Southwick Associates. "Assessing the Economic Benefit of the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP): 2011." Produced for the Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies under Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration grant #100-54.3-C-31-F.

The publication was funded by the Wildlife Conservation Grant Program, a program supported with funds from the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Program of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and jointly managed with the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies.

This report was not funded from VPA-HIP funds.

To see the technical report presenting full details, visit the "Free Reports" section of www.SouthwickAssociates.com.
As part of the 2008 Farm Bill, the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP) was designed. It encourages landowners to voluntarily open their lands to public recreation—primarily hunting and fishing. The program was designed to augment state-administered public access programs, many of which are limited by insufficient funds. Landowners are offered incentives—such as lease payments, technical services for habitat enhancement, and legal protection against landowner liability—to open their lands to public access.

Fifty million dollars were authorized for the VPA-HIP program to be paid out over four years (2008-2012). However, funding was delayed until late in the 2010 fiscal year, and then, due to legislative action, was cancelled for the 2012 fiscal year, bringing the program to an premature close. Nevertheless, in this short time, it was possible to measure the economic and recreational benefits created by the VPA-HIP program in 2011.

According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, there are 34 million hunters and anglers in the United States who spend approximately $76 billion annually in pursuit of their pastime. However, participation is increasingly limited as access to land and waters for hunting, fishing, and wildlife-dependent activities are reduced by development, legal issues, and increasing numbers of Americans desiring recreational access to open areas. One solution is to open more private lands for public use.

Research firm Southwick Associates, which specializes in natural resource economics, quantified the economic returns from VPA-HIP investments in 13 of the 17 states that participated in the program’s first year. The $9.1 million invested by VPA-HIP in those states in year one resulted in an additional $18.2 million dollars being spent by recreational users. This represents a 99 percent return on taxpayer investment, benefiting rural communities and landowners in all participating states.

This spending generated $41.7 million dollars in new economic activity and supported 322 full and part-time jobs across the nation, providing $14.6 million in payroll for businesses whose products and services were purchased by users of VPA-HIP-enrolled lands.

Although VPA-HIP was slated to provide four years of funding, Congress prematurely halted the program due to the difficult federal budget climate. The successes of the program witnessed in just a single year would have undoubtedly compounded with each successive year as hunters and anglers became aware of the available lands and as landowner enrollment continued to grow by year in states where one tied government was awarded VPA-HIP grants, opening thousands of additional acres to public access and potentially doubling the economic benefits reported here.

A Juicy return.

Money invested by VPA-HIP enjoyed a 99% return in just 12 months periods. That’s Wall Street sweetheart Apple’s return the only 90%.

Benefits of the Voluntary Public Access & Habitat Incentive Program: 2012

WHAT IS VPA-HIP?

What are VPA-HIP’s Benefits?
M ore than 80% of funding for most wildlife conservation programs is provided by hunters and anglers.

Why Pay People to Recreate?

The answer is VPA-HIP does not pay people to recreate. Instead, enrolling landowners are compensated for making their land and waters available to hunters and anglers. Without incentives, fewer acres would be open, which would ultimately mean fewer sportsmen. As a result, rural economic health would be negatively impacted. Hunters and anglers are the primary financial supporters of state fish and wildlife conservation programs. Through excise taxes and license revenues, they have contributed more than $10 billion toward conservation and annually provide more than 80 percent of the funding for most fish and wildlife agencies. Statewide management of VPA-HIP enrolled private lands allow sportsmen to easily locate and identify areas where they’re permitted to hunt and fish through published and online maps— a huge factor when it comes to encouraging both resident and nonresident sportsmen to visit and spend tourism dollars. By incentivizing landowners to open their lands, the economic and conservation benefits from hunting and fishing can be maintained and enhanced.

Unlike many farm Bill programs, often encumbered with onerous mandates that must be adhered to, VPA-HIP allowed landowners to make decisions for states and local governments to take actions best suited for their local areas, and VPA-HIP did not pay people to recreate. Instead, enrolling landowners are compensated for making their land and waters available to hunters and anglers. Without incentives, fewer acres would be open, which would ultimately mean fewer sportsmen. As a result, rural economic health would be negatively impacted. Hunters and anglers are the primary financial supporters of state fish and wildlife conservation programs. Through excise taxes and license revenues, they have contributed more than $10 billion toward conservation and annually provide more than 80 percent of the funding for most fish and wildlife agencies. Statewide management of VPA-HIP enrolled private lands allow sportsmen to easily locate and identify areas where they’re permitted to hunt and fish through published and online maps— a huge factor when it comes to encouraging both resident and nonresident sportsmen to visit and spend tourism dollars. By incentivizing landowners to open their lands, the economic and conservation benefits from hunting and fishing can be maintained and enhanced.

