

THINKING IN DECADES:

Stewardship for the long term

BY JENNIFER BLAIR
AF STAFF

Tom Towers grew up on stories of plenty and lack.

As a boy, his grandfather would tell him about a time when you could take a boat from the family farmstead into town — and in the next breath, about a time it was so dry, you could drop a crowbar down the cracks in the ground.

Those stories shaped the way the Towers family farms today.

“We thought we needed to keep all the water we could back and not let it all run into Piper Creek,” said Tom, who owns Tamara Ranch just south of Red Deer with wife Margaret.

“We just felt that we needed to do something different.”

That shift started in 1991 when the family scrapped the iron and the inputs of a conventional mixed farm for a more holistic approach.

“We’re very practical ranchers,” said Margaret. “When we first started doing this over 30 years ago and broke away from the traditional way of doing things, we recognized that we were spending more and more money on inputs.

“So my husband made the bold move of saying, ‘Well, we’re just going to not have machinery. We’re going to do everything with horses.’”

And that’s just what they did, feeding 300 cow-calf pairs with a horse and team. Before long, they converted their ranch into a multi-paddock forage-based operation, one of the first in central Alberta.

“We did it when the neighbours were looking at us from across the fence wondering what the heck we were up to,” said Margaret. “It’s a little hard not going with the crowd, but we persevered, and we noticed a lot of benefits.”

Not only did input costs drop, their vet bills nearly vanished. And in the process, their land has become healthier than the land around it.

“We recognized early on that, if you don’t have healthy soil, you don’t have a healthy grassland or vegetable or crop,” Margaret said.

“We know if we take care of the land, it takes care of us. Every little thing we do is connected to the bigger picture.”

Efforts recognized

The couple’s stewardship efforts were recently recognized by ALUS Canada, an innovative conservation program that promotes the idea of paying farmers for the eco-services they provide.

The Towers won the 2019 Dave Reid Award and \$10,000 in prize money. (Two other Alberta farm couples — Jerremie and Rita Clyde and Darren and Maria Smith — won the runner-up awards, worth \$1,500 and \$500 respectively.)

“We will continue to produce ecological services and be the change we envision in the world, one acre at a time,” Tom said at the award ceremony in Red Deer County earlier this month.

ALUS (short for Alternative Land



Margaret and Tom Towers have been on a different path for more than three decades. Today, three other families have joined them at Tamara Ranch — pictured in this 2015 photo with the Towers are Mike Kozlowski (left) and Blake and Angela Hall (with their then-infant son Hawksley). PHOTO: JENNIFER BLAIR



Jerremie Clyde and wife Rita have a lot on the go at Little Loaves Farm — livestock (including yaks), pasture, annual crops, perennials and woodlots. It’s all part of a “decades-long project” to make their operation sustainable and resilient. PHOTO: ALUS CANADA

Use Services) compensates farmers and ranchers for environmental enhancements on their land, both for up-front costs and ongoing maintenance of the land.

“We were embracing a lot of the ALUS principles before we were even part of the program,” said Margaret. “We’ve been pretty serious about this for a while, and we’re so happy to be associated with ALUS now.”

The Towers joined the program when it first came to Red Deer County in 2013, and since then, have been maintaining 45 acres of ALUS projects. This includes a new wetland, protected riparian zones full of native trees and shrubs and alternative watering systems for livestock.

“We see a lot of land that’s going backwards, and it’s sort of sad to see that in our time,” said Margaret. “So we felt that regenerating the land was important. Sustainability, we feel, isn’t going to move us forward. It’s the status quo.

“Regenerating the land is a step ahead of sustaining it.”

Sharing the vision

That work has not only paid off for their operation, but also for three other families.

Tamara Ranch is now home to Prairie Gold Pastured Meats (a grass-finished beef operation owned by Blake and Angela Hall), Steel Pony Farm (a vegetable CSA owned by Mike and MacKenzie Kozlowski), and Field to Fork (a

pasture-raised broiler chicken operation owned by Sven and Nicki Stave).

Tom credits that mix of livestock and cropping for the high-quality soil at the ranch.

“When you jerk all the livestock off the land and just go to monocropping, I think it’s a downhill slope,” said Tom. “You cannot build organic matter just growing canola.”

By creating diversity on their land through the crops they grow and the animals they raise, the four families have created an “oasis of green” that’s resilient against flooding, drought, and wildfire, while providing a healthy ecosystem for wildlife in the area.

“There’s a vibrancy to living in an ecosystem the way it’s supposed to be,” said Margaret.

“We have birds, we have bees, we have all kinds of wildlife wanting to come onto our land. And we’re just four miles from city limits.”

“‘Hug a tree’ isn’t just a bumper sticker,” Tom added. “There’s a lot of truth to that.”

A long-term investment

Jerremie and Rita Clyde share that philosophy on Little Loaves Farm.

The Clydes were market gardeners near Calgary before deciding to buy a quarter section near Sundre and make a go of mixed farming.

