

30
YEARS



Cows and Fish Newsletter

30th Anniversary Edition

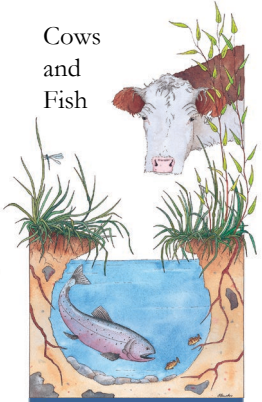


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Happy New Year! Welcome to our first newsletter of 2022

While this might be our first newsletter for 2022, it is Cows and Fish's 30th Anniversary this year, so this issue is dedicated to showcasing some of our history. See where we started, and where we've come, with the support of partners, landowners, and others.

[Learn about our founding partners, read what motivated my wise mentors and founders](#), to work together and watch some of our history with [Centennial Swell](#) and [Loving Fish](#) digital stories. We have come a long way,

building new tools and creating new partnerships. See our [newest videos](#) created with ranching families we have worked with for over 20 years, along with partner, [Southern Alberta Land Trust Society](#). I like to think that our success relies on a combination of how we do our work and who we work with. By approaching others with respect and a deep commitment to sharing lessons learned from both science and practical wisdom, we have built trust and helped increase riparian knowledge and health. Learning from people and organizations who use and manage riparian areas has led us to work with many passionate, hard working and adaptable people – people we owe our success to. You, dear reader, are part of that – thank you for reading, for sharing what you learn, and for challenging us to take on new riparian management issues.

We look forward to seeing you in person or online at one of our [upcoming events](#).

Sincerely,

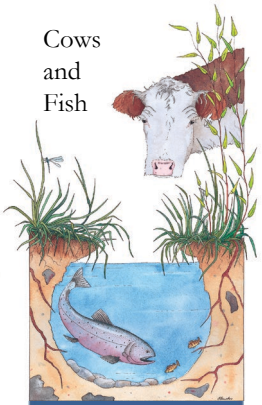
A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Noeline Ambrose".

Executive Director, Cows and Fish



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Reflections on Cows and Fish at 30

By Lorne Fitch, P. Biol.



Lorne Fitch and Barry Adams

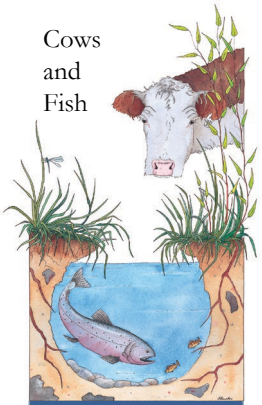
While it shouldn't have come as a surprise, *Cows and Fish* at 30 is like finally recognizing a young tree planted in your backyard now towers over the house. *Cows and Fish* has grown and matured over three decades and, like a tree, it has branched out, bulked up and set deep roots. It has weathered many storms, figuratively and literally, rising always above these setbacks. In advancing stewardship of riparian areas and watersheds, *Cows and Fish* stands alone as a leader. I write this with more than a tinge of pride in something I helped plant, nurtured carefully and have watched grow.

As a tree does, *Cows and Fish* shows growth increments from its beginning in 1992. Even before it was a seedling though, work went on to prepare the seed bed for it to take root and spring up. Years of trout stream inventories had pointed out the issues with unmanaged grazing (along with the impacts of other land uses). A growing awareness in agricultural circles, beginning in the United States, led to recognizing riparian areas as extremely productive and valuable and not as "sacrifice" zones to be ignored. At the same time, the wealth of ecosystem services provided by riparian areas began to surface.

Before *Cows and Fish*, fisheries biologists seeking solutions initially worked to exclude livestock from the banks with fencing. A few landowners were willing to have their stream banks fenced off from livestock, like the Pharis family in Willow Valley. Over the years, the family began to notice willows were in short supply in a valley named after the shrub. They recognized drastic measures were needed to protect water and other shared resources, like native trout. But for most, stream bank fencing was not a "one size fits all" solution and it rarely dealt with all of the riparian area.

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Alberta's beef industry had done some soul-searching through an independent audit of issues facing the industry. Riparian management was one of the issues identified. This began a conversation.

Chris Mills was a policy advisor to the livestock industry—by good fortune he was also a trout fisherman. He was aware of work done on stream bank fencing on the Pharis's Elkhorn Ranch and over their kitchen table, many of the details of what would become Cows and Fish were discussed. This led to a partnership between the then Alberta Cattle Commission (now the Alberta Beef Producers) and Trout Unlimited Canada, since both could see the advantage of collaborating rather than fighting.



