

# Rules help preserve hunting areas

There are several reasons for landowners to take part in the Walk-in Hunting Area program, says the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks in addition to the lease payment.

Many owners have land far from their home or don't have time to worry about who's hunting on their land. It may be more convenient for them to enroll in the state program.

Wildlife and Parks publishes a detailed map of each county outlining each tract enrolled in the program, and hunters are asked not to contact landowners, but instead contact the department with any questions. One of the program's benefits is not having to deal with hunters.

Conservation officers periodically patrol Walk-in Hunting Areas much like other public hunting areas. Violators can be ticketed or arrested for offenses such as vandalism, littering, or failing to comply with wildlife regulations.

The program provides hunters with a place to hunt while leaving the land in private ownership. Landowners have the option to withdraw from the program at any time. They will be paid a prorated portion of the arranged lease payment and provided with signs denoting that the land has been removed from the program.

Another primary reason landowners enroll



their property in the Walk-in Hunting Area program is release of liability concerns. State law provides immunity from damages or injuries resulting from ordinary negligence when private land is leased to the state for recreational purposes, the department said.

# Walk-in program public hunting access

By Kevin Bottrell

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For a place to hunt this fall, Kansas hunters need look no further than some of their next-door neighbors, thanks to the Walk-In Hunting Access Program.

Kansas Walk-In Hunting began in 1995 as a pilot program, with the Department of Wildlife and Parks leasing land from private owners and opening it up for public hunting. This approach met with praise from both landowners and hunters, and the program has continued to be popular in the years since. There are more than 10,834 acres of walk-in hunting land in Thomas County alone.

Jake George, private lands coordinator with the department, said that anyone who owns or leases at least 80 acres of land in one area can qualify for the program. This includes resident or absentee landowners, tenant farmers or any kind of property manager. Landowners can enroll any type of land, including wetlands, crop stubble or range land.

"Anything that can provide hunting opportunities," George said.

Applications are accepted year around, George said, and while there are cutoff dates each year, landowners are always welcome to

sign up for the next season. Landowners are paid based on the number of acres and the length of time they will be open for hunting. Being in the walk-in program absolves them of any liability if a hunting accident, due to ordinary negligence, were to happen on their land. They can remove their property from the program at any time.

For hunters, the program allows them many more and diverse places to hunt close to home and around the state. It allows them to hunt on private land without having to obtain each individual landowner's permission.

Walk-in areas are covered under the same rules as state lands, plus a few additional rules that the Wildlife and Parks Department has set up for hunters making use of this program:

- Activities other than hunting are not allowed in walk-in areas. This includes trapping, unless permission is obtained from the landowner.

- Access is allowed by foot only.

- The Parks and Wildlife Department puts up signs every year marking the boundary lines of walk-in properties. Hunters should stay on the side of the line which is enrolled in the program, especially if there is a clear border such as a hedgerow or creek.

- Hunters should also keep in mind the dates that each tract of land is open. Walk-in areas are open either from Sept. 1 to Jan. 31 or from Nov.

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# allows to land

1 to Jan. 31. Entering private land at any other time may be considered trespassing.

- Some walk-in areas have further limitations. Some may be designated for dove hunting only or as "No Firearms Deer Hunting."

- Hunters should respect a buffer zone around buildings and livestock. They should take any trash and animal carcasses with them when they leave an area.

- Some of the land involved in the walk-in program, especially in northwestern Kansas, is crop land. Hunters should avoid unharvested fields. In some cases, the department will sign agreements with landowners to limit access to fields until after crops have been harvested, in which case signs will be posted around the crop warning hunters to stay out.

- Much of the land includes Conservation Reserve Program grass. Occasionally, the U.S. Department of Agriculture releases this land for cattle grazing, and hunters should be careful not to harm livestock.

Department officers periodically patrol each of the walk-in areas, just as they do on public hunting lands, to make sure hunters are following the rules.



Hunters take to the fields the opening day of pheasant season. Avid hunters, (l to r) Rex Murray, John Hill and Joel Hill, all of St. Francis, look forward to the opening of the upland bird hunting seasons. — Photo courtesy of Sandi Murray

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