Wisconsin Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program

Final Grant Accomplishment Report

Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources
101 S Webster St
PO Box 7921
Madison, WI 53707-7921

Reporting Time Period:
January 2011 – December 2012

Amount of Funds Received:
$1,966,085.00

Amount of Funds Obligated
Administration: $386,642.09
Access: $1,511,127.26
Habitat: $0

Amount of Funds Unobligated
$47,544.79

Photo Credit: Missy Sparrow-Lien
If we conservatively assume 0.5 hunters and 0.5 wildlife watchers each visitor day on all VPA-HIP properties annually, we project:

47,815 hunter use days
47,815 wildlife watching use days

The USFWS 2006 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife-Associated Recreation in Wisconsin found that resident hunters spent $26/day and resident wildlife-watchers spent $19/day in pursuit of these recreational activities.

Hunter use expenditures = $1,243,190
Wildlife watching expenditures = $908,485
Annual User Expenditures = $2,151,675

Photo Credit: Melissa Keenan
Annual investment in the VPA-HIP program through landowner payments is $305,302. Considering annual user expenditures, the VPA-HIP program in Wisconsin is expected to generate a return of $7.00 for every dollar invested.
Number of Landowners Contacted Regarding Public Access: 49,845 landowners

People were contacted directly (mailings, phone calls, etc.) and indirectly (presentations, website views, press releases, etc.) regarding the VPA-HIP program. The most success came from a direct mailing to all Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) participants in Wisconsin totaling just over 12,000 private landowners. As a result, 52 landowners, or 20% of total VPA-HIP participants enrolled into VPA-HIP. A four-page article on the VPA-HIP program was published in the Wisconsin Natural Resources Magazine in August 2012 generating additional interest from landowners looking to enroll and hunters looking for a new place to hunt.  [http://dnr.wi.gov/wnrmag/2012/08/land.htm](http://dnr.wi.gov/wnrmag/2012/08/land.htm)

Photo Credit: Missy Sparrow-Lien
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Promotion & Outreach

Additional Public Land Acres Open to Access
As a result of VPA-HIP: 610 acres land, 3 acres open water
• Many of these land-locked properties were enrolled in the Managed Forest Law (MFL) program where landowners receive a tax break if they open their land to public access. VPA-HIP now provides an access point to these lands.

Acres of Habitat Enhancement thru VPA-HIP
CREP: 0 acres
Non-CREP: 0 acres
• No funds were designated for habitat enhancement in Wisconsin’s VPA-HIP grant proposal. However, VPA-HIP field staff provided technical assistance to interested landowners. Approximately 50% of VPA-HIP participants received technical assistance such as general habitat improvement advice and referrals to other local, state, and federal conservation agencies that provide cost share for habitat enhancement practices.
• A total of 3,259 CREP participants were contacted regarding VPA-HIP and 17 enrolled in VPA-HIP.

Photo Credit: Melissa Keenan
The Wisconsin DNR was instrumental in promoting the VPA-HIP program in the week before the annual gun deer hunt.

- An “access chat” allowed staff to answer questions from hunters looking for new places to hunt.
- VPA-HIP was featured in an “E-Update” from Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker to a subscription of 100,000 people.
- A VPA-HIP video was produced and featured on the DNR webpage. To date, the video has 2,197 views on YouTube. Viewers were from 40 of the 50 states, 1733 of those views were from Wisconsin, 180 from Illinois, and 78 from Minnesota.
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Enrollments

Properties Enrolled: 262
Acres Enrolled: 42,985.13 acres
Average size: 185.56 acres

Acreage Breakdown

- Agriculture Land: 23,814 acres
- Grassland/wetland: 9,802 acres
- Forest: 9,367 acres
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Enrollments

Number of Participating Landowners
Before VPA-HIP: 88 landowners¹
After VPA-HIP: 241 landowners

Percent Increase 174%

Private Land Open to Public Access
Before VPA-HIP: 14,231.99 acres¹
After VPA-HIP: 42,985.13 acres

Percent Increase 202%

¹Participating landowners and acres identified above were enrolled in the state-funded Public Hunting Grounds (PHG) program prior to implementation of VPA-HIP in 2011.
A survey was provided to each landowner of every property enrolled in VPA-HIP.