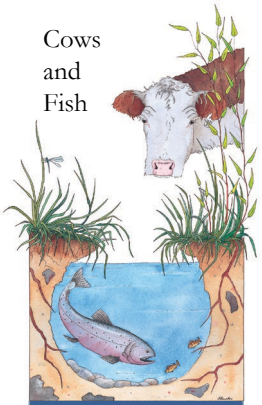
The Pharis family and partners meeting at their kitchen table

Working off the sides of our desks, Barry Adams, a range management specialist for Alberta Public Lands and myself, a fisheries biologist with Alberta Fish and Wildlife started a process of sketching out a riparian stewardship initiative. Since stream bank fencing would only be useful in a limited number of cases we explored additional options, many from the US where riparian management was a hot (and heated) topic.

Much of our learning came from Bill Platts, a fisheries biologist and riparian guru with extensive experience in the western states. We used this knowledge coupled with examples of Alberta ranchers who were ahead of the curve in protecting and effectively managing riparian areas. It allowed us to see how long-standing principles of range management could be tweaked and applied to also look after riparian areas. The application of the principles showed how riparian areas could be grazed and how ecological health and resilience could be retained. Time has shown that understanding principles has to precede choosing a riparian grazing practice.

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We were unsure what the appetite might be in Alberta, but the first riparian workshop in the Crowsnest Pass indicated we were on the right track. Expecting maybe 35 people, as a contingency, sandwiches were prepared for 50—to our surprise, over 167 people came through the doors. Cows and Fish has never looked back.

Then began province-wide engagement and outreach with presentations that identified what a riparian area is—people may have seen them, crossed them, walked in them and even lived in one—without recognizing their unique nature. Awareness began that the green zones around lakes and wetlands, the emerald threads of vegetation that border rivers and streams, and the lush fringe in valleys are riparian areas. There was a growing realization that riparian areas run through our lives and livelihoods, just as the water that forms them runs through our bodies. Riparian awareness messaging continues today, building on thousands of interactions throughout communities and watersheds in Alberta.



Barry Adams teaching the various riparian grazing management options

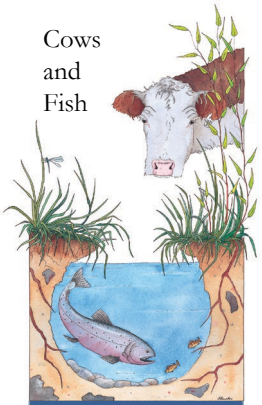
Hundreds and hundreds of presentations, workshops, field days, awareness documents, fact sheets, riparian health reports, digital stories and videos have built a cumulative body of knowledge that we all should know. This includes: how these systems function and link us; how to think at a watershed scale; the vital signs of landscape health; the essentials of how people need to work together; how solutions need to benefit us all; and, the kinds of information that will enable us to restore or maintain natural systems and build ecologically resilient communities and economies.

In explaining Cows and Fish to skeptical agency managers, Barry and I recognized we had adopted a way to guide our work and assure success. The sequential steps to change led from awareness through team/community building, tool building, community-based action and monitoring. That pathway was branded the Cows and Fish process. Time has proven its utility.

What is unique to Cows and Fish has always been the approach. The goal is landscape integrity and resilience through stewardship of shared resources. It isn't Cows **or** Fish, but Cows **and** Fish, managing so both have a place. To make it work requires the grease of relationship building, establishing trust so information finds a home, is accepted and not dismissed. Trust is built in large part by acknowledging the experience and practical wisdom of landowners, blending these essentials with the background of science.

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Cows and Fish staff have honed their communication skills with appropriate language, effective imagery, “gee whiz” facts, local examples and humor. Most of all they are empathetic listeners. Experience shows the approach leads to acceptance, adoption and adaptation, changing riparian management for the better.

People come away with additional skills in observation, understanding options and are motivated to make changes. As one producer pointed out, in terms of building capacity and capability: “Others give us things to think about. Cows and Fish gives us something to think with.”

There have been obstacles. Some producers were not convinced that the landscape had changed under grazing pressure. We used archival photographs, coupled with recent imagery to show the changes over time were dramatic and often negative. Some government bureaucrats wondered out loud if we were done yet. Cows and Fish is still at it after thirty years, exhibiting incremental and tangible progress towards healthier riparian areas. Some in the conservation community were unsure that grazing and riparian health could coexist. There are now multiple examples of the compatibility of grazing with vegetation diversity and healthy fish and wildlife populations.