KEY PROGRAM DIFFERENCES

Why Pay Landowners to Open Private Acres?

Unlike many farm Bill programs, often encumbered with onerous mandates that must be adhered to, VPA-HIP allowed landowners to make decisions for states and local governments to take actions best suited for their local areas, and VPA-HIP did not pay people to recreate.

The most important stakeholder group—landowners—a major voice in how programs were designed, decisions and actions are ultimately in the hands of landowners. Without incentives, fewer acres would be open, which would ultimately mean fewer sportsmen. As a result, rural economic health would be negatively impacted. Hunters and anglers are the primary financial supporters of state fish and wildlife conservation programs. Through excise taxes and license revenues, they have contributed more than $10 billion toward conservation and annually provide more than 80 percent of the funding for most fish and wildlife agencies. Statewide management of VPA-HIP enrolled private lands allow sportsmen to easily locate and identify areas where they’re permitted to hunt and fish through published and online maps— a huge factor when it comes to encouraging both resident and nonresident sportsmen to visit and spend tourism dollars. By incentivizing landowners to open their lands, the economic and conservation benefits from hunting and fishing can be maintained and enhanced.

How is VPA-HIP Different from Other Programs?

Unfortunately, landowners say due to concerns over liability; the costs to maintain and improve roads and areas impacted by increased traffic; worries over litter, vandalism and gates being left open; and the time required to deal with public inquiries regarding access, many of them are hesitant to open their properties to the public. In fact, only 37% of surveyed landowners say they would have opened their land to general public access without the VPA-HIP program.
The Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks, and Tourism allocated VPA-HIP funds toward two different programs. For hunters, they developed a complimentary VPA Access program, which included a plan to develop more public lands with the funding modelled on the Walk-In Access Hunting Program. For anglers, they expanded their Fishing Impoundments and Stream Habitats (FISH) program. In late 2011, a total of 75 new landowners opened 736 water acres (a 52 percent increase), 32 stream miles, and nine big river access sites for public access. Fishing began in these sites at the onset of the 2012 fishing season.

The Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife developed a Landowner Fishing Access Program that saw 64.5 water acres and 18 miles of stream enrolled upon initiation of the program. For the majority of the participating landowners, it is the first time they have enrolled their lands in this type of program.

Early feedback is extremely positive. Recreational users have shared comments such as “Thank you for opening to the public,” “Like what you are doing, keep it up!” and “VPA-HIP is a good use of public monies.”

Funding from VPA-HIP was used to expand hunting and fishing opportunities throughout the state. Specifically, by enrolling 196,640 acres of land and 20 stream miles on behalf of 50 landowners. These lands and streams were open to the public and provided hunting and fishing opportunities through VPA-HIP investments in land ownership. For each dollar invested, $5.91 is estimated to be generated each year over the next 12 years as increased hunter expenditures flow through the rural economy.

For anglers, Kansas expanded its Fishing Impoundments and Stream Habitats (FISH) program. In late 2011, a total of 75 new landowners opened 736 water acres (a 52 percent increase), 32 stream miles, and nine big river access sites for public access. Fishing began in these sites at the onset of the 2012 fishing season.

The state has a longstanding Hunter Access program, which has seen continued decline as participation levels are in decline. In 2011, the program supported 123 landowners, and the program is expected to continue. The state is also developing a new program for public access on private lands. The program is expected to open in 2012 and will be called the VPA-HIP Hunter Access Program (VPA-HIP HAP).

The Iowa Department of Natural Resources piloted a program called the Iowa Habitat and Access Program (IHAP). In just one year, 1,365 acres were enrolled in the program through a cooperative effort between state agencies and private landowners. Each dollar invested toward access to private acres will generate roughly $5.91 each year over the next 12 years as increased hunter expenditures flow through the rural economy.