“We were pretty much starting from scratch,” said Jerremie. “But we felt blessed to have this quarter to look after, and we really wanted to increase shalom — that depth and breadth of life.”

The couple stumbled across ALUS when researching ways to improve the land, and through the program, they now manage native tree plantations, enhanced wetlands and riparian areas, wildlife-friendly cattle fencing and pollinator projects. Today, Little Loaves Farm has a diverse mix of livestock (including yaks), pasture, annual crops, and perennials, employing long term-rotations, companion planting and green mulch.

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“The ground, the pasture, the woodlots are all doing better,” said Jerremie. “There’s definitely some uptick in the depth and breadth of life. But this is probably a decades-long project.”

He sees these projects as a long-term investment in making the operation more resilient.

“Frankly, for a sustainable farm that’s drought-resistant, everything we do for pasture management, woodlot management and riparian health all matters,” he said.

“It helps you weather the storm. It’s just a more resilient business, and anything you can do to make your farm as a business more resilient is a good thing.”

More importantly, the projects have given the Clydes “a better awareness of the land.”

“After putting the ALUS projects in, we’re paying closer attention to everything,” said Jerremie.

“It has really increased our attention to the detail of the land. And because of that, if one of our kids decides to take over someday, it will be a different place for them than it was for us.”

A lasting legacy

Maria and Darren Smith have the same goal.

“We want to leave something better than we started with for our grandchildren,” said Maria. “That’s basically the whole reason behind everything we do on the farm.”

The couple, who own Good Land Farms in Parkland County, joined ALUS last year when they created a wetland with an enhanced riparian area on the edge of their cropland.

“Where we live, people have been clearing trees forever and making room for very large equip-



The stewardship efforts of Maria and Darren Smith are motivated by a desire to “leave something better” for their grandchildren. PHOTO: ALUS CANADA

ment,” said Darren. “We’re planting trees and putting fences up. We’re driving our neighbours crazy right now.”

As they learned more about the ALUS program, the Smiths saw a natural fit with their farming philosophy and the work they were already doing on their operation.

“We found there were a lot of different projects we were doing anyway where we could get help with some funding but also some really good ideas and support,” said Darren.

“The money is part of it. The ideas are another.”

For Maria, the financial support that ALUS offers is just “the icing on the cake.”

“It’s stuff that we would spend money on anyway,” she said. “Whatever funding we get, we just reinvest it in other projects.”

But compensating farmers for

taking land out of production is one of the key draws of the program, which pays farmers based on a fixed rate per acre.

“It’s great having a program that recognizes that,” said Darren.

“Everybody wants to do a good job and improve the environment. They just need encouragement sometimes.”

Creating community

And the monetary incentive “definitely helps,” said Tom.

“If there’s an area that you’re just breaking even on or losing money on, if you can put that into a wetland and get paid for it, then shoot, everybody wins,” he said.

“That’s why ALUS is so amazing. It’s bringing a practicality to it for farmers,” Margaret added.

“When you farm and ranch, it’s go, go, go. If you’re putting a crop in or taking a crop off or plowing

or haying or silaging, it’s just all-consuming. It’s your livelihood. It’s make-or-break-you.

“So you don’t have a lot of time to sit around thinking about ecosystems and all the good things you could be doing. You need somebody to bridge that gap — somebody to come along and say, ‘This is what you could do, and we can support you with that project.’ That’s what ALUS does.”

That project support has been invaluable on the Clydes’ operation as well.

“The amount of not just financial support but intellectual support and encouragement from ALUS made a huge difference,” said Jerremie.

“ALUS is really good at affirming what we wanted to do with it. We appreciated having someone say, ‘It’s not just a crazy notion. It would work here.’ Every quarter is

different, and being able to have projects and support for projects that would match our quarter made a big difference.

“We knew what we wanted to do, and it was ALUS that helped provide the financial and intellectual support to do it”

But more importantly, being part of ALUS has created a sense of community for the couple.

“Where my family farmed in Manitoba, there was a lot of family around, but we’re new where we are near Sundre,” said Jerremie. “There have been a lot of great folks up there who have given us support, but ALUS gives us a wider community.

“Sometimes you can feel like a little bit of a freak for doing all of this sustainability stuff, so having that community and a wider network of other people who are doing it helps a lot.”

Maria agrees. “Before ALUS, we were just kind of doing what we do, and we didn’t really look out to our community. Coming to events and having people come to our farm for tours, we get an opportunity to meet people who have that same mindset.”

For the Towers, this likeminded community has been hard-won after nearly three decades of bucking the conventional road to farming success.

“We do it because we believe in it, and we really, really hope that other people will start to embrace some of these practices,” said Margaret. “As the ALUS program grows, more and more people are seeing the benefits of this, and they’re starting to buy in.”

“It’s not for us. We’re fine,” added Tom. “It’s our kids and our grandkids and our great-grandkids that we’ve got to be looking after.”

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