Greg Hale and Michael Gerrand setting up a riparian benchmark site

with Cows and Fish for decades, turning a job into a career with commitment and dedication. Their credibility has been pivotal to the formation and functioning of local watershed groups, where community members forge a course forward for their watershed. There is nothing more powerful than a community that comes together to solve a problem.

Along with riparian resource analysts, collecting information on riparian health, the staff has grown from one to over 20. There are few corners of the province that have not seen some level of Cows and Fish activity and influence.

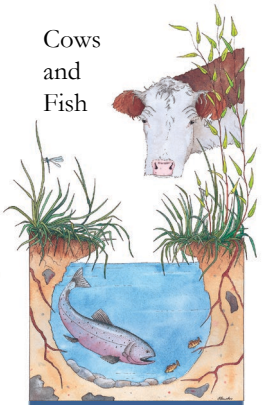
In the growth rings are embedded a string of awards, including two Alberta Emerald awards. These signalled that others had been watching the progress and success of Cows and Fish. Always moving forward, engagement with urban centres and cottage owners on lakes expanded the scope of

In the early growth rings of Cows and Fish appears the first (and for a long time, only) employee, Greg Hale. Greg blazed a course throughout Alberta laying the groundwork for staff who would follow. Another important ring was the development of a way to measure riparian health. Working with colleagues at the University of Montana, a made-in-Alberta system emerged and has given us and landowners a way to see progress with management changes.

Later, talented riparian specialists spread throughout the province, enhancing the capability to deliver messages and work with communities. Many have stayed

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riparian work. Working with other conservation and watershed groups, degraded riparian systems began to sprout willows from hours of volunteer labor.

Where once “riparian” was only found in the messaging of Cows and Fish, now many voices share the message of riparian protection and management. In a significant way, adding “training the trainers” to the repertoire of Cows and Fish has expanded message delivery through sharing of expertise, programs, tools and communication techniques with provincial staff, agriculture groups, watershed councils, conservation organizations, consultants and local government staff. This has also included assisting others across Canada with their own riparian initiatives.

Along the way, Cows and Fish found support and inspiration from many (too many to mention all). Some of the notables from agriculture include: Don Ruzicka, Lyle Voegtlin, Erik Butters, Glen and Kelly Hall, Francis Gardner, Jack Vandervalk, Dixon Hammond and a host of others from all corners of the province. Morley Barrett, from Alberta Fish and Wildlife believed in us and bankrolled our early endeavors. This provided a significant leg up to spreading the riparian gospel. Similarly, John Laarhuis from Alberta Public Lands was an ardent financial supporter, asking only that we continue to make progress toward healthy riparian areas. Gerry Ehler and other Public Lands staff enthusiastically promoted Cows and Fish. Municipal staff like Jeff Porter, Dave Trautman, Tim Dietzler, Gary Lewis, Jill Henry and Ken Lewis created the critical bridge to local governments.

Many people who were an integral part of Cows and Fish now watch from the sidelines. Collectively they passed the torch, made sure it was lit and the light from it now casts a wide pattern. Cows and Fish came about to provide practical, pragmatic solutions for riparian management and protection. The passage of 30 years hasn’t changed that crucial need.

Sadly, few conservation initiatives last. They start with much fanfare, support and resources. Then, as people change, priorities shift and as the corporate memory fades, support dwindles. I’m happy to see this hasn’t happened to Cows and Fish.

In the face of climate change, the work of Cows and Fish has even more relevance. Creating more watershed resiliency to drought and flood, assisting in recovery of species at risk and protecting source water are all essential outcomes of riparian management. Albertans of all stripes are exceptionally well served with this unique, non-government initiative.

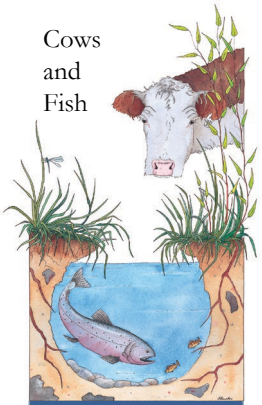
Thirty years isn’t long for a landscape but it represents a lifetime for a conservation and stewardship initiative. This should remind us that in conservation work (as in the growing of a tree) the two ingredients of success are continuity and persistence. Thirty years of work by Cows and Fish represents a lot of both.

