

THE FUTURE OF PRIVATE LAND CONSERVATION IN ALBERTA

5 WILL-BE'S, 5 MIGHT-BE'S, AND 5 MUST-BE'S

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THE CORVUS CENTRE FOR CONSERVATION POLICY

We're a **non-profit, research charity**

We focus on how **decision making** affects biodiversity and **nature conservation**

We do that by undertaking applied **research**, program **facilitation**, and **knowledge** mobilization.



MAKING PREDICTIONS

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I talk like this is my
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... but it's more like
this!



OUTLINE

“Will-be’s” – What we are on track for

“Might-be’s” – Some fairly clear forks in the road

“Must-be’s” – How we must direct the future



WILL-BE'S





WILL-BE'S

1. Rate of land changing hands will increase

“Changing hands” means sales, retirements,
passing on to heirs

1. Rate of land changing hands will increase

- **Change:** Average age of ag producers in AB increasing (from 50 to 55 over last twenty years)
- **Challenge:** Problems with conservation easement infractions peak with the 'third' owner; legal challenges will increase as earliest Alberta easements now 28 years old
- **Opportunity:** Conservation easements represent a vital succession planning tool; power of a tax receipt is highly under-rated

2. Conservation projects will be more complex

“Complex” does not mean more detailed (in fact they are less prescriptive than they were 28 years ago) – ‘use’ of the easement will become more complex

2. Conservation projects will be more complex

- **Change:** Will see more: “purchase, protect, re-sell”; “layered” CEs; temporary CEs for program-specific applications; multiple-funder CEs
- **Challenge:** Will see trend toward many small vs few large; easements will become smaller; from “important and easy” to “important but hard”
- **Opportunity:** Will see more sophistication in stewardship for the long term: pooled stewardship funds; communal defence funds; more certainty for landowners

3. Increased reliance on technology, digital data

Physical “technologies” and efficiencies will improve; relationships will change

3. Increased reliance on technology, digital data

- **Change:** Will see more technology in monitoring and data collection; drones and remote imagery; apps for data collection; GIS based conservation planning; AI
- **Challenge:** Remote data collection affects landowner/land trust relations; data 'privacy' versus 'transparency' will become contentious, especially when public funds involved
- **Opportunity:** May see (as other jurisdictions have) evolution from isolated planning (restricting data) to cooperative planning (sharing data)

4. Continued federal interest in private land conservation

Federal government's interest in private land conservation will increase; its programs will broaden and become ever more reliant on private land conservation

4. Continued federal interest in private land conservation

- **Change:** Increasing demand for private land conservation contributions to protected areas programs; species-specific conservation initiatives (SAR programs; temporary CEs)
- **Challenge:** Increasing influence through tax and funding programs (EcoGifts, NHCP); influencing accreditation (funding and directing creation of programs)
- **Opportunity:** Opportunities will continue (perhaps increase) through tax programs (EcoGifts), potential AgriGifts, and direct funding (NHCP, ag ecosystem services)

5. Accreditation will standardize land trust practices

Nationally there is a push underway to apply a formal 'accreditation' to land trusts based on their adherence to the long-existing Standards and Practices (S&Ps)

5. Accreditation will standardize land trust practices

- **Change:** Adherence to S&Ps will now be measured and accredited under the 'Performance Assurance' program of the Centre for Land Conservation
- **Challenge:** Land trust community is only indirectly involved in Performance Assurance effort; federal gov't is funding and directing the background research
- **Opportunity:** A properly implemented accreditation program will create guidance for land trusts, and increase confidence for landowners and funders

MIGHT-BE'S



1. Land trust work more integrated with municipalities

Land trusts may increasingly work with municipalities on conservation initiatives

1. Land trust work more integrated with municipalities

- **Change:** Could see more integrated and sophisticated relationships between land trusts and municipal gov'ts
- **Challenge:** Municipalities are not conservation organizations (potentially conflicting goals); conservation efforts can suffer in the struggle between politics and planning
- **Opportunity:** Represents a massively efficient way to achieve municipal conservation goals; municipalities can (do) support local land trusts; land trusts can 'consult' to municipalities; collaborative planning; collaborative program delivery

2. Conserved properties will catalyze associated prgrms

Privately-conserved properties will increasingly catalyze associated programs – what those are is the 'might-be'

2. Conserved properties will catalyze associated prgrms

- **Change:** Will increasingly see a privately-conserved property as a 'hub' or 'catalyst' of conservation activity, with a CE being just the beginning
- **Challenge:** Expectations will need to be managed; policy-nervous jurisdiction means innovation will lag; ease of ecological destruction will stunt offsetting
- **Opportunity:** Conserved properties will increasingly provide opportunities for conservation realty, mitigation banking, offsetting, layered easements, carbon and other markets

