



## **Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program**



*Reconnecting Americans with the Great Outdoors*



# Importance of Open Fields

While public land, such as the National Forests, National Wildlife Refuges, National Parks, and Bureau of Land Management lands, offer many outdoor recreational opportunities particularly out West, as parts of the country urbanized, access to land suitable for wildlife dependent recreation activities such as hunting and fishing became limited for many Americans. In many states the lack of access to hunting opportunities led to a decline in the number of hunters and anglers. License sales and taxes on hunting and fishing equipment provide badly needed revenue for conservation activities of state fish and wildlife agencies. The North American Model for Wildlife Conservation has been as successful as it has because of the vision and advocacy of early conservation pioneers and congressional action and passage of federal legislation such as the Pittman-Robertson, Dingell-Johnson, and Wallop-Breaux Acts. These Acts placed an excise tax on hunting and sport fishing equipment. The funds generated by these taxes are returned to the states by way of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and are used by the states to restore and manage fish and wildlife populations, habitat, and associated recreational opportunities, including providing access. Throughout the history of the US, hunters have been an integral supporter of conservation. Hunting is important to conservation. Open fields are important to hunting. More access means more hunters. More hunters mean more financial support for conservation. More conservation means more wildlife habitat enhancement. Better habitat means more wildlife.





With the passage of the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008, Congress provided authority for the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPAHIP). The Act directed the Secretary of Agriculture to establish a voluntary public access program under which States and tribal governments may apply for grants to encourage owners and operators of privately-held farm, ranch, and forest land to voluntarily make that land available for access by the public for wildlife-dependent recreation, including hunting and fishing under programs administered by the States and tribal governments. The Act provided the authority for up to \$50 million from the Commodity Credit Corporation be made available to support VPAHIP through September 30, 2012. The recent passage of the Taxpayer Relief Act extended authority for VPAHIP, along with other Farm Bill programs, through September 30, 2013.

Between 2008 and 2010 FSA worked to scope out what the program might look like. It wasn't until the Summer of 2010, that VPAHIP went operational.

# Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program Implementation

Following the announcement of the Administration's America's Great Outdoors Initiative in 2010, funds were first made available to the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) to implement VPAHIP. An Interim Rule published in the Federal Register on July 8, 2010, provides VPAHIP guidance. VPAHIP funding is to be made available to States and tribal governments through a competitive Request for Application (RFA) process. Applications for VPAHIP funding are to be submitted by state and tribal government entities to FSA through the grants.gov portal.

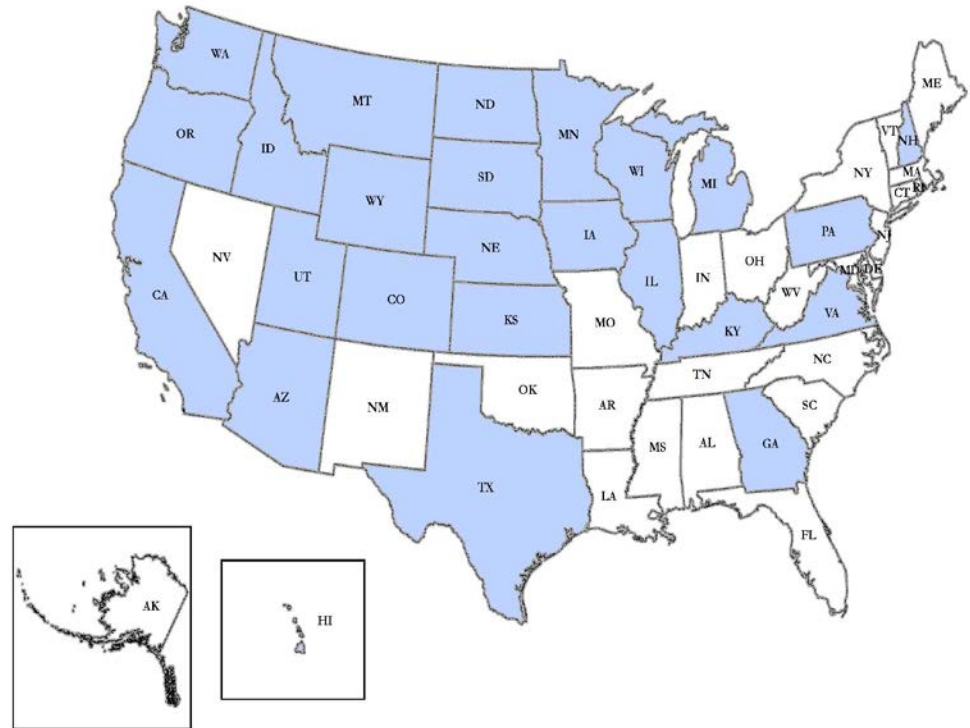
The first RFA was held July 8-August 23, 2010. Twenty-eight applications were received from 27 state fish and wildlife agencies and one tribal government entity.

