

Unique wildlife area worth preserving

Conservation organizations strive to save 'largest working ranch' now for sale

BY HANNEKE BROOYMANS, THE EDMONTON JOURNAL MARCH 7, 2009

A coalition of conservation organizations is campaigning to preserve some of the richest wildlife habitat remaining in Strathcona County.

Golden Ranches, 600 hectares on the shores of Cooking Lake, is "a unique property," said Brad Fenson, habitat development co-ordinator for the Alberta Fish and Game Association.

"It's the largest working ranch left in the county of Strathcona."

Fenson said ranching goes hand-in-hand with good habitat, with its open pastures and woodlots maintained for windbreaks.

But the most striking feature of the property is its eight kilometres of shoreline, Fenson said.

"It's such a productive zone. Right along the shoreline itself you've got everything from ducks, to geese, to swans, to shorebirds. We saw moose and mule deer and coyotes. There were also ospreys out there."

The family who currently owns the land also wants to see the property remain intact and undisturbed, but did not wish to comment further on the project.

The Alberta Fish and Game Association has joined with six partners to try to buy the property, a deal that would cost almost \$13 million. Their partners are the Alberta Conservation Association, Ducks Unlimited, the Nature Conservancy of Canada, the Beaver Hills Initiative, the County of Strathcona, and the Edmonton and Area Land Trust.

"Unfortunately, with land values these days, not one organization can step up and be successful in purchasing something of this magnitude," Fenson said. "All of us have different directions, but we do have similar objectives."

For example, the property would be open to the public, he said.

"Working as a group we have a lot stronger chance of being successful in acquiring the ranch, but it also gives us a very strong management team in the future to come up with the people and resources that will be required to manage the property."

Strathcona County Coun. Glen Lawrence said the county likes the property's mix of natural areas, agricultural land, and house and shops. The county, with its high per capita number of horses, has

long wanted a spot for an equine facility where events such as show jumping and other types of horse shows could take place, he said.

An agricultural education group called Green Hectares could also offer various classes, such as enhanced agriculture and understanding livestock, said Lawrence, who grew up across the lake from Golden Ranches.

All of this could be done while still protecting the existing wildlife habitat, he said.

Fenson said the property is important regionally. It's a key parcel to tie together nearby Elk Island National Park, Blackfoot Grazing Reserve, and Ministik Lake Game Bird Reserve.

While conservation groups have raised a large amount of money for the project, they will need significant help from corporate Alberta, Fenson said.

Lawrence said they've been lobbying big industry in the county to see if companies are interested in raising their environmental profiles by getting involved.

Fenson recently gave a presentation to Alberta's Industrial Heartland Association.

"We've been working to introduce them to industry players," said Neil Shelly, the association's executive director.

"There are some new federal guidelines regarding green offsets and tax credits you can get by contributing to or giving other types of supports to these type of operations."

Shelly said industry players in the heartland realize environmental gains are going to be made in the county's southeast, and not in the county's north, where the heartland is located.

He's not sure how quickly companies might join the project.

"Things have changed quite a bit in the last year around here," Shelley said.

"But as developers move forward, maybe next year or the year after, as things start heating up again, you could have a lot of industrial operators looking for offset credits of this type. And companies, as well, are looking to be able to show people that they are balancing the environment with the economy."

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