

RM at the heart of a unique environmental partnership

By Keystone Agricultural Producers

The RM of Blanshard is home to two major communities and about 700 people, but may one day be known as the birthplace of a nation-wide agricultural conservation program. With the support of governments, farmers and a forward-thinking municipal council, this RM launched the first Alternative Land Use Services (ALUS) pilot project in Canada in 2005.

Since then, ALUS has provided an opportunity for farmers to evaluate their farms and become actively involved in identifying lands that create environmental benefits. A payment is then provided to farmers who have signed a contract to provide these services to the public.

Innovative leadership from farmers, a municipality, conservationists, and governments had moved ALUS forward to this stage. Evaluation is still under way, but results from the first two years are very promising.

Over 70% of eligible landowners in the RM participated in ALUS, a rate that is unheard of in any other conservation program in Canada. Of those that participated, about half had never participated in a conservation program before – which means that ALUS was successful in reaching a new audience. Those that participated signed contracts to maintain or enhance their environmentally significant acres, including wetlands, riparian buffers, grasslands or wooded areas, and other ecologically sensitive lands.

Part of the reason for these successes has been the involvement and leadership shown by local people. An ALUS project manager working through the Little Saskatchewan River Conservation District worked as the first point of contact for farmers. The municipal council was also strongly supportive of moving ALUS forward, and even invested money over the course of the three-year pilot project. **Roy Greer**, a local councillor and member of the project's management committee often explains that their commitment was an easy decision: Their \$120,000 share triggered nearly \$1 million of investment in the region over the course of the project.

The impact of the ALUS project in Blanshard is being closely watched by agricultural organizations, conservation groups, and governments across the country. Another pilot project is taking place in Norfolk County in Ontario, where demonstration farms are highlighting environmental services that could be part of a full ALUS program. The government of Prince Edward Island recently announced a province-wide ALUS program that will help them to reach their environmental goals. Other pilot projects are also under development in Saskatchewan and Alberta, all based on unique local partnerships.

The ALUS research project receives its funding from the Advancing Canadian Agriculture & Agri-Food program, Manitoba Agriculture, Food & Rural Initiatives (MAFRI), the Delta Waterfowl Foundation, the Manitoba Rural Adaptation Council,



(L-R) MAFRI Minister Rosann Wowchuk, KAP President Ian Wishart, and Delta Waterfowl VP Robert Sopuck participated in the ALUS tour in the RM of Blanshard.

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and the RM of Blanshard, with technical expertise provided by Manitoba Habitat Heritage Corporation, the Little Saskatchewan River Conservation District, MAFRI, and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada - Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration. The ALUS concept was initially developed by Keystone Agricultural Producers and is being administered by the Manitoba Agricultural Services Corporation.

For more information about ALUS, contact the KAP office at (204) 697-1140 or communications@kap.mb.ca. Information is also posted online at www.kap.mb.ca/alus.btm and www.deltawaterfowl.org/alus. 