A second RFA for VPAHIP funding was held January 19-March 7, 2011. Eighteen applications, including re-submittals not approved following the first request for funding, from 16 state fish and wildlife agencies and 2 tribal government entities, were received in response to the second RFA.

In total, 30 state fish and wildlife agencies and two tribal government entities have expressed formal interest in participating in VPAHIP.

Those approved for VPAHIP funding include state fish and wildlife agencies in Arizona, California, Colorado, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Oregon, Pennsylvania (both the Fish and Boat Commission and the Game Commission), South Dakota, Texas, Utah, Virginia, Washington, Wisconsin, and Wyoming; and the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation, located in Toppenish, Washington. Applications were submitted, but not approved, by Arkansas, Massachusetts, Nevada, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and the Tyonek Native Corporation in Alaska.

States Participating in Voluntary Public Access





## VOLUNTARY PUBLIC ACCESS AND HABITAT INCENTIVE PROGRAM AWARDS

State/Tribal Project	FY 2010 Obligations	FY 2011 Obligations	Total
Arizona Game and Fish Department Access	\$600,000	\$550,500	\$1,150,500
California Department of Fish and Game SHARE Expansion		\$509,908	\$509,908
Colorado Division of Wildlife Small Game Walk In Access	\$445,318	\$395,318	\$840,636
Georgia Wildlife Resources Division Public Access for Wildlife Recreation		\$325,440	\$325,440
Hawaii Department of Land and Natural Resources Habitat Improvement		\$169,905	\$169,905
Idaho Department of Fish and Game Access Yes	\$400,000	\$400,000	\$800,000
Illinois Department of Natural Resources Recreational Access	\$525,250	\$481,250	\$1,006,500
Iowa Department of Natural Resources Habitat Management Access	\$500,000	\$500,000	\$1,000,000
Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks	\$1,500,000	\$1,500,000	\$3,000,000
Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources	\$651,515	\$937,023	\$1,588,538
Michigan Department of Natural Resources and Environment Hunting Access	\$457,449	\$477,600	\$935,049
Minnesota Department of Natural Resources Access to Minnesota Outdoors	\$582,367	\$912,500	\$1,494,867
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks New Ventures		\$373,811	\$373,811
Nebraska Game and Parks Commission Expanding Public Access	\$1,091,164	\$1,309,843	\$2,401,007
New Hampshire Fish and Game Department Wildlife Recreational Access		\$75,000	\$75,000
North Dakota Game and Fish Department Private Land Open to Sportsmen	\$300,000	\$412,500	\$712,500
Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife Open Fields	\$786,795	\$775,704	\$1,562,499
Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission Fishing Access		\$500,000	\$500,000
Pennsylvania Game Commission	\$1,500,000	\$1,500,000	\$3,000,000
South Dakota Department of Game Fish and Parks Hunting Access	\$558,325	\$504,320	\$1,062,645
Texas Parks and Wildlife Department Increasing Public Access		\$813,068	\$813,068
Utah Division of Wildlife Resources	\$84,837	\$1,045,345	\$1,131,182
Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries		\$205,000	\$205,000
Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife Expanding Hunting	\$836,999	\$1,039,176	\$1,876,175
Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources	\$936,040	\$1,030,045	\$1,966,085
Wyoming Game and Fish Department Private Lands Public Wildlife		\$937,434	\$937,434
Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation Wildlife Recreation		\$157,250	\$157,250
	\$11,756,059	\$17,832,940	\$29,588,999

Given limited VPAHIP funding available and the amount of expressed need by those interested in VPAHIP, it is necessary that VPAHIP funding be competitive. VPAHIP applications received are reviewed and ranked by a federal interagency panel. The panel considered factors such as, but not limited to, the applicant's administrative skills and personnel qualifications to cost effectively deliver a public access program; the availability of technical service producers to assess, maintain, restore, and enhance wildlife habitat; the widespread acceptance and participation by landowners; the size and scope of the recreational activities and program envisioned; and the program and public benefits to be derived.

Following application review the FSA makes approval and funding determinations. Approved applicants subsequently engage in a financial agreement with the Commodity Credit Corporation, with awarded funds provided upon preparation of a programmatic environmental assessment and satisfactory completion of National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requirements including the issuance by the FSA of a Finding of No Significant impact (FONSI) to the human environment.