November, 2021

Lorne Fitch is a Professional Biologist, a retired Fish and Wildlife Biologist, including the Provincial Riparian Specialist. He and Barry Adams co-founded Cows and Fish and were active in its development for many years.

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Meet The Cows and Fish Board

By Norine Ambrose, Executive Director

Cows and Fish started with visionary individuals who saw an opportunity to do things differently – to create unlikely partners, be proactive instead of reactive and take ownership of the issues. This early approach is still central to our work, and core to our organizational values. Our founding partners, [Alberta Beef Producers \(ABP\)](#) (then, Alberta Cattle Commission) and [Trout Unlimited Canada \(TUC\)](#), took a real risk at a time when conservation and the environment were not seen as allies to agriculture, and instead were often seen as outright enemies. Leaders in Alberta's beef cattle sector saw the need to tackle future and expanding issues, including water quality, riparian health and sustainability in the early 1990's, just like they do today. Those early discussions revolved around the desire to be stewards, and the recognition that sometimes beef producers did not have all the knowledge of alternative management practices, but could do better, if they did have that expertise, from peers, shared through Cows and Fish presentations and field days. These producers wanted to integrate sound science and practical wisdom, and working with a well recognised science-based conservation organization like TUC, showed that commitment. Trout Unlimited Canada (TUC), with their early focus on cold water fish conservation, realized that livestock producers were a logical partner to support habitat and healthy fish populations across vast areas of the landscape. Today, both organizations continue as members and sit on our Board of Directors.



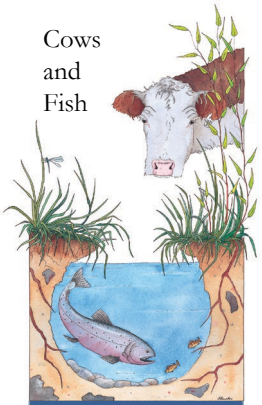
The Cows and Fish board in 1997

Today, we do extensive work with TUC, developing and delivering restoration, riparian management and awareness activities together and co-supporting work with livestock producers and others across the province. As a long-standing funder to Cows and Fish, ABP provides critical funds that help us leverage grants, in addition to helping keep our overhead costs low by providing in-kind office space. ABP continues to champion our work to livestock producers as well as provincial governments and others.

As we embark on our 30th year, we want to thank both the individuals and the organizations, then and through the years, who built and continue to sustain us in so many ways — Alberta Beef Producers and Trout Unlimited Canada, as our founding members, partners and ongoing directors on our Board, deserve a huge 'Thank you'.

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Full Circle Stewardship

*Written by Logan Peters,
Communications Coordinator*

Tracey Feist used to treasure those rare Sunday mornings she was permitted to sneak away from church, when her dad, Gary Munro, would ask her to help him feed cows. At just 12-years-old, Feist was trusted to sit behind the driver's seat as the hay retriever truck rolled slowly in first gear, under the careful direction of her father.

"You'll be fine—just stay out of the irrigation ditch!" Munro would reassure as he jumped onto the back deck to feed the cows. This was just one of the many moments where Feist witnessed first-hand what being a steward meant.

Words like "stewardship," "conservation," and "environmentalism" weren't commonly used by Munro. However, these words were innate for the ranchers of his generation; they were born into stewardship, with the engrained knowledge that taking care of the land wasn't a choice, but a responsibility.

"I have an obligation to maintain, protect and uphold what others have done before me and to ensure that the health of what we are stewarding is maintained to the level in which I received it, or possibly even make it better," said Feist, who inherited the Bar Open A Ranch after her father's passing in April, 2020.



Tracey Feist and her father Gary Munro



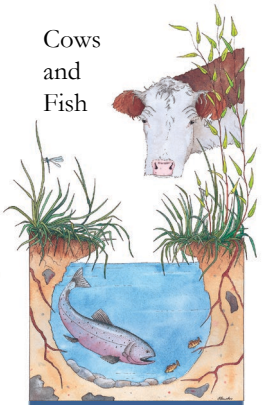
An example of an off-site watering system on Feist's ranch

When Tracey and her husband Kelvin moved back to the farm in November 2020, they made it a priority to revisit the ranch's relationship with Cows and Fish, which first began in March, 2001. Together with Cows and Fish, they are working on creating a plan to protect Pirmez Creek and the native grasslands on their property through management strategies such as off-site watering systems.

