



Welcome to OPEN FIELDS

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As a youth of the 50s, I would routinely gather up my hunting gear and walk with Sam, the family bird dog, to a local farm where I could hunt birds and explore nature within an area that now lies well within the Washington Beltway. I would leave home at daybreak to explore the local woods, fields and waters and return home late, sometimes with game but always with the satisfaction of a good day spent afield. That was a long time ago, and now precious hunting land I roamed as a lad is covered with asphalt and concrete—a mall, condos, and apartments.

While I have long since moved away from my childhood home, I find that more and more landowners are posting their land off-limits for public hunting. There are many reasons for this behavior, including use of the land for family enjoyment, concern for liability, and protection of property from vandals. However, this trend, when combined with population growth and its attendant housing, employment, and service-facilities development, are rapidly destroying wildlife habitat and preventing today's youth from enjoying the quality outdoor pursuits that I treasured as a boy. While we will never return to those halcyon days, we should all be grateful that there is a movement afoot among our state and federal conservation agencies to make it easier for sportsmen to hunt and fish on private lands.

A new federal hunter-access program that will open millions of acres of previously closed private lands for hunting and fishing was announced by the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture on July 8. Building on highly successful hunter-access programs in states like Montana and Kansas, the formally titled Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program, known as "Open Fields" encourages farmers and ranchers to allow sportsmen to pursue outdoor recreation on their lands.

The Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership (TRCP), Pheasants Forever, Ducks Unlimited, and the Wildlife Management Institute worked for nearly a decade with Senators Kent Conrad (D-N.D.) and Pat Roberts (R-Kan.) and Congressman Collin Peterson (D-Minn.), state fish and wildlife agencies and others to promote the concept of a national hunter-access program. As TRCP President and CEO Whit Fosburgh enthusiastically trumpeted at a press conference with Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, "Open Fields is the first federal landowner incentive program of its kind to enhance access for hunting and fishing and has been a flagship issue for the TRCP since our inception. Today's announcement by the federal government is an unqualified victory for fish and wildlife conservation and our hunting and fishing traditions."

Authorized by the 2008 Farm Bill, Open Fields will enhance existing state access programs and allow states or tribes that have not yet established public access programs to do so. It provides \$50 million in federal grants through 2012 to state programs that encourage private landowners to open their lands for wildlife-related recreation and to enhance fish and wildlife habitat on their property.

The USDA Farm Service Agency is offering competitive grants to qualified state fish and wildlife agencies and tribes that meet eligibility requirements. They may propose to expand existing public access programs,

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create new public access programs or provide incentives to improve habitat on enrolled program lands.

Funding priority will be given to state or tribal public access programs that meet the following objectives:

- Maximize participation by landowners;
- Ensure that land enrolled in the program has appropriate wildlife habitat;
- Provide incentives to strengthen wildlife habitat improvement efforts on Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) land;
- Supplement funding and services from other federal, state, tribal government or private resources that is provided in the form of cash or in-kind services; and
- Provide information to the public about the location of public access land. There is a disincentive for states whose migratory bird hunting seasons are not consistent for residents and non-residents.

The states or tribes that receive Open Fields grants will be able to use the funds to pay landowners rental fees, provide technical or conservation services, and expand enrollment of acreage for public access. More information about the Voluntary Public Access Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program can be found online at www.fsa.usda.gov/vpa.

Hunter-access programs like Open Fields are already popular in many states, with 26 states currently running programs. They provide rental payments and incentives like technical assistance to landowners who offer recreational access. Most of these programs are funded from hunter license fees and have limited budgets of \$1 million or

less, so the addition of federal funds will be extremely important to their continued success and growth.

According to research by the Wildlife Management Institute, approximately 50 million acres are enrolled in a variety of state hunter-access programs. For more information, go to www.hunt-ingerheritage.org/access-programs.

Some farmers and ranchers worry about potential liability for injury to the public if they provide access, but fortunately, many states are providing blanket liability relief, and all states provide some type of liability protection. Furthermore, states have found that liability claims are exceedingly rare for access programs.

It's worth exploring how some states have successfully established popular sportsmen access programs. The states of Montana and Kansas offer good examples. Montana started its Block Management Program in 1985 and expanded it in 1996. In 2010, 1,275 landowners will provide public access to 8.8 million acres. Each Block Management Area (BMA) is managed appropriately, with some strictly regulating entry of hunters and others having fewer restrictions. The land is leased for fall hunting and access is free of charge to the hunter. In return for participation, landowners may receive a complimentary sportsman's license, limited liability protection, livestock loss reimbursement if needed, and compensation (up to \$12,000) to offset potential public hunting impacts. The Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks also provides signs, maps, permission books, and on some BMAs, staff to patrol and assist hunters.

Kansas started a walk-in hunting-access program in 1995. The Department of Wildlife and Parks enrolled 1 million acres by 2004. Landowners receive compensation dependent on amount of acres enrolled and the length of the contract, and land is leased for both fall and spring hunting. Eligible lands include those enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), native rangeland, wheat or milo stubble and riparian or wetland areas. An atlas of available lands is published annually and agency officials patrol leased tracts.

While a myriad factors seem to discourage youngsters from hunting these days, it's satisfying to know that increased hunting opportunities are on the horizon. I hope an enhanced hunter-access program bolstered by Open Fields will be coming to your state soon, and that you and your children will enjoy the wholesome activity of going afield in pursuit of game well into the future. ■