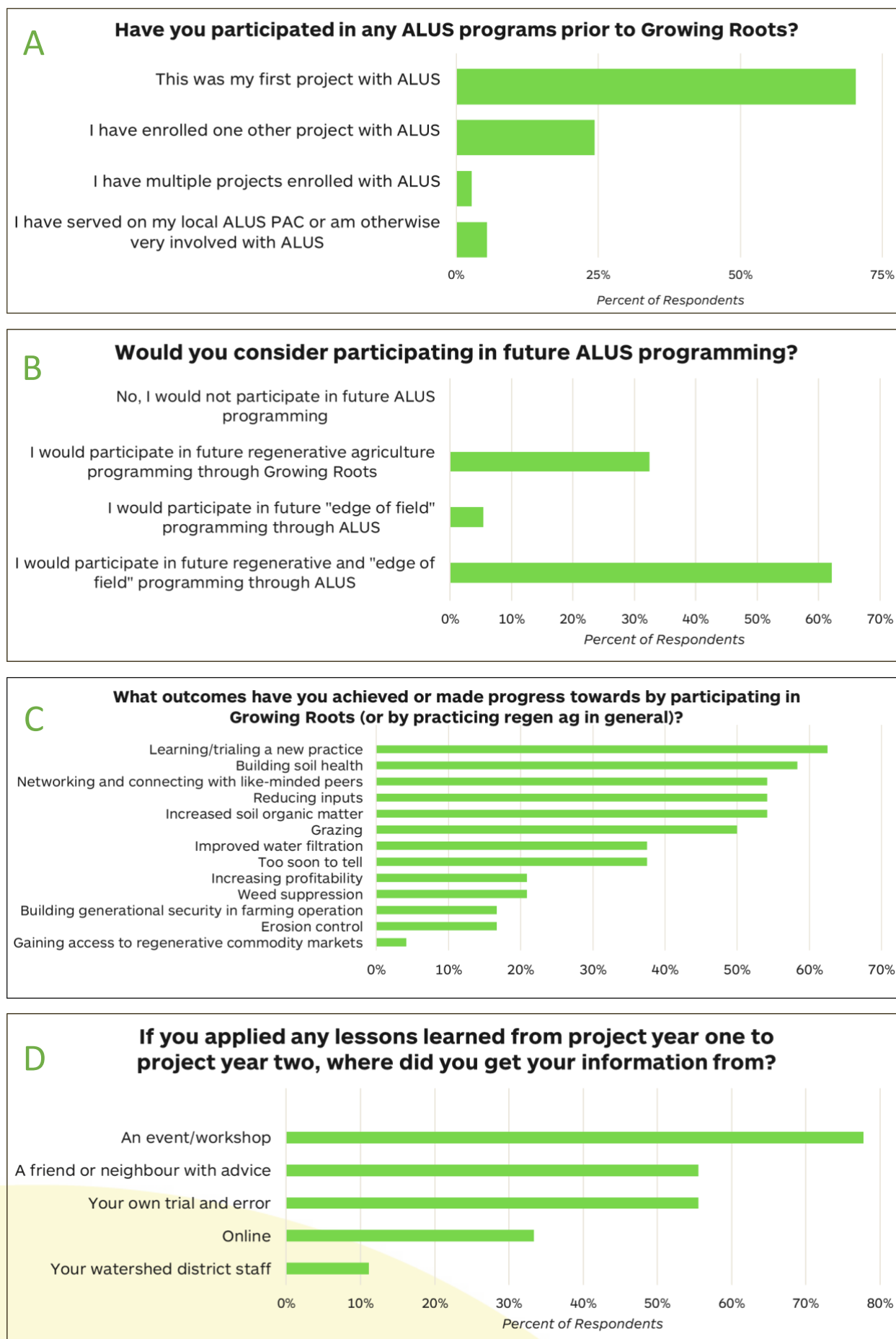


Figure 5 (A-D). Results from ALUS' annual Growing Roots participant survey.

Next Steps and A Look Ahead

ALUS is greatly appreciative of General Mills' continued support of Growing Roots and our national and community program staff are well positioned to move forward to the next phase of program delivery.

Growing Roots will expand geographically in Q1, with an additional delivery community joining the program in Saskatchewan. ALUS Saskatchewan Association of Watersheds (ALUS SAW) launched in 2023 in partnership with the Saskatchewan Association of Watersheds (SAW) serving as the legal entity. The model of ALUS program delivery through SAW is unique – SAW serves the entire province of Saskatchewan is launching ALUS regionally. The first ALUS SAW community has been established in the Carrot River watershed in east central Saskatchewan and serves the greater Melfort region. This community is uniquely positioned to deliver on Growing Roots as a number of current and prospective PAC members and participants have previously worked with General Mills through its existing prairie programming in the region. The ALUS SAW staff and PAC will be supported by ALUS national staff, current Growing Roots Coordinators, and the TAC as they begin program delivery in spring 2024.

In addition to onboarding ALUS SAW, ALUS national staff have committed to laying the groundwork for program expansion into new geographies over the next two years with the intention of onboarding additional communities when funding becomes available. **Figure 7** outlines the growth potential for Growing Roots, as outlined in ALUS' recent slow-steady expansion proposal (2023-10-18).

