



Strategic Plan 2024-2027

Our Vision

Healthy, functioning riparian areas for the benefit of all.

Our Mission

To promote healthy landscapes by fostering riparian stewardship.

Introduction

Cows and Fish (Riparian Management Society) is a non-profit organization working with agricultural producers, urban and rural landowners, communities, watershed groups, and resource managers since 1992 to improve the health and management of riparian, water, and natural resources. Cows and Fish supports proactive, voluntary stewardship by building capacity for change. We create increased awareness, knowledge, and skills by developing riparian management tools, motivating people to consider the changes necessary, and measuring the difference those changes make in landscape health. We have led the establishment of a widely accepted and utilized method for evaluating riparian health across many Canadian provinces. Specifically, Cows and Fish helps people recognize the importance of healthy ecosystems and how their personal actions influence ecological function, leading to increased use of management that benefits the landscape and riparian health.

Riparian areas are the "green zones" of water-loving vegetation along streams, rivers, lakes, wetlands, and springs; when healthy, these areas provide many key ecological functions.

Background

Cows and Fish is a recognized and trusted organization throughout Alberta's agriculture and conservation communities. We are seen as a key partner in riparian work. This reputation was built by using a respectful approach focussed on going where we are invited, providing technical expertise and encouragement, focussing on sound process, and providing outreach and extension that meets landowner and community needs to build capacity. Providing strategic direction and support to the Cows and Fish organization is a Board, with directors representing member organizations:

- Alberta Beef Producers
- Trout Unlimited Canada
- Canadian Cattle Association
- Rural Municipalities of Alberta
- Association of Alberta Agriculture Fieldmen
- Independents
- Alberta Agriculture and Irrigation (non-voting)
- Alberta Environment and Protected Areas (non-voting)
- Alberta Forestry and Parks (non-voting)

It is important that Cows and Fish continue to meet the current levels of demand and some growth, while maintaining flexibility, to meet changing agriculture, policy, and conservation drivers. Continuing to reach out to past members and future potential partners will build the continuity and ongoing commitment to help landowners and groups continue to learn and make progress as their ability, needs, and interests change. We welcome new collaborations and connections.

Operating Principles

Process Orientated	People and Community	Delivery Emphasis	Scientific Strength	Practical Approach
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Utilize Cows and Fish Process •Begin with basic awareness and education messages •Recognize and support community based action and decision making •Stewardship is an outcome 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Respect and empathize with challenges to improving riparian health •Acknowledge value of voluntary approach to stewardship •Landowners, managers, and users decisions and actions determine riparian health 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •"We go where we are invited" •Use appropriate scale to work •Be realistic and honest about impacts without blame and focus on how to improve •Non-regulatory approach focuses on communication, awareness and building relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Riparian areas may be small but their importance is large •Experts on riparian areas •Riparian health is a key measurement metric •Program evaluation and social science inform tool development and program delivery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Support management changes that are practical, economical, restorative, and sustainable •The solution or 'answer' is often developed as we work on a site with the landowner/ manager and not known in advance •Accomplish a lot with available resources •Organizational learning is key to growth and adaptation

Key Overarching Communication Messages, Embedded with Our Principles

- Cows and Fish empowers people who live, work, and play in Alberta's riparian areas to take action to care for riparian areas.
- Together, we can make a difference.
- Riparian areas, the areas connecting land and water, help clean our water, create drought and flood resiliency, and provide habitat for fish and wildlife.
- Cows and Fish encourages others to utilize our tools and our expertise in riparian management and riparian health to meet their goals of resilient landscapes.

