

What to Do with Crop Areas that Won't Dry Up

Many farms have patches that use up resources but don't give much yield in return. These unprofitable areas are easy to recognize – soils are wet in the spring, fertilizer and seed get placed, but the crop drowns over the summer, equipment gets stuck at harvest. Many of these low spots are fairly productive in dry years, but now that we are getting consistent rains many low spots are costing you inputs and giving little in return. The County's ALUS program may be able to provide an alternative income from low, boggy areas that are consistently losing money.

Stop spending money on low spots and flooded areas that don't provide a return. Many low spots get the same fertilizer, seed, and weed control as upland areas in a field. When the areas are consistently drowned out, unharvestable or weedy you lose money every year. Maybe these areas would be better suited to perennial crops rather than annuals.

Non-farmed spaces can increase the crop yield for adjacent areas. There is growing evidence that natural areas can improve crop production in nearby areas. When you take unproductive crop acres and put them into hay or trees, you stop the need for input costs on these spots and give a home to pollinators and beneficial insects which can improve yields on remaining cropped areas. One of the more effective ways to manage gophers in Alberta cropland was found to be providing perennial stands and shelterbelts to give homes for weasels, who hunt the gophers in adjacent crop areas.

Flooded, unproductive patches often provide a source for weeds and crop diseases. Failed annual crops in low spots increase the risk of clubroot, kochia and other weeds and diseases. Compacted field entrances and wet low spots grow weak, susceptible crop plants at the same time as providing good conditions for fungal disease development, leaving them host patches for clubroot or fusarium. Weeds that thrive with low crop competition, like foxtail barley, take over and can move out into more productive areas. As a result, you not only have low crop production, but have higher weed and pest management costs. Putting these poor patches into perennial grass reduces weed and disease risk

A good option to stop the money drain may be to seed field entrances, erodible water runs, saline and wet patches to perennial forages or even trees. Stop pouring money into low spots that only give a return in dry years. ALUS can help. ALUS provides land rental payments to support improved riparian (the sometimes wet areas around sloughs or drained sloughs) area management, creation of pollinator and beneficial insect habitat, and wildlife habitat and nesting areas. ALUS payments on areas converted to perennials can help convert chronically unprofitable acres into spaces that actually help the farm.

As part of our Clubroot management program, the County of Vermilion River Agriculture Department and ALUS Vermilion River will work with area farmers to proactively manage clubroot on their farms. Farmers are encouraged to establish perennial grass at canola field entrances to provide a non-host place to remove soil from equipment and park equipment to

reduce soil and spore movement between fields. Farmers are further encouraged to seed water runoff channels to perennials to reduce the movement of clubroot spores through runoff. Finally, farmers are encouraged to consider seeding low lying/wet areas at higher risk of developing clubroot to a perennial stand to help manage clubroot.

These perennial areas, seeded to a diverse, easily managed grass/legume/forb stand, may qualify as ALUS Vermilion River projects. Participating landowners seeding canola field approaches to grass may be eligible for assistance with establishment costs from ALUS Vermilion River. Farmers seeding low, wet areas and grassing runoff channels, if approved, would be eligible for assistance with establishment costs and even land payments for ecosystem services provided, including carbon sequestration and pollinator habitat. Accepted ALUS projects receive an annual per acre payment based on provincial crop rental rates.

In addition, the County Agriculture Department can provide participating landowners with up to \$100 of a diverse blend of perennial grass/legume seed (enough to seed about 3 acres) in small quantities to match plot size, making it quick and easy to get involved. We can also provide access to a broadcast seeder to assist with establishment.

The goal for this program is to provide area farmers the opportunity to build on their proactive clubroot management program, improve clubroot management for both their operation and the county overall, and get some cash return on the seeded area.

For more information, contact Chris Elder, ALUS Coordinator at 780-853-7844 or Cathie Erichsen Arychuk, Director of Agriculture at 780-846-2244.

