

Ducks Unlimited Canada (Kim Schmitt and Julie Pierce, Conservation Specialists)

Natural Advantage: The On-Farm Wildlife and Biodiversity Planning Service

The Natural Advantage Service was predicated on the belief that farm and ranch managers represent a “core opportunity” for a future where Alberta’s agricultural landscape would deliver a sustainable flow of key ecological services (ES) such as habitat, biodiversity and clean water.

The pilot objective was to design and test processes, products and an overall service to support and encourage on-farm efforts to conserve and restore habitat.

During the two year pilot, extension biologists systematically classified, assessed, digitally mapped and meaningfully discussed habitat stewardship with farm managers. Comprehensive planning reports and interviews were completed. A total of 158 farm/ranch enterprises involving over 234,000 acres of privately owned land were involved.

Third party evaluation revealed a high level of satisfaction with the program service and the responses to the process and final product were overwhelmingly positive.

The Natural Advantage pilot project, complete with industry focused communications and marketing, successful grassroots engagement, science-based measurement, facilitated goal establishment, accountability components, and technology, is seen as a process model that can be readily adopted by jurisdictions where strategic goals for both food production and biodiversity conservation exist.

A complete “system” combining behaviour-focused extension programming such as the Natural Advantage service, with financial incentives, is recommended to resource focused policy makers as a most likely means of assuring a sustained flow of ecological services on agricultural landscapes.

The pilot provided solid confirmation that a market of interested and willing private land managers exists.