Cows and Fish Logic Model

The following logic model outlines the intended outcomes that Cows and Fish works to achieve. The outcomes are individual and community focused and incremental, meaning this is a chain of results that link activities to the expected learnings, actions, and benefits. The logic model will:

- Provide a line-of-sight to guide decision making, performance measurement, and evaluation
- Demonstrate how priority strategies and actions directly contribute to achieving the intended outcomes

- Emphasize the importance of collaboration and integration to achieve intended outcomes

Assumptions

There are certain biases and preconceived notions that the people in an organization bring to the table. Understanding and articulating these assumptions is important awareness for our organization. Some of our assumptions of who we are, how we will work, and deliver programming include:

Who we are:

- Cows and Fish is a unique brand and organization, filling a niche that others do not, because of how we deliver our work (described in our Operating Principles)
- Guided by a diverse and dedicated Board, adding new partners as needed
- Ensure Members are comfortable even as priorities change, to ensure we are meeting longer term needs

Why we do what we do:

- Foster stewardship, because it creates longevity. Stewardship is comprised of awareness, ethics, and action
- Build a cumulative body of knowledge so more people can be stewards
- Translate science and experience to create knowledge and inform practical action
- Build relationships on trust and credibility because this motivates awareness and change
- Require a strong and effective engagement process
- Work is about people and social science, as much as it is about ecological science and land use

Where do we work:

- While we can and do work at an individual site level, we focus program delivery with individuals within watersheds and at community scales

Why our work is important:

- Riparian areas are a cornerstone topic that connect to many issues
- Understanding of current riparian health measurements changes knowledge and influences management actions
- Land uses (including agriculture) and ecological function will sometimes conflict
- Our audiences and the public value (or will value) healthy riparian areas
- Awareness and education lead to shifts in behaviour, leading to improved riparian health
- Demand from many audiences will continue to increase, given the value provided to help diverse individuals and organizations achieve their goals

How we do our work:

- Provide honest and sometimes difficult-to-hear messages in a realistic, respectful, solution-focused way

- Require experienced and dedicated staff to maintain high technical capacity; building and maintaining this experience is a challenge, particularly as a non-profit
- Ensure quality extension materials, content, and program delivery
- Riparian health metrics are unbiased and applied consistently, regardless of land use or management
- Government of Alberta funding will remain somewhat constant as a result of strong partnerships and relevant value propositions
- Messages, tools and systems will evolve as new movements or opportunities arise
- Capacity to participate in new movements or opportunities is not infinite

External Factors

Cows and Fish is a non-profit collaborative organization and therefore is subject to forces outside of the organization. These external factors may have a positive or negative effect on the success of Cows and Fish reaching our desired outcomes. It is important we are aware of these factors although often we will have little to no control over them.

- Government and other funding is multi-faceted and changes over time, and can be insecure
- Changing government and industry or sector mandates and priorities
- Government priorities and policies influence our work though funding as well influencing our audiences' interests and demands and their access to funding
- Expanding national or provincial priorities related to extreme climate impacts (including water security, flood amelioration, drought proofing, wildfire prevention, and grazing management), natural and green infrastructure, and species at risk
- Environmental Goods and Services (EGS) concepts or payment systems will continue to evolve and show potential for growth
- Costs of doing business are growing, but also volatile, affecting our ability to operate
- Economic considerations continue to impact landowner and land manager decision making, but economic change as reward or compensation in the market or cost-share programs evolve
- Landowners and land managers do not control everything that affects a site or place and recovery or management responses are influenced by both site specific and watershed issues
- Receptivity of land users and land holders will vary
- New movements or opportunities will arise (e.g. permaculture, natural infrastructure, climate variability and adaptation to change, beef sustainability verification, mitigation off-sets, etc.)
- Reaching landowners and their communities is more challenging than in the past because of:
 - comparatively fewer rural extension staff working for the province and counties to partner with or train
 - fewer watershed groups to act as a community hub and reason to gather
 - more agricultural producers have off-farm jobs, making them busier
 - increased amount of rented lands and an aging agricultural sector mean agricultural operations get larger and sometimes those owning lands are no longer on site

