

Cows and Fish: Setting Our Direction – 2011 to 2015



Who is Cows and Fish?

The Alberta Riparian Habitat Management Society (known as Cows and Fish) has worked with agricultural producers, landowners, communities, watershed groups, and resource managers since 1992 to improve water, riparian and natural resources. Riparian areas are the "green zones" of water-loving vegetation along streams, rivers, lakes, wetlands, and springs; when healthy, these areas provide many key ecological functions. Riparian areas are critical for providing fish and wildlife habitat, improving water quality, stabilising flows and storing water, reducing flood impacts, and creating primary production. Cows and Fish supports proactive, voluntary stewardship by building capacity for change. We create increased awareness, knowledge and skills and develop riparian management tools, motivating people to consider the changes necessary, and measuring the difference those changes make in landscape health. We have been a leader in establishing a widely accepted and utilised method for evaluating riparian health across many Canadian provinces. Specifically, Cows and Fish helps people recognise the importance of healthy ecosystems and how their personal actions influence ecological function, leading to increased use of management that benefits the landscape and riparian health.

Since 1992, we have spoken to nearly 55,000 people in about 2,200 activities (presentations, field days, tours), evaluated the riparian health of over 2,200 sites and worked with more than 60 local watershed and community stewardship groups. Each year, we reach 4,000-7,000 people in our extension activities. We work extensively with other conservation organisations, government departments and others on riparian ecology and management. As a result of formal, independent evaluations, we know that we have an impact, with our work changing both knowledge and action, altering management choices made on the ground.

What prompted the need for a strategic discussion?

It has been eight years since our last in-depth strategic discussion, and that prompted us to have a deeper look at where we are going. A lot has changed in those years, particularly with respect to funding, the public's knowledge and interest in the environment and water quality, the presence of new government approaches, policies and strategies and more community watershed stewardship groups.

Many other conservation and non-profit organisations have expanded their work with agricultural producers and landowners on riparian management. Often, these activities involve a much larger collaboration of organizations, because more groups have recognized the importance of including riparian areas in their work. Cows and Fish, and our long-term partnerships, have helped make riparian topics a higher priority.

Over the years, there has been an increase in interest and understanding of the relevance of riparian health work, as well as other demands and interest in our expertise, including more diverse rural audiences, youth and urban interest, and more public and general interest and concern in many riparian and water related issues. All these things change the social landscape we work in and deliver our program within. These changes led us to decide to review where we are at and where we are going.

In addition to our staff and the Society Board and members, we invited colleagues and friends to participate in our strategic review process, because we knew their perspectives would help us chart our course for the coming years.

To understand our current direction and vision, read on!

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Strategic Plan and Direction

Our Vision: *Healthy, functioning riparian areas for the benefit of all.*

Our Mission: *To promote healthy landscapes by fostering riparian stewardship.*



Means to achieve the Mission:

- Recognising and encouraging stewardship, which is comprised of awareness, ethics (informed choice) and action
- Educating and empowering land owners, managers and communities
- Monitoring and evaluating riparian health
- Working at a local watershed scale

Goal 1: *Awareness*

➤ *Increase understanding and appreciation of riparian functions, values and management.*

Objectives & Strategies:

1. Create awareness of the state of riparian health and the importance of riparian areas' ecological functions and benefits.
2. Develop and provide tools and knowledge to help landowners, managers and users positively impact riparian health and function.
3. Promote successful management options and tools to improve riparian health.
4. Demonstrate the health of riparian areas.



Goal 2: *Team Building*

- *Connect and build capacity of agricultural producers, landowners, community residents, and resource managers to form partnerships to address riparian and watershed issues.*



Objectives & Strategies:

1. Connect landowners, agricultural producers, and community residents to resource managers and technical experts to form local partnerships to address local riparian and watershed issues.
2. Support local-led initiatives to link landowners, land managers, and community members to technical and financial resources to identify and address riparian issues.

Goal 3: *Tool Building*

- *Develop and share tools that combine science and experience to support landowners, land managers and others improve riparian health, to continue as a Centre of Excellence.*

Objectives & Strategies:

1. Develop and share riparian management tools that combine and connect sound science and practical experience to help landowners, land managers and others improve riparian health.
2. Gather, develop and share successful riparian management strategies with diverse audiences.
3. Maintain Cows and Fish as a Centre of Excellence in riparian and watershed ecology, management and extension, by maintaining a library of resources, extensive expertise and experience, and forward thinking, creative ideas.
4. Share our knowledge, skills and experience to help other organisations and agencies increase their capacity to effectively promote sustainable natural resource management, including providing a trusted, arms-length delivery mechanism to achieve healthier landscapes.
5. Provide tools and monitoring that illustrate the urgency and need to take action.

