



ALUS gets long-awaited government funding

By Ron Friesen

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Ian Wishart has been knocking on the door for years trying to get governments to fund his Alternative Land Use Services plan. Now he's finally getting somewhere.

The Manitoba government last week promised to launch a long-awaited ALUS pilot project in the coming year.

Reading the throne speech to open a new legislative session, Lieutenant-Governor John Harvard said Manitoba "will become the first province in Canada to develop a project to support farms in carrying out a range of environmentally friendly farming practices and alternative land uses.

"This project will support the agricultural community in its commitment to protect water quality, healthy soils, and wildlife habitats."

It didn't actually say ALUS, but it's pretty clear that's what was meant, according to Keystone Agricultural Producers.

Wishart, a KAP vice-president, developed the agricultural conservation program in 1999. He has been promoting it ever since.

Last week he felt vindicated.

"We're certainly very pleased," Wishart said. "I'm feeling pretty good."

ALUS would pay farmers to deliver environmental benefits from their land. A proposed \$1.9 million, three-year pilot project for the rural municipality of Blanshard in southwestern Manitoba has been on the drawing board since 2004.

It was hoped the project would be announced last winter, but government funding failed to come through in time.

Now that the province has made its commitment to ALUS, Ottawa is expected to follow. A federal announcement is likely soon, according to sources.

The proposed project would involve over 138,000 acres of land, including wetlands, fragile and natural lands, and riparian areas in Blanshard Municipality. Eligible producers would receive payments ranging from \$5 to \$25 an acre to maintain wetlands, prevent soil erosion, protect waterways and perform other environmentally beneficial land practices.

The project is a joint effort of KAP, Delta Waterfowl Foundation, Little Saskatchewan River Conservation Project and the R.M. of Blanshard.

The Manitoba project is one of several being planned in Canada. Efforts for ALUS-type programs are also under way in Prince Edward Island and Ontario.

“I think this has the potential to be a national program, but it has to prove itself,” said Wishart, a producer from Portage la Prairie.

He says ALUS aims at financially rewarding producers who provide so-called “ecological services” to the general public. It is also viewed as an alternative way of improving farm income.

Wishart acknowledged ALUS is only a small step in dealing with the farm financial crisis, but he said many agricultural programs grew from small beginnings.

For example, crop insurance started as a pilot project in 10 Manitoba municipalities during the 1970s. Today, it is a basic farm program in every province, Wishart said.