- non-agricultural rural land (acreages, recreational properties, etc.) continues to expand, and those landowners may not have long-term connections in the community or have very different ways of being part of a community, be unavailable during normal business hours, and require very different riparian area management needs
- Landowner, land manager, and audience participation and modes of interaction have changed, including sometimes declining participation at in-person activities in part due to demographic and land changes and much more quality information available online
- Recent shift in range management perspectives, particularly for more intense livestock rotation, which is more suited to tame pastures, yet is often applied to native landscapes
- Reduced focus on range management expertise and increased emphasis on conservation biology in land management organizations leads to increased train-the-trainer needs
- With increased younger generations returning to farms and ranches, this audience comes with different skills and perspectives and may also not have evolved with our past work in that community, requiring re-engagement and learning. They do not necessarily have the mindset or habitats of multiple decades of management led by others, which can be positive, negative or neutral
- Urban watersheds are beginning to look more upstream to contributing watersheds, for water quality improvements and flood mitigation expectations
- Increased need for verification and benchmarking for land trusts, certification and other credit systems, as they expand
- Expanding societal and governmental push to grow Indigenous involvement and partnerships to increase knowledge and capacity for their increased autonomy in support of reconciliation efforts

Opportunities Resulting from External Factors

- Extension to landowners and managers is needed, to reach new audiences and provide messages and expertise as priorities and interests evolve
- Reaching youth and new entrants, who are not yet landowners or managers, is part of a long-term strategy to affect change as part of our work
- New and ongoing partnerships and collaborations are needed to reach diverse audiences and find required resources
- Achieving resilient healthy riparian areas, including using natural and low-tech solutions, is an expanding societal interest, whether through direct management, restoration, mitigation funding or other means
- Our expertise, process of working with communities and riparian health validation metrics provide opportunities to help many others with their needs

Explanation of the Cows & Fish Logic Model

Audiences:

Land Managers: control, plan, and / or implement land management activities. They include policy makers; allotment holders, leaseholders, and permittees on public lands; and Indigenous groups or individuals with direct care or decision making on the land. Land managers may also be land users in some cases.

Landowners: have personal title to the land and typically control, plan, and / or implement land management activities.

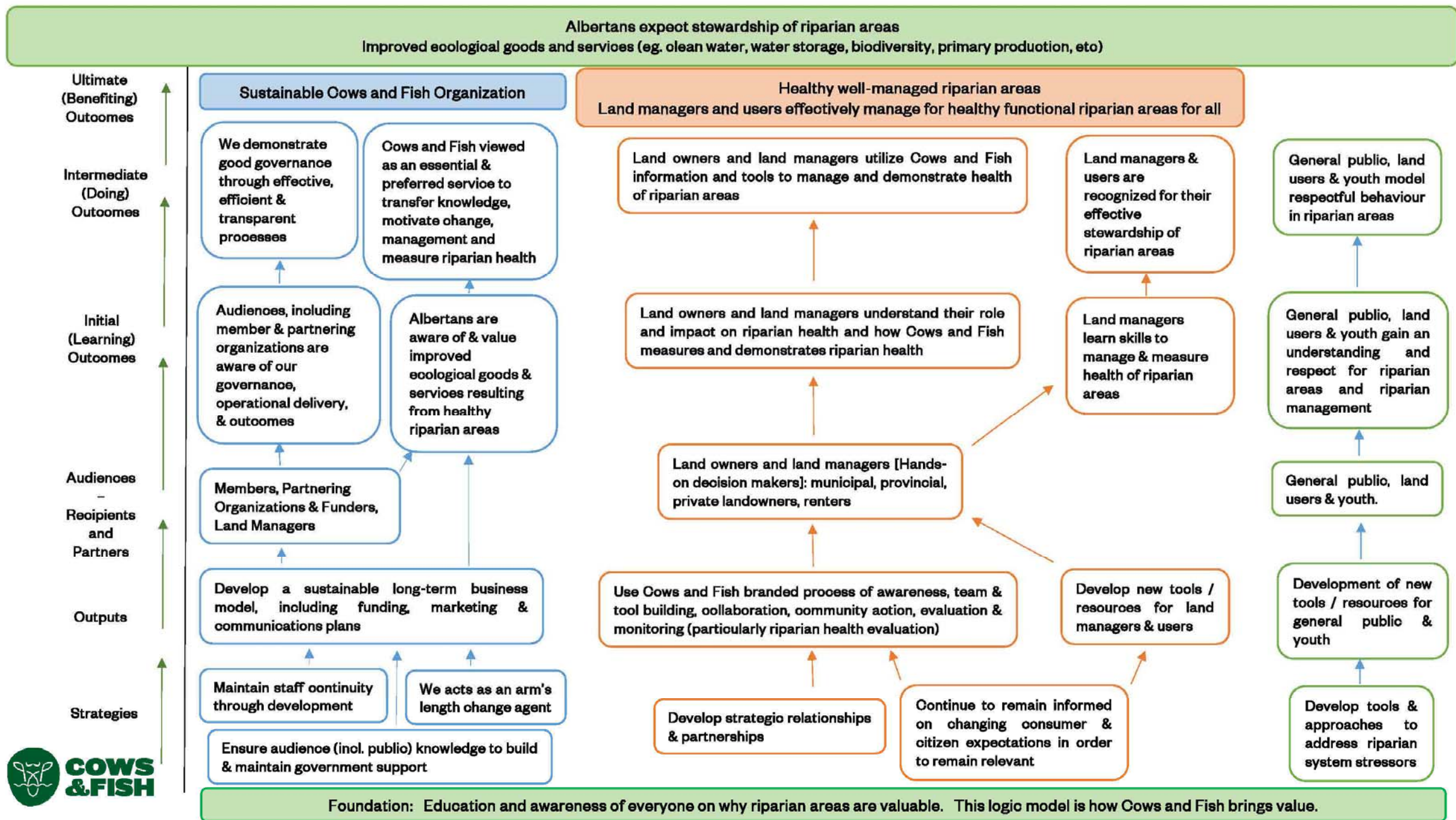
Land Users: have been separated from landowners and land managers because they do not have the same authority or responsibility for land management decisions and do not normally need to have the same knowledge or skill set as land managers. Land user groups that have a delegated authority or responsibility (e.g. trail maintenance) are considered a land manager, while the individual user or group that is just using, but not managing or planning, are included within land users.

