

# HELPING PUBLIC WILDLIFE ON PRIVATE LANDS

CONSERVATION  
POLICY COLUMN

**Charlie R. Booher**  
BOONE AND CROCKETT CLUB  
POLICY CONSULTANT

**Managing public wildlife residing on private land is an ephemeral question for wildlife managers—and one we typically struggle to answer.**

The quintennial Farm Bill has become a vehicle for the federal government to provide voluntary technical and financial assistance to landowners in return for providing ecological and commercial benefits to the public.

With 12 titles spread over hundreds of pages of legislation, the Farm Bill is one of a handful of recurring bills in Congress. Most simply, legislators working on the Farm Bill must agree on nearly the entire corpus of policy when it comes to growing, processing, or consuming food and fiber in the United States. This legislation touches every American daily, regardless of whether we are enrolled in any of the programs this bill authorizes or funds.

The Farm Bill's conservation and forestry titles also represent the largest federal investment in voluntary

private land conservation efforts and present several opportunities for innovation in the field of conservation, restoration, and access. By providing private landowners the incentives and tools they need to conserve valuable timberlands, wetlands, grasslands, and other habitat values on their lands, USDA and other federal agencies can achieve beneficial results for producers, fish and wildlife habitat, water quality, rural economies, and nationwide climate goals.

We know that because most land in the lower 48 is privately owned, private lands are home to most fish and wildlife species that occur in this country. Because of this, these lands also offer some of the best habitat and opportunities for outdoor recreation. So, private land conservation programs in the Farm Bill support a whole slew of wildlife species, including both game and non-game, threatened, endangered, "of greatest conservation need," and thriving.

## WHY HUNTERS SHOULD CARE ABOUT THE FARM BILL

While the text is dry and program status updates often sound like a farm commodity report you *might* hear on the radio, there is plenty to be interested in for folks who care about wildlife. The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP; pronounced "Krep" or "C-Rep"), Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP; "Equip"), Wetland Reserve Program (WRP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Agricultural Conservation Enhancement Program (ACEP; "A-sep"), Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), and many other alphabet soup programs support millions of dollars of conservation and restoration every year. Each provides slightly different benefits for various habitat types, agricultural production, and ecosystem services.

The Voluntary Public

Access and Habitat Improvement Program (VPA-HIP; VEEP-a-hip) is another one of these programs, but it likely provides the most tangible benefits to hunters. Introduced in 2008 and reauthorized in the 2014 and 2018 Farm Bills, this program provides funds to open public access to hunting and fishing on private lands.

Under this program, state and Tribal governments apply for grants to grow, improve, and innovate their public access programs. From there, private forest, farm, or ranch lands become eligible for financial assistance from the state and Tribal wildlife agencies that know their jurisdictions and constituents better than anyone else. The 2018 Farm Bill funded the program at \$50 million, which was committed by the Natural Resources Conservation Service in a competitive grant process in 2019. Montana has the Block Management Program, Ohio has Public Access for Wildlife (OPAW), and

**Funding public access to private lands in a voluntary manner helps give landowners an extra source of income (or at least offset their costs), while hunters gain access to some prime wildlife habitat.**



Read Andrew McKean's first-hand experience on private land on page 38.

Texas has its Public Hunting Draw System—all of which, along with nearly every other state, have benefited from this program in the past. The program has been so successful and subscribed that many organizations are calling on Congress to increase funding for these efforts to \$150 million for the next five years.


Funding public access to private lands in a voluntary manner helps give landowners an extra source of income (or at least offset their costs), while hunters gain access to some prime wildlife habitat. It's a win-win. Adding habitat improvement just sweetens the deal, and VPA-HIP allows up to 25 percent of funds to

be spent improving habitat for wildlife. This, among a suite of other Farm Bill conservation programs, provides public benefits to wildlife habitat, improves water quality, and sequesters carbon on private lands.

The VPA-HIP program is part of a broader trend toward collaborative conservation. In this case, by bringing together landowners and hunters in a way that cultivates trust and understanding between these two groups. As Andrew McKean's article in this issue attests (see page 38), all should welcome any opportunity to bring hunters and landowners to the table.

As hunters, we can experience the benefits of this program firsthand, but this work goes far beyond improving access. We know that hunting contributes to maintaining strong outdoor recreation economies nationwide.

Of course, these Farm Bill programs aren't without critics. Some suggest that private markets for these ecosystem services might be a better way to compensate landowners, while others note that these programs don't always deliver the results we're looking for. However, the Farm Bill continues to present incredible opportunities for providing wildlife habitat, hunter access, and supporting



Read more about private land conservation.

rural economies on private lands across the nation. As Members of Congress begin to craft the 2023 Farm Bill, the Boone and Crockett Club and American Wildlife Conservation Partnership members will continue to ensure that hunters and anglers are at the table to help craft the important policies. ■

*Claitor G. Gentry*



**Kenetrek**  
Boots  
FOR THE TRAIL LESS TRAVELED

**MOUNTAIN EXTREME**

Built for unyielding traction, support and comfort in the most rugged terrain and weather. Thick leather uppers wrap around supportive nylon midsoles, on top of high traction outsoles. Bottom line: They make it possible to get anywhere you need to go in total comfort.

WWW.KENETREK.COM  
800-232-6064

©KENETREK, LLC 2023