In the first year, 10 landowners enrolled 1,365 acres for an average of 7.5 years. Based on estimated yearly investments to support habitat improvement work, every dollar is estimated to generate $1.82 in additional sportsman spending, further benefiting the rural economy and conservation.

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Minnesota: Much of Minnesota’s 5.3 million acres of public hunting lands are in the northern part of the state. VPA-HIP funds were used to provide access in the southwestern region. In 2011, a total of 89 landowners enrolled 9,113 acres, meeting 91 percent of the Department of Natural Resources’ goal to enroll 10,000 acres in the first year. Investments to landowners for access total roughly $105,000. These new acres are estimated to have spurred $300,000 in extra hunter spending, generating a return of $2.83 for every dollar invested.

Nebraska: Under Nebraska’s reconfigured Open Fields and Waters Program, funded in part by VPA-HIP, 193 new landowners enrolled an additional 74,175 acres of land and water, as well as 8 miles of stream for public use. The program expansion is estimated to have generated an additional $3.6 million of in-state spending and $1.6 million of in-state trip and equipment-related spending in 2011 based on surveys and reports. Just under $370,000 of VPA-HIP funds was invested to support these new landowners, generating an estimated return of $4.37 for every federal dollar invested.

Pennsylvania: By expanding existing access programs, VPA-HIP funding helped the state open 40,152 acres owned by 260 landowners to the public. These landowners say that the ability to allow the public to enjoy the land and liability protections are among the most important benefits of the program. More than 75% indicate they would like to continue participation once their current contracts end.

North Dakota: The Game and Fish Department enrolled 156 landowners to provide additional walk-in opportunity through the Private Land Open to Sportsmen—Wetland Reserve Program. All landowners are enrolled under a 30-year contract and 80 percent of landowners are satisfied with the program indicating continued access for many years to come. Over the life of each contract, VPA-HIP investments average roughly $36,000 per year and are expected to generate $4.3 million in additional sportsman spending, further benefiting the rural economy and conservation.

South Dakota: VPA-HIP funding helped expand the state’s successful Walk-In Access Program to the southeastern portion of the state where a need for public access was not being adequately met. The state enrolled 28,000 acres of private land and water for public use for an average of 8 years. Over the first year of the program, every dollar of VPA-HIP investment is estimated to have generated $1.76 in additional sportsman spending, benefiting the rural economy and conservation.

Wisconsin: The Voluntary Public Access Program, which replaced Wisconsin’s struggling Public Hunting Grounds program, allowed Wisconsin to nearly double the public land available for public hunting, fishing, trapping and wildlife viewing. As a result, these landowners report that $364,000 in extra hunter spending, generating a return of $2.10 for every dollar invested.
1,932 total landowners voluntarily enrolled in state public access programs funded by VPA-HIP in 2011. Eighty-three percent of landowners are satisfied with their program, more than 75 percent would like to continue participation and 63 percent of landowners say had it not been for the benefits of participating in their state program, they might not have made their land available to the public.

VPA-HIP investments in 2011 supported a total of 970,197 acres for public hunting, fishing and related recreation. This equals 1,410 square miles, or more than 20 times larger than the District of Columbia.

In 2011, 24,173 estimated recreational users in 13 states took advantage of newly enrolled lands available through the VPA-HIP program.

$91 million invested by HIP in 2011 generated:
- $417 million in new economic activity
- 12,244 full and part-time jobs in hunting and fishing related businesses, as well as in ancillary service industries such as hotels, restaurants, gas stations and retail shops.

In 2011, 4,542 water acres—roughly 7 square miles—were made publicly available for fishing and related recreation. The equal 180 square miles, or more than 20 times larger than the District of Columbia.

Hundreds of thousands of acres of public lands are “land locked” surrounded by private lands with no access to the public. In 2011, VPA-HIP opened 17,268 land-locked acres to public access.

A total of 187 miles of stream—nearly the distance from Washington, D.C. to Baltimore and back—were made available for fishing and related recreation supported through VPA-HIP.

In 2011, 4,542 water acres—roughly 7 square miles—were made publicly available for fishing and related recreation.

A look at some of the highlights of VPA-HIP.

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- 12,244 full and part-time jobs in hunting and fishing related businesses, as well as in ancillary service industries such as hotels, restaurants, gas stations and retail shops.