

Pennsylvania's Hunter Access Program

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PENNSYLVANIA'S private lands are vitally important for wildlife conservation and our rich hunting heritage. Realizing that hunting access depends on cooperative relationships, the Game Commission has fostered interactions among hunters and landowners for 75 years. The Cooperative Farm-Game Program began in 1936 to improve game habitat in farming regions. It was also intended to create more open hunting ground near population centers, better protect landowners from irresponsible hunters and encourage farmers to improve farmland habitat for all wildlife.

The program became an overnight sensation. Hunters saw it as a way to obtain more hunting opportunity and farmers saw it as a means to manage their game populations through hunting, trapping and habitat enhancements. Each year the program gained more favorable reviews and endorsements. It started in the southeast and quickly expanded across the entire state. Additional opportunities were later added to include smaller landholdings (Cooperative Safety Zone) and large forested properties (Cooperative Forest Game).

Today, all branches are included under the Game Commission's "Hunter Access Program."

With 14,000 private land cooperators enrolling more than three million acres, the benefits to hunters and landowners are more relevant than ever.

COOPERATOR BENEFITS:

Landowner Liability Protection

It is essential that landowners who allow hunting access feel comfortable that they are protected from liability. In 1966, the Pennsylvania Legislature passed the Recreation Use of Land and Water Act (RULWA). The Act provides liability protection to owners, tenants, lessees, occupants, or persons in control of lands on which public access is allowed for hunting. Enrollment in the Hunter Access program affords RULWA protection to landowners. In addition, Game Commission signs are provided to increase safety and establish no hunting zones around occupied dwellings. It is important to note that landowners who charge a fee for hunting access are not covered under RULWA.

Increased Law Enforcement

Unfortunately, all too many private landowners must contend with illegal activities, such as littering or dumping, illegal ATV use and illegal killing of wildlife.

True hunters deplore these acts, because they know it leads to more "Posted" and "No Trespassing" signs. The Game Commission provides increased law enforcement presence on Hunter Access Program lands to deter illegal behavior. Roads and trails that may be damaged during certain periods of the year are considered officially closed when posted with agency-provided signs. Posting of other official signs and patrolling by Game Commission personnel are provided, especially during hunting seasons.

Game News Subscriptions

Complimentary *Game News* subscriptions were enjoyed by Hunter Access cooperators for many decades, but due to funding shortages this incentive was discontinued in 2005. Many cooperators were quick to convey their dissatisfaction, and in the next few months *Game News* will be returned to cooperators. The return of *Game News* is possible through funds recently secured from the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Improvement Program (VPA-HIP). These funds were appropriated from the 2008 Farm Bill and issued through the Farm

Services Agency. *Game News* subscriptions will continue to be provided to cooperators in the long term.

Habitat Improvement Work

One of the original Hunter Access Program goals back in 1936 was to improve wildlife habitat on private lands. Because more than 80 percent of Pennsylvania's wildlife habitat is on private lands, this is still a major intent. This year, habitat management work on Hunter Access land is being expanded thanks to VPA-HIP funds. Some of the management practices available to landowners include native grass and wildflower plantings, invasive shrub mowing (like multiflora rose) and non-commercial forestry practices (such as aspen cutting). All costs for all these practices are covered by the Game Commission, and PGC staff handles any administrative details associated with contracted work.

For Hunter Access cooperators enrolling in CREP, an incentive payment is available for landowners who opt for the "Establishment of Permanent Native Grass" conservation practice (CP2).

Cooperators within PGC-defined Wild Pheasant Recovery Areas are eligible for annual and 3-year set-asides on existing grass and cropland. Incentive payments are made for seasonal mowing restrictions. All of these management options are intended to improve habitat for wildlife that require grasslands, shrub lands and young forest habitats.

Wildlife Population Management

Hunters were the first wildlife conservationists and continue to be essential to wildlife population management. Although the agency offers depredation permits and nuisance wildlife removal on a limited basis, these means can be precluded by allowing hunters and trappers access to a property.

Landowner Hunting License

Landowners with more than 80 acres enrolled are eligible for the reduced cost landowner license (\$3 plus issuing fee), one license per property, which can be issued to the owner or immediate family member living on the property.

Landowner Antlerless Deer License

Every cooperating landowner may purchase a single landowner antlerless deer license for their county. These licenses are part of, but issued prior to, antlerless tags allocated by Wildlife Management Unit and different from the separate DMAP program.

Seedlings and Bird Boxes

The Game Commission's Howard Nursery produces top quality seedlings and wood products for habitat. Cooperators are eligible for 500 to 1,000 tree and shrub seedlings at no cost every year. Additional seedlings may also be purchased at affordable prices. One free blue bird box is also provided upon request to each cooperator each year, and other cavity nesting boxes (barn owl, kestrel, flicker, wood duck, etc.) are available at wholesale cost.

THE COOPERATIVE AGREEMENT:

In exchange for the benefits of Hunter Access enrollment, landowners agree to allow reasonable hunting access. Cooperators also have flexibility in the types of hunting they allow. The following categories were created to suit landowner objectives: deer/bear, turkey, small game and trapping. Limitations within these categories are permitted, as long as at least one category has no limitations. Here are some examples:

Deer/Bear—could limit to a season or sporting arm type (example: can hunt archery and muzzleloader, but not firearms season).

Turkey—could limit to a season (example: can hunt fall turkeys, but not spring gobbler).

Small Game—could limit a species (example: can hunt squirrels and rabbits, but not pheasants).

Trapping—could limit a trap or animal type (example: can trap water courses, but not uplands).

COOPERATION WINS

The Game Commission has a long history of cooperation with hunters and landowners. The Hunter Access Program is being improved through recent VPA-HIP funding that promotes increased enrollment and private land habitat management. In the coming months, *Game News* articles will expand on various aspects of the Hunter Access Program and how it benefits hunters and landowners alike. □