Partnering organizations: are sometimes Members of Cows and Fish, and thus on the Board. In addition to jointly working on program delivery in many aspects, they can also be organizations that learn from us, tell our audiences about us, and incorporate our messages and tools in what they do.

Note: Landowners, land managers and land users have separate roles and responsibilities, some deep, others simple.

Outputs:

- To ensure a sustainable organization, communication and marketing plans have been completed.
- Ongoing fund planning and staff development and retention discussions continue.



Cows and Fish Success Factors – Metrics and Measures

Goals are described, where applicable or suggested. Note that some metrics will be used for more than one indicator. Not all indicators and outcomes identified within the Logic Model have metrics specified due to the broad or general outcomes desired (e.g. Albertans expect stewardship of riparian areas).

Expected Results	Indicators	Data Sources	Results [As Of 2023-24]	Metric
Initial Outcomes:				
Audiences, including member and partnering organizations are aware of our governance, operational delivery, and outcomes Additional thoughts: For funders, they need to be comfortable w/ what we achieve For land managers, we want them to be comfortable/trust Cows and Fish For general public / youth, we want them to be aware, interested...the general public is part of the strategies that are to ensure funders	Distribution of an annual report: 1-2 page highlights annual report, focussing on key items with infographics	Completion of highlights annual report Number of mailings (email or paper)		Completed: Yes or No? # sent
	Ease of funding access [internal discussion]	Discuss annually at the Board meetings/AGM		No specific metrics
	Cows and Fish is providing value to and receiving value from members Potential opportunity: include profiles of demonstrable impact with members in annual reporting or newsletter	Annual discussion at Board meetings: a) is Cows and Fish providing value and how is the member organization made aware of this? b) what member connections or updates should Cows and Fish know about?	<u>[Goal: all members and Cows and Fish receiving value; 1-3 connections or other values demonstrated per member per year]*</u>	No specific metrics