Of the 262 properties enrolled, we received 241 responses (92%)

- Most landowners would not continue to keep their land open without the VPA-HIP program (53%).
- In August 2012 all existing VPA-HIP participants were offered three-year extensions and new enrollees were offered longer (5-6 years) lease agreements. A total of 216 lessors (82%) extended their existing lease agreements or entered into longer lease agreements. The new end date for these lease agreements is August 31, 2017.
- Most feedback from landowners has been positive. Some of the reasons landowners enrolled were:
  - Excitement of seeing visitors enjoy their land.
  - Interest in keeping hunting traditions alive in Wisconsin
  - Currently do not hunt their own property
  - Increased wildlife damage control
  - Financial incentives that help offset taxes
  - Previously enrolled in the Public Hunting Grounds (PHG) program
  - Liability protection

“We have a 91-acre marsh with a lot of open water that attracts Sandhill cranes, turkeys, and other wildlife. I want everyone who loves hunting to have access and enjoy my farm like my husband and I have.”

- VPA-HIP participant
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Recreational Users of Private Access

Although it is unknown how many hunters accessed lands enrolled in the Public Hunting Grounds (PHG) program prior to VPA-HIP, a conservative estimate would be that each of the 88 previously enrolled PHG properties were visited each day by 0.5 hunters\(^2\). Therefore, PHG properties would see 16,060 hunters annually.

\[88 \text{ properties} \times 0.5 \text{ hunter} \times 365 \text{ days} = 16,060 \text{ hunters}\]

\(^2\)Hunting was the only activity allowed on lands enrolled in the PHG program.

Photo Credit: Missy Sparrow-Lien
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Recreational Users of Private Access

To date, many responses have been received from the online survey (43) as well as post card surveys (575) evaluating visitor satisfaction with their visits to VPA-HIP properties. However, anecdotal observations of visitor use suggest this represents a small fraction of the actual visitors to these properties. Additionally, the VPA-HIP webpage had an impressive number of page views recorded (87,629 views from 10/1/2011 - 12/12/2012), along with many emails and phone calls requesting maps and program information. This suggests there is great interest in the VPA-HIP program in Wisconsin.

If we assume 0.5 wildlife viewers and 0.5 hunters visit each of the 262 VPA-HIP properties daily, we can expect to see 95,630 recreational users accessing VPA-HIP lands annually.

262 properties* (0.5 hunter + 0.5 viewer) * 365 days = 95,630 recreational users
Survey cards were available at all VPA-HIP properties and a similar survey is available on the Wisconsin VPA-HIP webpage. To date, user survey results are as follows:

What activity did you participate in on VPA-HIP lands today?

- Hunt: 431
- Wildlife Observation: 73
- Other: 48
- Fish: 16
- Trap: 5
Why did you choose to use this VPA-HIP Property today?

- Close to my home: 326
- No access to private land: 295
- Just come across the land: 123
- Limited amount of time: 105
- Other: 93
- Recommended by someone: 72
- No other public land nearby: 48
- Other private land required a fee: 31
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Visitor satisfaction

- The most popular activity conducted on VPA-HIP lands in Wisconsin was hunting. However, many visitors participated in multiple activities during their visit such as hunting & wildlife observation, hunting & trapping, etc.
- #1 reason for choosing VPA-HIP property
  - “Close to my home” (57%)
    - Average distance travelled one way = 19.8 miles
- #2 reason for choosing VPA-HIP property
  - “No access to private land” (51%)
    - Land typically visited for recreation = public land (87%)
- Of the 573 surveys cards collected:
  - 144 harvested fish or game
    - 25% success rate
- The majority of people would visit the same VPA-HIP property (92%) and/or another property (75%) again in the future

Photo Credit: Melissa Keenan
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Visitor satisfaction

One VPA-HIP property that was recently restored through the USDA’s Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) became a hotspot for bird watching. Over 125 different bird species have been sighted on this property including many Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) such as the Federally listed Whooping Crane. A visitor captured one of her many visits here in a YouTube Video.

- A total of 11 properties enrolled in VPA-HIP are also enrolled in WRP

Photo Credit: Melissa Keenan, Video Credit: Cynthia Bridge
Many people were successful hunting on VPA-HIP properties, especially during the 2012 Spring Turkey Season.

Photo Credit: Missy Sparrow-Lien

Photo Credit: Michael Versland

Photo Credit: Ryan Brathal
“This program makes my many, years worth of patrons license purchases all that much more valuable. I find incredible value in this program.”

-Visitor to V1 in Richland County

“I really appreciate having the additional opportunity for hunting land and think it’s a great program. I harvested a doe from a VPA property on Monday.”

-Regular Visitor of VPA Lands

“Having [been] a conservation patron for [a] few years this program has come right at the moment when I was considering that the lack of the public access is going to negatively impact my decision to continue with hunting sport.”

-Visitor to V167 in Walworth County