



Partner Perspectives

Independence and trust help landscape group make progress



Partner Perspective

FOOTHILLS LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT FORUM

"Operating under the umbrella of the Foothills Research Institute, which is very much a known entity, provides us with instant credibility."

Wayne Thorp,
Program Lead,
Foothills Landscape Management Forum

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Overview

Foothills Landscape Management Forum was created in 2005 to lead the way forward on ways to reduce the human "footprint" and improve habitat values for caribou on a million ha in west central Alberta. Today the government and industry partnership has grown significantly, along with the size of the landbase under study. Values of interest to the Forum now include two herds of woodland caribou, grizzly bear, Athabasca rainbow trout and overall watershed health.

Challenge

Wayne Thorp, Program Lead for the Forum, speaks of multiple high-level challenges that can only be tackled by a collaborative partnership focused on a common vision. First was the need to develop accurate and consistent data sets for the entire program area, to give all partners the same knowledge foundation. "Before this, the data resided in 15 different places, and was recorded in many different ways," Thorp says. Another layer of complexity is added by the frequent changes required, as roads are built or closed, and vegetation patterns evolve over time. Further, any plans developed by the Forum need to fit with the "top-down" regional plans now being created under the provincial Land Use Framework.

Solution

Operating under the umbrella of the Foothills Research Institute is the reason the Forum has been successful, Thorp says. It provides support in administration, accounting and Geographic Information Systems, which otherwise would be an onerous burden for a self-funded group. The GIS office has been instrumental in developing the accurate data set Forum partners require. "It has taken us five years to accomplish, but having this data has provided the most value," says Thorp. "It's the reason we have just taken on three new industry partners – we are expanding despite the economic downturn." The Institute also provides "instant credibility" and a sense of being independent of specific government and industry entities. "That is very important if you want to collaborate with 16 different companies," Thorp says. "One individual company could never do this on its own, because of trust issues and the need for some level of business confidentiality."

Results

Thorp lists the up-to-date and accurate dataset for access (roads and trails) as a prime benefit of the Forum's work. There's also been completion of an integrated access plan for primary corridors, and a test of a caribou mother-and-calf survival project – to prove a particular concept. The first-ever vegetation inventory of linear disturbances within one caribou herd's range will be completed this spring, providing information critical to habitat renewal and restoration planning. Future work will see a secondary road/pipeline plan, and a landscape level restoration plan. "This project is allowing the partners to find new ways to balance human and landscape values through responsible management and a planned approach, rather than an ad-hoc disposition-by-disposition approach," Thorp says. "It's an approach that could well be replicated elsewhere."

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