(Gov) are happy/satisfied	Do a networking or thank you event (profile work & success)-to allow funders to see the bigger role and other aspects that all funders are receiving	# attendees at thank you or other profile events	<u>[Goal: 1 event in 3 yrs; 50 attendees]</u> Annual tour associated with AGM in part meets this goal. 30 th Anniversary events in 2022 met this outcome	Completed: Yes or No? # attended
	Summarize overall program work	Completion of full program annual report	recent years need finalized	Completed report: Yes or No?
Albertans are aware of and value improved ecological goods and services resulting from healthy riparian areas	Attendance at our extension activities	Extension tracking file	<u>[Goal: 120 events and 3,500 - 5,000 people annually]</u> 2023-24: 4,838 at 165 events	# of people we spoke to # of events
	Social media presence, use, engagement, and interactions	Staff generate social media summaries from various platforms – see separate files for further metrics	<u>[Goal: Facebook [FB], X [formerly Twitter], Instagram [IN], and LinkedIn: increase in engagement and followers (or equivalents) each year]</u>	Depending on platform: # posts # impressions # reached # followers # engagements # replies or reposts (e.g. retweet)

			2023-24: 3,166 Facebook followers ~2,177 (157 new) followers on X Impressions: 79,738 Facebook 42,000 on X Engagement: 2,179 Facebook clicks 2,663 on X	
	Number and type of use of website	Staff use Google Analytics (or similar) to compare analytics annually	<u>[Goal annually: 7,000-9,000 users; 20,000 - 25,000 page views; 12,000-14,000 sessions; 1:50 average duration]</u> Website: 2023-24 7,393 users 21,364 page views 11,998 sessions	# page views # users # sessions
	Number of Cows, Fish, Cattledogs and Kids! (CFCDK!) games delivered	Extension tracking file (staff)	<u>[Goal: deliver game at 5-10 venues, annually]</u>	# of Cows, Fish, Cattledogs and Kids! (CFCDK!) games delivered

Land managers and users understand their role and impact on riparian health	Via poll or program evaluation, do GRAZING participants learn new information?	Exit surveys at women's grazing schools and range school courses and similar, where we are able to ask if they learned	<u>[Goal 75% indicate improved knowledge]</u>	% indicate improved knowledge
	Via poll or program evaluation, can GRAZING participants indicate planned or actual management changes?	Exit surveys at women's grazing schools and range school courses and similar, where we are able to ask if they will implement / make a change	<u>[Goal 75% indicate intent to implement]</u>	% indicate management change planned or implemented
	Via poll or program evaluation, do BEAVER COEXISTENCE participants learn new info?	Beaver workshop feedback forms	<u>[Goal: 65% indicate improved knowledge]</u>	% indicate improved knowledge
	Via poll or program evaluation, do CONSERVATION/PRACTITIONER participants learn new info?	Formal train-the-trainer session feedback forms	<u>[Goal 65% indicate improved knowledge]</u>	% indicate improved knowledge
Land managers understand how Cows and Fish measure and demonstrate riparian health	Learning and using riparian health assessment: RHA field days	Extension tracking	<u>[Goal: 5 days/year. average 10 days/year]</u> 2023-24: 35 RHA and Range HA days 440 attendees	#/year # attendees
	Riparian health inventory and assessment sites and reports	Internal tally of reports Number of sites completed	<u>[Goal: 120 sites reported on/yr]</u> 2023 – 100 riparian and 2 range health sites Note that sites with multiple riparian health	# RHI/A sites # individual reports

			polygons, in 1 report, are only counted as 1 report so there are actually more sites than reports most years.	
Land managers learn skills to manage and measure the health of riparian areas	Number of Riparian Health (RH) training sessions and feedback results	Formal train-the-trainer session feedback forms	<u>[Goal 75% indicate increased skills]</u>	% indicate improved skills
	Riparian Health Assessment (RHA) field days	Extension tracking	<u>[Goal: 5 days/year, average 10 days/year]</u>	#/year # attendees
	Grazing schools and similar events that provide skills and knowledge that can be learned and apply to management	Exit surveys at women's grazing schools and range school courses and similar, where we are able to ask if they learned	<u>[Goal: 65% indicate increased skills or understanding related riparian health measurement or riparian management]</u>	% that indicate increased skills or knowledge
General Public, Land Users, Youth, and New Entrants gain an understanding and respect for riparian areas and riparian management	People engaged (extension events; website; social media)	Extension tracking file Website, YouTube and social media metrics Note: this data will be within other rows	See above rows related to extension events, attendance and social media metrics	See above rows related to extension events, attendance and social media metrics
Intermediate Outcomes:				
Cows and Fish demonstrate good governance through effective, efficient, and transparent processes	List of governance and policies Gathering and sharing key metrics (via annual reporting) Also see Ultimate Outcomes	Internal Board review of governance items needed and approach to implement them	Prior work identified Identify governance priorities, and (all or mostly) address those policy needs. Board policies	Review of Board policies Annual report