Feist's family has a rich ranching history in the Springbank area, just west of Calgary. Her great grandparents' homestead, which was established in 1894, was awarded the

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Alberta Century Farm Award in 1994 and is still an active ranch under the Munro family name today.

The Bar Open A is situated near Springbank, just south of the Elbow River, in an area that is rich in biodiversity. Located on intact native grassland, the ranch is also where Pirmez Creek begins, which is an important waterway, home to many four-legged families, as well as multiple trout species, including native Bull trout.



Pirmez Creek on Feist's ranch

Feist recognizes the sensitive ecosystem and is concerned about encroaching development (the Calgary city limits are only 15 kilometers east) and the impact of the neighbouring Springbank Off-Stream Reservoir project on upstream habitat and how this could negatively impact the areas downstream. "I knew I needed to initiate contact with the local Cows and Fish riparian specialist to learn all I can from them."

Living on a ranch instilled in Feist a passion for environmental stewardship, and as she grew up, so too did her love of the written word. Prior to her extensive career in communications, she worked as a freelance writer, telling the unique stories of different ranching families. "I loved working behind the scenes and telling agriculture stories," Feist said. "All of the scientists, technicians and individuals that I worked with over 30 years ago, really laid the footprint for my future."

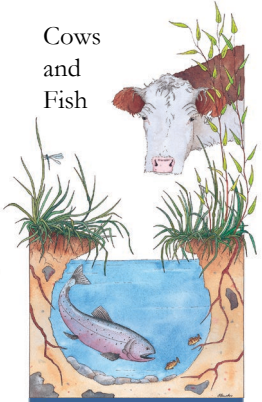
This was also when she was introduced to the founders of Cows and Fish, Barry Adams and Lorne Fitch, who had worked with her father previously. "The two of them [Barry and Lorne] laid an indelible impression upon me to ensure that conservation and stewardship becomes a part of your day-to-day life," Feist said. She and her father even attended a range management course delivered by Adams in southern Alberta.

"As a farm kid, when you grow up with the land, you don't realize your connection until you leave it. I loved it growing up but then when I moved away, and now that I'm back for good, it's a full circle moment for me that this is now mine and my family's. It rests on my shoulders to protect it going forward," Feist said.

"We have to find a common ground so that we can maintain native grasslands that have been there for generations before us, so that they can be maintained for future generations to enjoy—so those generations understand what it means to smell a wildflower in the springtime, or see that bright green springtime growth that's only there for a few days when you're out on the land. There's just a connection there that I've been honoured to experience—and what an incredible gift to receive."

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Grazing and Riparian Health?

A Good News Story in Alberta's Headwaters

By Kristi Stebanuk, Riparian Specialist

Livestock grazing has been happening in Alberta's headwaters for a century and a half, mimicking the bison that once roamed the land. We know that riparian health can vary when grazing cattle along streams and rivers, leading to a wide range of views on the topic of riparian grazing. Cows and Fish and the [Southern Alberta Land Trust Society \(SALTS\)](#) decided to partner with ranchers in the headwaters of two Alberta streams to assess trends in riparian health where ranching was the dominant land use and where ranchers were actively engaged in riparian management. What we

found was no surprise. Long-term commitment by ranchers to riparian health and adaptive grazing management has resulted in a healthy landscape, benefitting both the ranch and the communities downstream. As part of this project, we also wanted to share these success stories with others. We created two videos that highlight the compatibility of ranching with a healthy watershed from a producer perspective and also from a general water user perspective.



Edith Wearmouth, owner of the WineGlass Ranch speaks about her grazing management in the producer-focused video called, "Success Stories"

[The public focused video](#) highlights how sustainable grazing practices play a vital role in protecting source water for all downstream users. [The producer focused video](#) highlights success stories from the ranchers who have been able to maintain or improve riparian health over time. It can take a long time to improve the health of the landscape, but this project has shown that it is more than possible to make a significant impact in less than one generation of ranch management. [Click this link to view our project page and to learn more.](#)