A total apportionment of \$33.34 million of VPAHIP funds have been released by the Office of Management and Budget to FSA to date. FSA incurred obligations of \$29,588,999 associated with 29 approved applications received from 26 separate state fish and wildlife agencies and one tribal government entity for VPAHIP funding. Un-obligated funds were returned to the Commodity Credit Corporation.

The New Hampshire Fish and Game Department was unable to fulfill their NEPA requirements before the termination of their VPAHIP grant. Therefore, the \$75,000 of VPAHIP funds previously obligated to them was de-obligated and returned to the Commodity Credit Corporation in September 2012. Excluding New Hampshire, a total of \$29,513,999 of VPAHIP funds have been paid out to state and tribal grantees described above.

Funds received by the states and tribe are used for landowner outreach and program enrollment and associated activities. Landowner outreach included direct (personal contact, mailings, and phone calls) and indirect (presentations, website announcements, newspaper stories, radio announcements, and press releases) methods.

Grantees offer a number of incentives to encourage landowners to open their land for public access, such as financial and technical assistance and increased law enforcement.

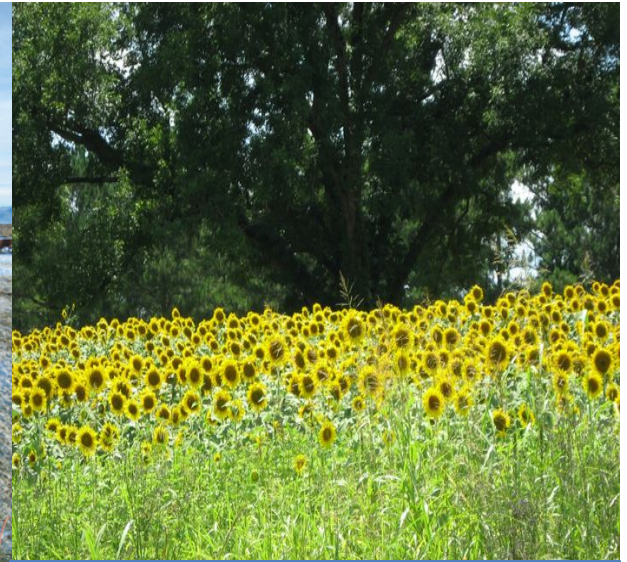
Incentives for public access include payments for one-year contracts, multi-year agreements, and long-term easements. VPAHIP funds can also be used for habitat enhancement incentives and for administrative costs associated with program delivery and ensuring natural resource protection and public safety.



55% of the VPAHIP funds received by the grantees have been spent for landowner public access incentives.

31% of the funds have been spent by the grantees for landowner incentives for wildlife habitat enhancements.

14% of the funds have been spent by grantees on administrative functions such program oversight, technical assistance and law enforcement, placing information kiosks, signage and boundary markers at each public access site, developing websites and publications showing location of public access sites, and other expenditures associated with protecting private property rights; conserving the soil, water and wildlife resources found on public access sites; and ensuring the safety and enjoyment of recreational users of the public access sites.





Common recreational activities associated with lands enrolled in state and tribal public access programs are hunting, wildlife watching, fishing, boating, and trapping, and other compatible recreational activities.