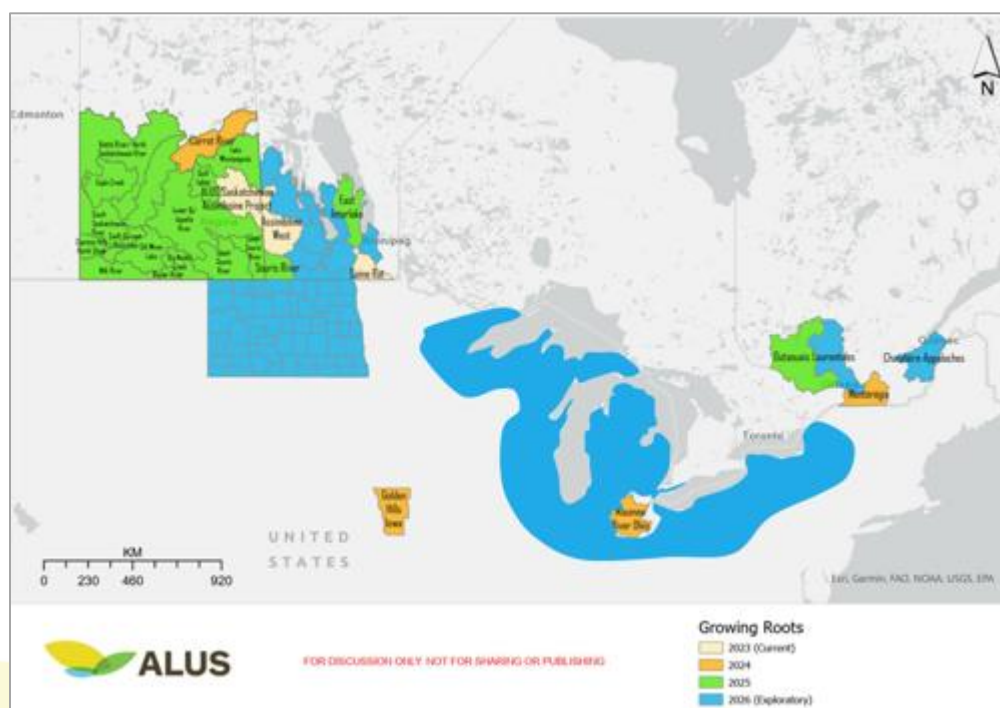


Figure 7. Potential for future Growing Roots program growth.

ALUS conducts an annual target projection exercise in Q3 with all delivery communities to determine their capacity and interest in delivering various ALUS programs. This year's target projection exercise asked Coordinators from across Canada to gauge PAC and community capacity and interest to deliver regenerative agriculture projects and programming. 74% of ALUS communities indicated that they would be interested in delivering regenerative agriculture programming now or in the future (**figure 8**). This included 10 of 14 communities in the East Hub (ON/QC), 4 of 5 communities in the Prairie Hub (SK/MB), 12 of 17 communities in the West Hub (AB), and 2 of 2 communities in the US Hub (US Hub includes one current and one future ALUS community).

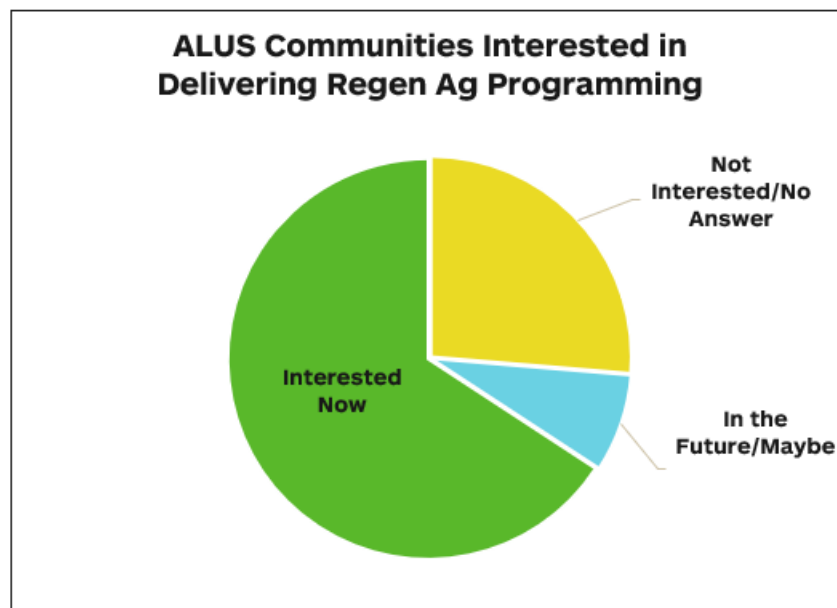


Figure 8. Results from ALUS' annual target projection exercise with current delivery communities.

With program infrastructure in place and communities keen to deliver, ALUS is well positioned to expand Growing Roots both geographically and in terms of impact on the landscape. Moving into Q1, ALUS has officially re-branded Growing Roots from a pilot program to a program and will be allocating additional national staff time towards our fundraising strategy to pursue additional funding support for the program. To date, 10 other funding sources have been engaged to support ALUS' regenerative programming.



THANK YOU!

ALUS would like to thank GMI for your continued support in working towards our collective goal of furthering regenerative agriculture as a vital climate and environmental solution across the prairies. We are looking forward to continuing our partnership through Growing Roots!