3. CEs may become more transactional versus altruistic

Grants of conservation easements may move to being more about the financial transaction than the conservation contribution

3. CEs may become more transactional versus altruistic

- **Change:** Could see design of easement programs becoming framed more around facilitating transactions than facilitating enduring conservation
- **Challenges:** CEs become temporary; programs measured in dollars and acres; funder goals trump land trust goals; financial goals trump conservation; specific element / activity eclipses broad conservation; compensation is discounted
- **Opportunity:** Specific-element easements (for a species, carbon, a woodlot) can be layered more easily; temporary CEs could become stepping stones to enduring conservation

4. May see more integration of envt and ag in CEs

Integration of agricultural values and environmental values within conservation agreements has been challenging, but new developments may better facilitate this

4. May see more integration of envt and ag in CEs

- **Change:** Could see more active integration of agricultural and environmental conservation values in CEs
- **Challenge:** Ag land conservation has only been a permissible CE purpose since 2009; most CE templates focus on environmental conservation values while crafting restrictions to support ag operations; CE support programs favour environment
- **Opportunity:** Alberta one of only 2 provinces with agriculture purposes for easements; Alberta has new Alberta Farmland Trust; national discussions continue on an Agri-Gifts program

5. AB may lead the nation in landowner-conservationists

Private land conservation approach in other provinces can emphasize “protecting land from landowners” vs “protecting land with landowners”

5. AB may lead the nation in landowner-conservationists

- **Change** (or lack thereof): Alberta's private land conservation will likely continue to favour use of CEs, which engages landowners as active partners
- **Challenges:** Other provinces appear to favour fee simple purchases, transfers to government; design of national programs can favour park-like conservation
- **Opportunity:** More conservation activity can occur with the same dollars; long-term stewardship on site; catalyzes community of stewards; retains economic activity



MUST-BE'S

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1. We have to remember the “Ecological middle class”

The “ecological middle class” refers to the extensive and vital – but not extraordinary – elements of healthy ecosystems

MUST-BE'S

1. We have to remember the “Ecological middle class”

- **Change:** Private land conservation must resist pressure to focus only on the most critically endangered, most limited, most unique elements of natural systems
- **Challenge:** Like educating only the top 20% of the class or treating only the most unhealthy 20% of patients, this ignores the system as a whole and creates “race to the bottom”
- **Opportunity:** As well as conserving ‘critical’ landscapes, private land conservation can conserve the “ecological middle class”: wildlife connectivity, buffer areas, hydrologic connectivity, aquifer recharge, natural areas

MUST-BE'S

2. Must engage with other's programs for land trusts

As private land conservation increasingly becomes seen as critical by other entities, they increasingly create oversight programs for land trusts

2. Must engage with other's programs for land trusts

- **Change:** This situation is not likely to change, so land trusts must be more actively engaged in the design and management of programs others create for land trusts
- **Challenge:** Not parties to the agreements; initiatives represent other's goals and interests; can result from funder advocacy; often modelled on *public* land conservation
- **Opportunity:** This active interest can help land trusts increase their credibility, stability, and accountability; funding may increase and diversify

3. Need for 'professional' awareness of land conservation

Lawyers, appraisers, accountants, financial advisors, estate planners, and other professionals have a low level of awareness of private land conservation

3. Need for 'professional' awareness of land conservation

- **Change:** Land trusts and landowner-conservationists must become more active in creating this awareness
- **Challenge:** These professionals are experts in their field, but private land conservation not part of their training / mindset; can represent a bottleneck for conservation projects
- **Opportunity:** Are relatively few professionals who work with landowner-conservationists, so can be targeted efficiently; if opportunities for activity in these fields increases, so do their business opportunities

4. More capacity is needed in private land conservation

Any potential increase in future private land conservation activity will directly correlate to increases in land trust capacity

4. More capacity is needed in private land conservation

- **Change:** Land trusts and their supporters will need to address the capacity gap proactively
- **Challenge:** Is tendency to view capacity as “dollars to secure land”, but real gap is personnel, support services, training, and creation of a professional work force; new requirements are not coming with new capacity support
- **Opportunity:** Alberta has a strong foundation to build from; funding sources are increasingly recognizing the capacity need; Alberta has several support organizations

5. Exceptional provincial support must continue

No other province has the level, history and committed provincial support for private land conservation that Alberta does

5. Exceptional provincial support must continue

- **Change:** As reliance on private land conservation to serve broader conservation goals continues to increase, so too must key support program
- **Challenge:** Provincial support via the Alberta Land Trust Grant Program may wane or cease if the underlying Land Stewardship Fund does not receive ongoing attention
- **Opportunity:** Alberta's government has a structure for and history of supporting land trusts, and exceptional working relationship with those groups; public support for land conservation appears to remain high

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