

Farm puts out welcome mat for trees

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Brenda Bohmer of Bawlf, Alta., stands in a newly seeded perennial strip between an existing wetland and her grain field. The plan is to let the wetland refill and then plant trees around the wetlands. |

An Alberta producer has taken 20 acres out of production, filling the wetlands with water and planting 3,100 trees

BAWLF, Alta. — Brenda Bohmer's farm looks like hundreds of others on the Prairies.

A canola field lines the long driveway. Grass is neatly mowed near the row of grain bins. Trucks and swathers are washed, serviced and ready. Old wagon wheels and rustic signs lean against wooden buildings as decoration and as a nod to her farming heritage.

Look closer and the differences emerge.

In the last two years, Bohmer has taken 20 acres out of production, filled wetlands with water, planted 3,100 trees and has plans for more.

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A road construction crew is building a borrow pit on her land, which will be shaped, filled and turned into an additional wetland for wildlife.

"To a normal farmer this is probably a disaster zone because I am taking farmland out of production," said Bohmer, as she watches large earth-moving equipment dig a two-acre hole at the edge of her field.

Instead of clearing trees and draining wetlands she's planting trees and adding wetlands.

"Not only do I want to conserve what I have, I want to make it better."

Her soul searching began with farm-retirement planning. Did she want to farm until she was 80, sell and move to town, or something else. The thought of someone buying her four quarters of land and clearing the trees was horrifying. Her parents and grandparents planted and nurtured the trees and created protective areas for wildlife.

"My dad hated cutting trees. This piece of land has supported my family for three generations.

Three years ago, Bohmer started to read, took holistic management courses, investigated conservation easements and assessed her options.

“It is not easy to make these changes. There is a lot of self inquiry required. You’re not fitting with the norm anymore.”

Using three dimensional mapping software and with help from mentors and experts, she mapped her property and took a second look at the land, rainfall, wind direction and existing contours and began to plan.

In 2018, she took 20 acres out of grain production. Some areas were obvious, especially where large sprayers could no longer fit between trees or in corners of the field. Rows of trees and perennial ground cover were planted around existing wetlands and trails of perennial ground cover now separate the fields from the fence line to create a barrier and to give vehicle access to the project areas.



The family planted 3,100 trees in specific areas of the farm this year. Bohmer’s job is to weed and water the newly planted trees for two years. A biodegradable material helps keep the weeds down. |

Bohmer also looks differently at wetlands than she once did. Like many farmers, Bohmer used to farm as close to a wetland as possible, squeezing the maximum acreage from every quarter section. On dry years she would disc through the low areas and hope to seed through them the following year.

No longer. In one slough, now dubbed Beaver Lake, after its beaver-tail shape, two million gallons of water has flowed back into the low area, a buffer of perennial grasses and legumes was seeded around the edge of the wetland and two rows of trees were planted.

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In just one year, the cattails have regrown and staff from the environmental program Cows and Fish counted 30 varieties of plants, all regrown on their own just because it was taken out of crop production.

“I can’t believe how much the wetland has changed. It’s like it’s healing itself,” she said.

“Eighty percent of all wildlife species spend part of their life in a riparian area. As farmers we’re destroying these wetlands.”

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In another area, she planted two acres of pollinator plants designed to attract bees.

Bohmer looked to the non-profit Agroforestry and Woodlot Extension Society to help with planning details of the three-year project.

With their help they identified seven restoration sites on two quarters of land and 18 species of trees that would suit her property.

Through the federal and provincial government’s Canada Agricultural Partnership program, 70 percent of the cost of trees was paid. The group also paired her project with Pur Project, a company from France whose goal is to fight deforestation and climate change. The organization pairs multinational companies that want to support tree planting projects and landowners. Her project was paid for by the cosmetic company Clarins and Accor, the parent company to the Fairmont Hotel chain.

Representatives from Clarins came to the farm later to look at the newly planted trees, planted more and blogged and took photos of the project.

Bohmer's role in the project is to prepare the land and for the next two years weed and water the trees.

Plans for next year's tree planting and location will be finalized once the crop is harvested. After three years, the plan is to have about 6,000 trees in the ground.

A county road construction project has allowed Bohmer the ability to expand her wetland project. Clay from the borrow pit on her land is used on the road and the hole left behind will be turned into another wetland. It won't look like a borrow pit, or dugout. Instead the sides will be curved and shallow areas built in for shorebirds. Black soil will be added back into the edges to allow for quick regrowth of plants.

She has also negotiated a pilot project with the county to seed the ditches to native grass.

"This could be something that leads to something larger. We have roads everywhere."

It's not uncommon for each municipality to rebuild 10 or 15 kilometres of road each year. If the native grass trial is successful, it may be adopted by other areas.

"I'm trying to change my farming practices. This is so important. I have to farm in a way that's not taking away from what the land and its inhabitants need. I feel like it's the right thing to do.

"I can still crop around the wetlands."