

USDA to Invest \$20 Million to Help 15 States, Including Wisconsin, Increase Recreational Public Access on Private Land

Madison, Wis. – August 17, 2015 – Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack today announced that the U.S. Department of Agriculture will invest \$20 million to partner with 15 state agencies to improve wildlife habitat and enhance public access for recreational opportunities on privately held and operated farm, ranch and forest lands. The projects are being funded under the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentives Program (VPA-HIP).

“Our partnerships with state governments will help them work with interested landowners to enhance hunting and fishing and other wildlife-dependent recreation, to enhance wildlife habitat, and to protect wildlife species and encourage new opportunities for local businesses,” Vilsack said. “These projects are excellent examples of USDA’s successful efforts to connect public and private partners for long-term conservation gains that benefit sportsmen, wildlife, private land owners, and the public.”

The selected state governments will encourage owners and operators of privately held farm, ranch or forest land in their respective states to voluntarily open their land for hunting, fishing and other wildlife-dependent recreation and to improve fish and wildlife habitat on that land. USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation (NRCS) awarded grants for projects in Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Kansas, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Oregon, Washington, Wisconsin and Wyoming.

In Wisconsin, the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) will receive a grant through VPA-HIP to expand wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities in areas where access to land is limiting and to promote sound wildlife habitat management among participating landowners. This program will allow the expansion of Wisconsin’s extremely successful and popular VPA-HIP effort, which to date has tripled the acres of private land available for public use (from 14,232 acres to a peak of 42,985) and increased the number of recreational users from an estimated 16,000 to more than 95,000 annually. The increased acreage available for outdoor recreation and extensive promotion of the VPA-HIP program have also greatly increased the visibility of the program, such that enrolled lands are now widely recognized among outdoor enthusiasts.

The VPA-HIP program has therefore fostered a mutually-beneficial partnership among USDA, DNR, landowners and various user groups. With VPA-HIP assistance, DNR projects it will enroll 10,000 new acres of forests, wetlands, grasslands and other landscapes into an incentive program, which will pay \$3 to \$15 per acre depending upon its type.

“Connecting outdoor recreation to private lands conservation is good for wildlife, people, and rural economies,” said Jimmy Bramblett, State Conservationist in Wisconsin. “Conservation matched with good partnerships and land management will lead to sustainable recreational and economic opportunities for years to come.”

According to a 2013 study commissioned by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, the outdoor recreation economy in the United States supports 6.1 million jobs, \$80 billion in federal, state and local tax revenue, and \$646 billion in spending each year.

In evaluating proposals for funding, NRCS looked for projects that would:

- Increase private land acreage available for public use;
- Offer a public access program that gains widespread acceptance among landowners;
- Make special efforts to reach historically underserved or socially disadvantaged landowners;
- Ensure appropriate wildlife habitat is located on enrolled land;
- Strengthen existing wildlife habitat improvement efforts;
- Follow NRCS conservation practice standards for VPA-HIP habitat improvement activities; and
- Inform the public about the locations of existing and new lands where public access is available.

More detailed information about the fiscal year 2015 awardees is available at [VPA-HIP Fiscal Year 2015 Grantees](#).

When Congress reauthorized VPA-HIP in the 2014 Farm Bill, Secretary Vilsack assigned administration of the program to NRCS. In fiscal years 2014 and 2015, USDA has invested the Farm Bill-authorized \$40 million for VPA-HIP, which has helped 21 states and one tribal nation complete projects to increase wildlife-dependent outdoor recreation opportunities.

Under VPA-HIP, state and tribal governments apply for grants to encourage owners and operators of privately held farm, ranch or forest land to voluntarily open that land for public wildlife-dependent recreation activities such as fishing, hunting and birding. State and tribal governments may use VPA-HIP funds to create new public access programs, to expand existing public access programs, and to improve wildlife habitat on enrolled public access program lands. Projects can span up to three years.