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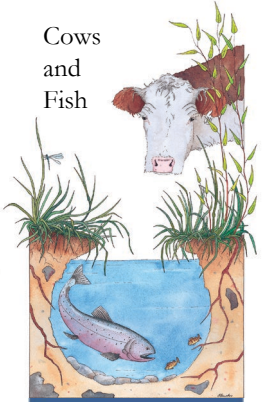
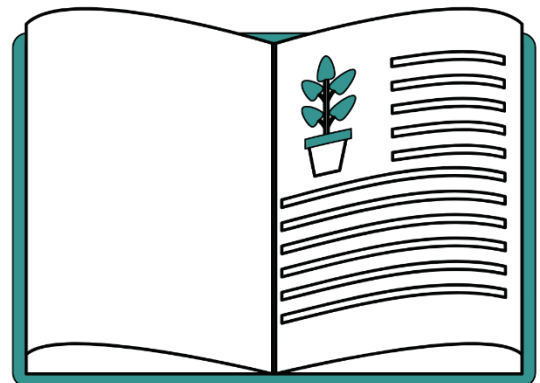
Riparian Fun Fact



The Manual is your Friend

By Kerri O'Shaughnessy, Riparian Specialist

As technologies and techniques advance, one mantra continues to stand the test of time at Cows and Fish – “the manual is your friend.” Whether we’ve got questions about how to change the settings on a camera, make a map in online software, or interpret a particularly unique feature of a riparian area, we have a number of references to help our staff navigate these challenges. Most are in paper form and many are dog-eared and tattered from well use, but they remain valuable resources as we inspire new staff and new people to love the world of riparian areas. In the spirit of bringing the understanding of riparian health to a new generation – as they say, there is an app for that! Watch for a coming announcement on our new Riparian Health Assessment App.



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Upcoming Events Calendar

WHERE'S THE DIRT? GETTING TO THE ROOT OF SOIL EROSION

January 20, 2022
@ 12:30pm - 2:00pm

Come join us (Cows and Fish), the Vermilion River Watershed Alliance (VRWA), and Lamont County for a webinar all about dirt!

[Click here to RSVP](#)

LADIES LIVESTOCK LESSONS 2022

January 21, 2022
@ 8:50am - 4:30pm

LLL is a workshop designed for women involved in or interested in the profession of managing livestock. It was developed with the goals of encouraging and educating women in the business and to facilitate the opportunity to expand their professional network.

[Click here to RSVP](#)

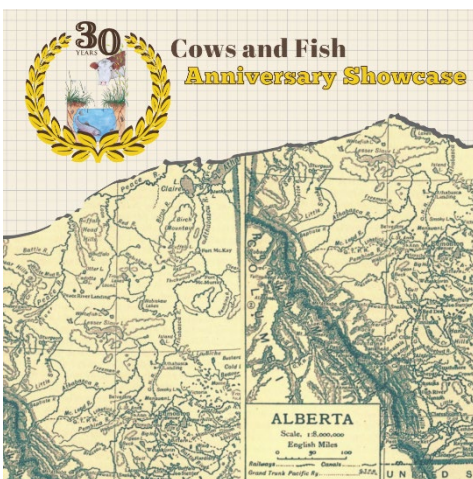
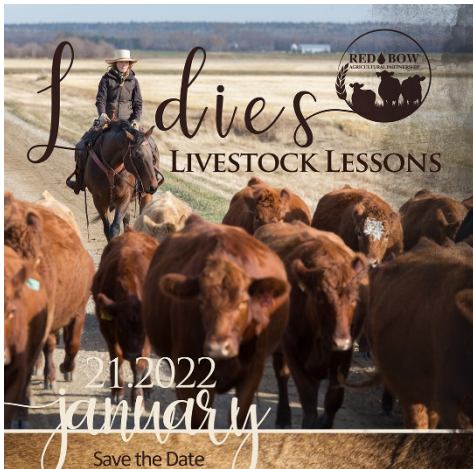
THE COWS AND FISH 30TH ANNIVERSARY SHOWCASE

January 31, 2022
@ 7:00pm - 9:00pm

Join Cows and Fish in celebrating our 30th year empowering people who live, work, and play in Alberta's riparian areas. The 30th Anniversary Showcase will feature a collection of videos, digital stories, and more from our staff, partners, and land stewards that we have worked with over the decades.