Goal 4: *Community-based action*

- *Foster locally-led, voluntary action by landowners, communities and groups to improve riparian and watershed health.*

Objectives & Strategies:

1. Support locally led teams and community-based groups to identify issues, set priorities, establish timelines and set direction to initiate and address local riparian and watershed issues.
2. Foster and empower locally-led stewardship by providing awareness, tools, skills and building teams that helps landowners, communities and groups improve riparian and watershed health.
3. Empower landowners and local communities with a sense of their key role in maintaining and providing healthy, functioning riparian areas, within a watershed context.
4. Assist the community to develop and implement proactive, voluntary



solutions to maintain or restore riparian health, in collaboration with other resource organisations and managers.

5. Promote long-term success and commitment by providing consistency, long-term involvement and encouraging other resource organisations to do the same.

Goal 5: *Monitoring & Evaluation*

➤ *Monitor and report on riparian health status to act as a catalyst for action and to evaluate progress in achieving our vision of healthy riparian areas.*

Objectives & Strategies:

1. Provide annual update on overall provincial riparian health status
2. Use riparian health monitoring as an awareness tool and a call for action to improve riparian health.
3. In collaboration with individuals, agencies and watershed community groups, measure riparian health, to establish benchmarks for monitoring, to act as a catalyst for action, and then periodically, revisit sites to monitor and report on status and trends in riparian health.
4. Promote consistent use of riparian health assessment and inventory methods across Canada
5. Establish, implement and report on results of mechanisms in program design in order to evaluate program effectiveness on awareness, management action and riparian health and to increase effectiveness of other organisations.



Goal 6. *Organisational Values*

➤ *Maintain a respectful and respected, and financially stable professional organisation where staff and partners are acknowledged for their contributions, support core organisational values and are committed to achieving healthier landscapes.*

Objectives & Strategies - People:

1. Acknowledge staff and partners contributions internally and externally.
2. Provide annual opportunity for staff to review and reflect on personal and organisational progress and room for growth or improvement.
3. Provide ongoing professional development opportunities each year to expand expertise and offer growth opportunities to staff.
4. With staff and member's input, develop and maintain a core values and operating principles document.

Objectives & Strategies – Financial & Operational:

1. In order to increase diversity and stability in funding, successfully access one new funding source each year and strive for at least one multi-year commitment of funding each year.
2. Annually conduct informal review of organisational activities and actions to minimise negative ecological footprint, by considering program delivery and design, as well as daily operations.

Operating Principles

Process Oriented

1. Program delivery is most effective when delivered through the Cows and Fish Process (awareness, team building, tool building, community-based action and monitoring), and we will encourage other organisations to consider this approach.
2. Improved riparian health begins with basic awareness and education messages.
3. Recognise and support local community-based action and decision making are required to manage riparian areas and watersheds.

People and Community Focussed

1. Respect and empathise with the challenges facing landowners, managers and users in making changes to improve riparian health.
2. Acknowledge the inherent value of the pro-active, voluntary stewardship approach to addressing riparian and landscape issues.
3. Landowner, land manager and land user decisions and actions determine riparian health and the provision of ecological services.

Delivery Emphasis

1. “We go where we are invited”, meaning we generally determine what communities and riparian areas to work on by based on community-based interest and commitment, by invitations for us to participate.
2. The appropriate scale to work at is the local community, watershed level.
3. We will be realistic and honest about impacts to riparian health, without finger pointing or placing blame, focussing instead on good news stories and areas for improvement.
4. Our approach is non-regulatory and focuses on communication, awareness, and building relationships; it requires patience to effect results.

Scientific Strength

1. Riparian areas are more important to society and landscape health than their small land area would suggest, emphasising the need for our work in these areas.
2. We work hard to be experts on riparian areas and working effectively with communities and stewards, but always recognise there is more to learn.
3. Riparian health is a key metric to measure and monitor progress.

Practical Approach

1. Endeavour to showcase and support management changes that are practical, economical, restorative and sustainable.
2. Accomplish a lot with available resources.
3. In order to succeed, we must have staff, members and an organisation that continues to learn, grow and adapt.



What prompted the need for a strategic discussion? Some background and history.