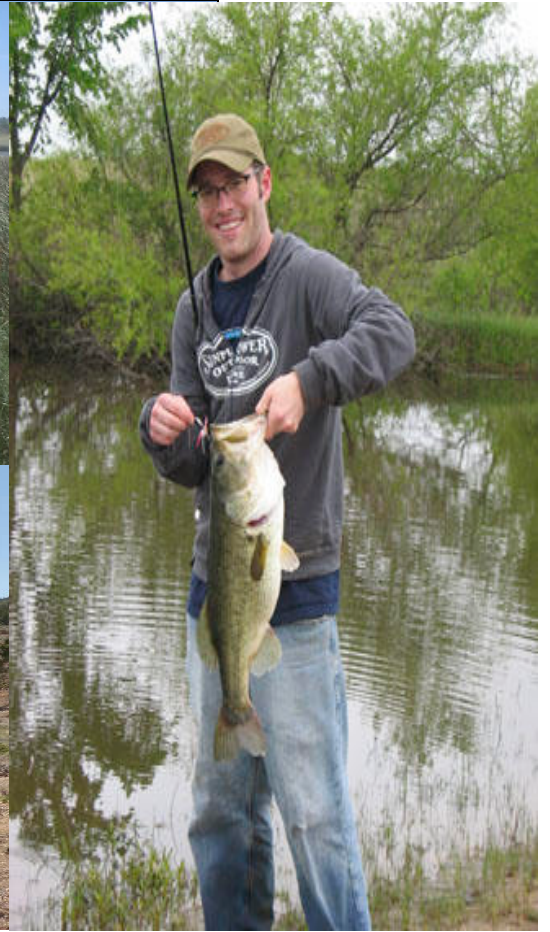




# Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program Accomplishments

As a result of new or expanded state and tribal public access programs brought about by the availability of VPAHIP funding, an additional 2790 willing landowners opened their land to public access during 2011 and 2012. This represents a 12% increase in the number of private landowners providing public access. These landowners provided an additional 1.6 million acres of private land open to public access. The availability of this additional land represents a 15% increase in private land open to public access. It is estimated that an additional 80,000 recreational users took advantage of the expanded recreational opportunity as a result of VPAHIP. It is also estimated that 185,000 acres of wildlife habitat will be enhanced through VPAHIP funding, including 8096 acres also enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program.

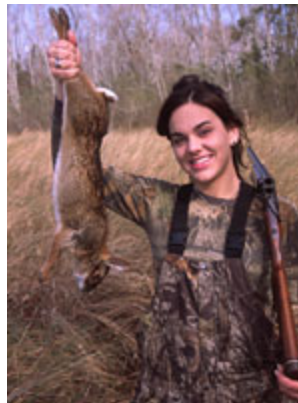






## Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program Results

*Availability of additional public access land has re-connected many Americans not previously exposed to it to the great outdoors, helping to grow a new generation of stewards that will appreciate and conserve our natural resources, foster our outdoor legacy, and preserve some of our social traditions.*





*Landowners see value in program participation and willingly open their land to public access.*

Feedback from landowners participating in state and tribal public access programs has been positive. Financial incentives help offset property taxes. Participating in these programs provides some limited liability protection. Some landowners get excited with seeing others enjoy their land and have an interest in preserving hunting traditions. One survey of program participants found that 65% of the landowners would not have kept their land open to public access without VPAHIP incentives. Another State reported 82% of their participating landowners extending current short term contracts into longer term agreements as a result of positive enrollment experiences and additional VPAHIP incentives offered.



*Outdoor recreationists are appreciative of the additional opportunity and experiences offered by public access programs.*

Hunters in one survey stated that they had little time available to travel great distances to recreate or previously had no access to land and valued the availability and opportunity that public access land close to their home provided.

Wisconsin found that 92% of hunters using state public access lands said they would re-visit the same property enrolled in the program as a result of enjoyable experiences afield.









*Public access programs have improved natural resource condition and enhanced wildlife habitat providing for more abundant wildlife populations.*













*Rural communities have benefitted from the economic activity associated with the use of public access lands supported through VPAHIP.*

Sportsmen and women provide badly needed revenue for local grocery stores, restaurants, gas stations, outdoor apparel stores, hunting, fishing and bait shops, and other businesses throughout rural America. Expenditures associated with these wildlife dependent recreational activities were estimated to be \$137 billion nationwide or approximately 1% of the nation's gross domestic product in 2011. Wildlife associated expenditures exceeded \$9 billion in both New York and Florida; \$7 billion in California; and \$6 billion in both Texas and Michigan. Even at the other end of the spectrum, wildlife dependent recreation brought in \$351 million to the economies of local Delaware communities. Studies have shown that hunters annually spend approximately double that of the average angler, and more than three times that of the average wildlife watcher. The addition of 80,000 recreationists experiencing outdoor opportunities nationwide as a result of VPAHIP is estimated to have contributed at least \$150 million to local economies (using an average annual expenditure of \$2,484 for hunters and \$1,000 for other recreational users) throughout rural America.





2011-12 was truly the first full year of VPAHIP implementation. The additional availability of public access land, brought about by VPAHIP funding, especially when located in proximity to urban centers facilitates opportunity for more people to get out and enjoy America's Great Outdoors. Preliminary results indicate that the program is providing the desired benefits envisioned.

However, no additional VPAHIP funds were apportioned in FY 2012 as a result of the language contained within the Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act of 2012 which stated that none of the funds appropriated or otherwise made available by this or any other Act shall be used to pay the salaries and expenses of personnel to carry out the VPAHIP.

2008 Farm Bill authority expired on September 30 but was extended, including VPAHIP authority, with the Taxpayer Relief Act through September 30, 2011. This Act authorized \$10 million of VPAHIP funds to be appropriated. But the various Continuing Resolutions that have occurred in 2013 have not provided those appropriations. Additional Congressional action on VPAHIP appropriations seems unlikely.