[Click here to RSVP](#)

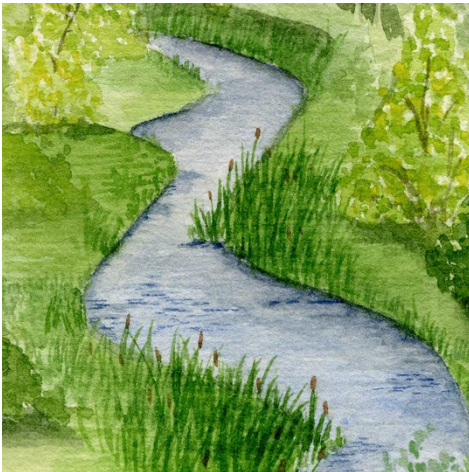
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RANCHING OPPORTUNITIES 2022

**February 3, 2022
@ 8:50am - 4:45pm**

The Red-Bow Agricultural Partnership invites you to attend Ranching Opportunities 2022 at Olds, AB. Topics include soil health, a grassland research update, regenerative agriculture producer panel and more.

[Click here to sign up](#)

STREET TO STREAM WEBINARS

[For Municipalities](#)

February 3 @ 9 AM - 12 PM

[For the General Public](#)

Part 1: February 3 @ 7 PM - 8:30PM

Part 2: February 8 @ 7PM - 8:30PM

If you have questions about these events, please contact Rachel at (780) 812-2182 or at outreach@lica.ca

BEAVERS IN OUR LANDSCAPE WEBINAR

**February 10, 2022
@ 7 PM - 9 PM**

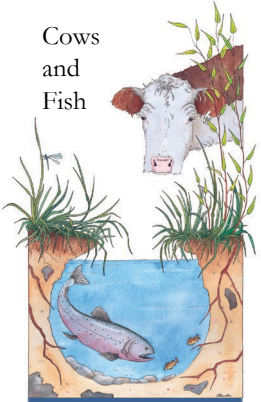
Whether you love them, hate them, want to understand them, think you need them, or want to learn how to live with them, you will find this online workshop useful.

[Click here to RSVP](#)

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Cows and Fish is a member of The Alberta Native Trout Collaborative — a group of partner organizations working to advance native trout recovery in Alberta via habitat restoration, restoration stocking, land use planning, watershed and fish population assessments, and public education. **To find out how you can help protect Alberta native trout, visit albertanativetrout.com.**

Cows and Fish is currently looking to fill **Riparian Resource Analyst** and **Riparian Resource Technician** positions to collect and interpret riparian health inventory data. You will be part of a team collecting vegetative and physical baseline information of riparian function on various streams, rivers, lakes and wetlands across



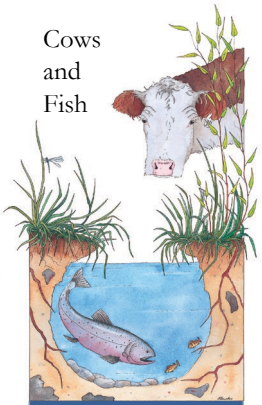
Alberta during the summer months and analyzing and reporting on data throughout the remainder of the year. [Click this link to learn more](#). Deadline to apply is February 8, 2022.



Original development of our newsletter was graciously supported by **Alberta Ecotrust Foundation**, along with our many core [funders and supporters](#). As you may know, we rely upon grants to do much of the work we do, so if you want to suggest an opportunity, collaboration, or make a donation, please do! [Click here to make a donation](#) and [click here to subscribe to our mailing list](#).

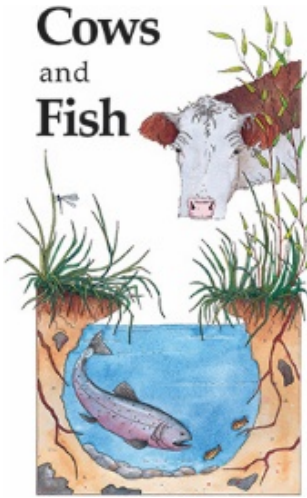
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Have you worked with Cows & Fish in the past?

- Have you wondered how your riparian area scores now?
- Wanted to have an extension event in your local community?
- Have a riparian management story to share?

To increase the broader community's riparian awareness and expertise, we will deliver extension events with local partners, bringing together neighbours and sharing successes. If you are a landowner we worked with in the past, and want to reconnect with us, give us a call or email. [Contact us.](https://cowsandfish.org/contact-us/)

We love hearing from you!

Please contact Norine Ambrose nambrose@cowsandfish.org or any Riparian Specialist in your area, to follow up on any items in this newsletter. For full contact information, visit our website at: <https://cowsandfish.org/contact-us/>

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Trout Unlimited
CANADA



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A special thank you to our partners