

THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY

Policy Brief Series

The Farm Bill: Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Improvement Program

The Conservation Title in the Farm Bill is the source of several programs designed to help landowners conserve natural resources on private land through federal financial and technical assistance. The Voluntary Public Access- Habitat Improvement Program (VPA-HIP) enables state and tribal governments to increase public access to private lands for recreational opportunities and enhance habitat for game, fish, and other wildlife.

Methods

VPA-HIP is a competitive grants program that offers states and American Indian governments funding to develop public access programs for private land. The Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) administers the program by providing technical assistance and block grants to qualifying states and tribes.¹

Each state and tribe that receives VPA-HIP support uses that funding to develop new public access programs or supplement existing programs. Individual landowners and other private entities can then apply to the state and tribal programs directly for rental payments and technical services in exchange for voluntarily opening their lands for hunting, fishing, hiking, and other activities.¹

VPA-HIP was first authorized in the 2008 Farm Bill for \$50 million, but only issued grants in 2010 and 2011 before expiring.² The program was reauthorized in the 2014 Farm Bill for \$40 million and transferred to the NRCS from the Farm Service Agency (FSA) within the Department of Agriculture.¹

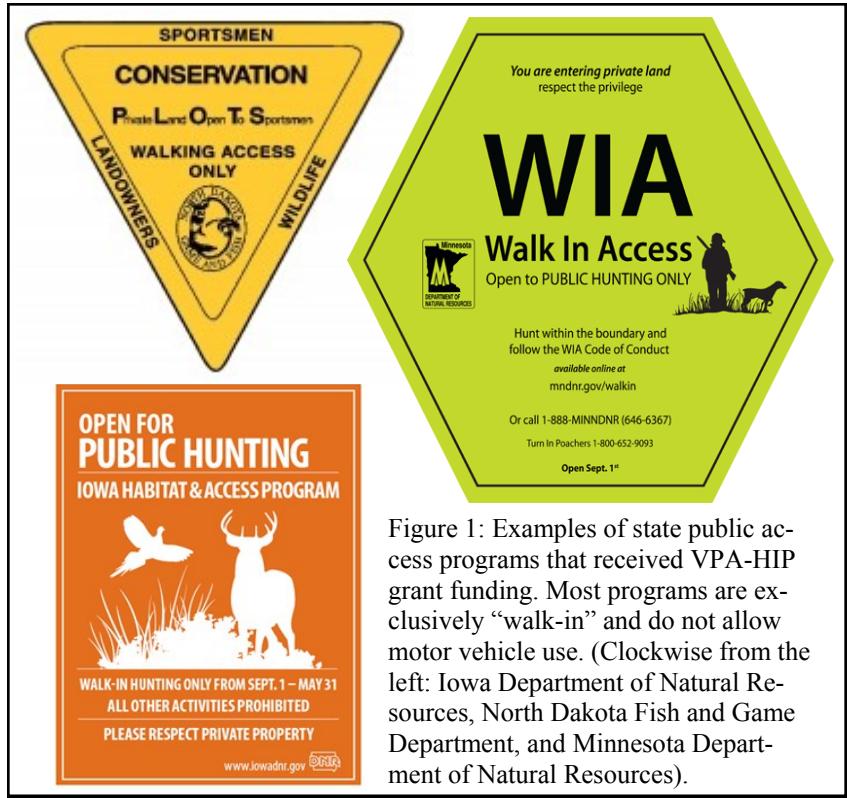


Figure 1: Examples of state public access programs that received VPA-HIP grant funding. Most programs are exclusively “walk-in” and do not allow motor vehicle use. (Clockwise from the left: Iowa Department of Natural Resources, North Dakota Fish and Game Department, and Minnesota Department of Natural Resources).

Results

During the initial round of grants in 2010, 17 states received \$11.76 million in VPA-HIP funds.² These states enrolled 1,064 landowners covering 451,000 acres of land and water and 68 miles of stream for public access over the course of 2011.² In addition, 868 landowners who were already enrolled in public access programs re-enrolled 350,000 acres and 43 miles of streams through the program.² FSA issued \$17.8 million more in 2011, adding several more states and one tribe.³ Following reauthorization, NRCS awarded \$20 million to 10 state and tribal governments for 2014.⁴

Discussion

VPA-HIP grants are very competitive; only 10 of the 25 states and two tribes that applied for grants in 2014 received funding.⁴ NRCS determines which state or tribal public access programs to fund based on a priority system designed to maximize both public access and wildlife resources. Considerations include the amount of acreage that will be available to the public, the amount of wildlife habitat available or enhanced, and how much the funding will be matched by state, tribal, or local government, or private organizations.⁵

Implications for Wildlife Managers

Lack of public access is consistently one of the most compelling barriers to sportsmen, anglers, and wildlife viewers. VPA-HIP grants allow states and tribes to open up more lands to recreation, generating interest in conservation and revenue for state fish and wildlife agencies that supports science-based management of wildlife. Wildlife managers are then empowered to manage those lands for the public interest.

The Farm Bill: Voluntary Public Access– Habitat Improvement Program: Features



The locations of Wisconsin VPA-HIP properties in red in 2012 (Credit: Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources).

The Economic Benefits of Increased Public Access²

Sportsmen and other recreationalists are important sources of revenue for state fish and wildlife agencies from taxes on guns, ammunition, and travel. Furthermore, outdoor recreation supports rural communities through spending on local accommodations. A 2012 study quantified this return on investment in 13 of the 17 original state grantees throughout 2011 and found that in that year, recreationalists spent an additional 18.2 million dollars on transportation, lodging, and equipment (doubling the federal investment of 9.1 million to those states). In addition, the report estimated that the increased recreation from VPA-HIP supported an additional 322 part time and full time jobs that generated \$14.5 million in salary.

VPA-HIP improving public access in Wisconsin^{6,7}

The Wisconsin Public Hunting Grounds (PHG) program provided financial assistance to willing landowners to open their lands for public access. Although historically successful, rates began to drop and the amount of acres enrolled in the program trended downward until there were only 14,000 acres enrolled in 2010. In 2011, Wisconsin received \$1.9 million from the federal VPA-HIP which allowed Wisconsin to build their own VPA-HIP program. Wisconsin started to pay better rates and build capacity for outreach and customer service within the program. As a result, Wisconsin retained nearly all 14,000 previously enrolled acres and added over 32,000 acres in Fiscal Year 2011.



A landowner near Grand Rapids, Michigan directs hunters on his property as part of Michigan's Hunting Access Program (Credit: Dave Kenyon/Michigan Department of Natural Resources)

Sources

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