It has been eight years since our last in-depth strategic discussion, and that prompted us to have a deeper look at what we are all about, and where we are going. A lot has changed in those eight years, particularly with respect to funding sources, the public's knowledge and interest in the environment and water quality protection, and presence of new societal and government approaches, policies and strategies, including Water for Life, the Landuse Framework (and associated regional plans), Watershed Planning and Advisory Councils, and the existence of many more watershed stewardship groups. All these things change the social landscape we work in and deliver our program within.

Changes in agricultural conservation related stewardship program delivery have also occurred and continue to evolve. These changes are partly driven by changes to the over-arching federal/provincial agriculture policy framework, which occurs approximately every 5 years. Currently, the federal/provincial program (Growing Forward Stewardship Plans) addresses farm level risks and practices, some of which are related to watershed issues at the farm level through cost shared projects. There are fewer community riparian stewardship grant dollars available to support group stewardship initiatives, although there may be more diverse small funding sources being accessed for this kind of financial support. The AESA (Alberta Environmentally Sustainable Agriculture) program, continues to evolve but still provides funding to support environmental programs in agriculture. Users of the program include Agricultural Service Boards, some agricultural organizations (such as forage associations) and Cows and Fish. Cows and Fish plays an important role supporting agricultural stewardship initiatives through AESA-funded riparian and grazing extension programs by working with local rural conservation and extension staff, who are the primary local agricultural conservation staff. In the past, many riparian demonstration sites and on the ground projects involved the county, municipal district or forage association, along with AESB (Agri-Environment Services Branch) formerly known as PFRA (Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration), with support from Cows and Fish. Currently, fewer demonstration type sites are being created, and many other conservation and non-profit organisations have noticeably expanded or have begun to work directly with agricultural producers on riparian management. Often, such activities and projects involve a much larger collaboration of organizations than five to ten years ago, because more groups have recognized the importance of including riparian areas in their work—Cows and Fish, and our long-term partnerships, have helped make riparian topics a higher priority for many organisations. These include a significantly expanded number of local watershed stewardship groups, and organisations such as Alberta Conservation Association, Nature Conservancy of Canada, Trout Unlimited Canada plus many others.

Over the past decade, a number of shifts have occurred in our funding and resources. In-kind support to our program has increased, with additional office spaces in partner locations (currently Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development, Alberta Beef Producers, Alberta Sustainable Resource Development) and continued support for program delivery (range health and plant community ecology expertise and training from Alberta Sustainable Resource Development Lands Division; GIS support from Agriculture and Agri-food Canada's Agri-Environment Services Branch) and accounting (Alberta Beef Producers). We still depend extensively upon grants from government sources, although we continue to work on diversifying our funding sources. Over the long-term, about one quarter of our funding has come from provincial government sources, while about a quarter has come from federal government sources. In recent years, federal grants have been absent or minimal, but provincial sources of funding have remained a vital and significant part of our funding, via grants from Alberta Sustainable Resource Development and Alberta Environment, as well as AESA funding via Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development. Conservation sources, municipalities (or other local groups), and industry sources (mostly livestock sector) have been consistently important over the years, each comprising about 10-15% of our long-term funding. To meet our overall funding needs, we have continued to diversify funding sources. Engaging new funders has led to additional funding from foundations, and part of that has been

possible because of collaborating with Trout Unlimited Canada. We are working toward charitable status to increase our ability to further attract and apply for new funding sources.

Over the years, there has been an increase in interest and understanding in the utility and application of riparian health work, as well as other demands and interest in our expertise not previously considered, especially more diverse rural audiences, youth and urban interest. In general, there is more public and general interest and concern in water related issues and thus interest in riparian conservation and management. In the past decade, we have reached 4,000 to 7,500 people each year, with 15-25% of those being agricultural producers and about the same proportion being youth.

Because of the changes in the past eight years, demand for our participation and involvement is very different than it was even a few years ago. For one thing, there are more urban requests, less producers at our extension activities, and fewer producer-focussed events in general, even though these are still a vital component of our work and where efforts are still needed. There is increased demand for committee work, input on strategic and planning documents, watershed councils, and other groups. There are also many more organisations and agencies working on riparian related topics, working on and in riparian and watersheds in many kinds of ways, building their own expertise and niches within these areas. These changes have not reduced demand but rather have increased and diversified the types of things we are asked to support, work on or contribute our expertise to.

The above observations are not an exhaustive list, but based these reflections, led us to decide now was a good time to review where we are at and where we are going. In addition to our staff and the Society Board and members, we invited other colleagues and friends to participate in the strategic review process, because we know their perspectives would have real value in helping us chart our course for the coming years.