			should be reviewed periodically	
Cows and Fish is viewed as an essential and preferred service for knowledge transfer, motivating change, management and measuring riparian health	Program evaluation results Also see Ultimate Outcomes	New External Program Evaluation, approximately <u>once every 10 yrs</u>	To be compiled and compared from former reports	To be determined at time of evaluation, but focus on improved knowledge and management change as a result of working with Cows and Fish
Land managers are using information provided by Cows and Fish to demonstrate the health of their riparian areas	Program evaluation results Also see Ultimate Outcomes	New External Program Evaluation, approximately <u>once every 10 yrs</u> Future opportunity: RHI follow up phone calls or emails to gather feedback	To be compiled and compared from former reports	To be determined at time of evaluation, but focus on if land managers are using info provided by Cows and Fish
Land managers and users are actively using the tools provided by Cows and Fish to manage riparian areas for health	Riparian area influenced by new management changes (best management practices / BMPs)	Specific project BMP implementation site reporting (select funding) and BMP agreements NEW External Program Evaluation, approximately <u>once every 10 yrs</u>	Yet to be compiled	# BMPs adopted that we have financially supported in a cost share project # kilometers or hectares impacted by changes we have financially supported in a cost share project or our own project

	Changes over time, being maintained or continuing to improve, and also reaching new areas [partially or entirely new]	Provincial riparian health roll up data Riparian health follow-up results from revisits (health changes and management use)	Provincial riparian health results from 2023 show more, healthier sites, from revisits (see separate reporting). 2023 results: Of 94 sites to be included in the provincial annual summary, 39 were revisits, 21 of these sites improved; 17 of these 21 improved enough to move up a health category. Of 3,344 provincial summary sites: Healthy: 28.5% Healthy but with problems: 47.5% Unhealthy: 24%	Annual provincial riparian health revisit results continue to show sites improving # riparian health revisits and change in health over time
Ultimate Outcomes:				
Sustainable Cows and Fish organization	Full complement of governance items for Board and organization	Cows and Fish Board and organization policies and procedures		Periodic review completed
Sustainable Cows and Fish organization	Review and discussion of funding and budgets, completed, ongoing	Funding list and amounts financial summaries Budget confirmed at AGM	[Goal: increase or maintain diversity of sources and multi-year funding sources]	Review and discuss annually

	Program evaluation results show Cows and Fish viewed as an essential and/or preferred partner	New External Program Evaluation results (once every 10 years)	Future evaluation question(s) should ask if we are seen as valuable, essential, or preferred	Future evaluation question(s) should ask if we are seen as valuable, essential, or preferred
Healthy well-managed riparian areas	Riparian health is high or improving provincially, or improving at various other scales	Cows and Fish Provincial (and other scales) riparian health reporting changes show improvements	2023 provincial roll up (3,344 sites) shows average health of 70%; also the proportion of sites that are healthy continues to increase from about 25% for many years, to 28.5% now.	Annual provincial riparian health revisit results continue to show sites are improving.
Land managers and users effectively manage for healthy functional riparian areas for all	Program evaluation and riparian health results show improvements	<p># revisits for riparian health and change in health over time</p> <p>Approximately every 10 years redo external program evaluation which shows an impact in people making a management change as a result of working with Cows and Fish</p>	<p>See above riparian health results; directly linking riparian health change to management change is NOT easily or always possible.</p> <p>Note: this data may be within other rows</p>	<p>Annual riparian health provincial roll up continues to show an improving trend for overall sites as well as revisits.</p> <p>External evaluation which shows an impact in people making a management change as a result of working with us</p>