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From Left: Tammy Fredrickson, Fonda Farr and Abby Hissong

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Landowners mark their property southwest of Goodland with no trespassing signs notifying hunters and others to keep out.

— Photo by Tom Betz/Goodland Star News

Walk-in hunting areas plentiful in the state

By Kimberly Davis

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The Oberlin Herald

With close to a million acres across the state in the walk-in hunting program, there are lots of places for people to bag some birds or shoot a deer.

Trouble getting access to land, said Brad Odle, regional wildlife supervisor for the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks in Hays, is the main reason that people have been giving up the sport of hunting. Many have moved to the urban areas, lost contact with their rural homes and no longer have a spot to hunt.

In 1995, the department started looking at the problem and began leasing land from private owners to give people places to hunt and fish. By 2004, Kansas had close to million acres enrolled in the program.

Since then, said Odle, the number has stayed pretty stagnant, although some owners have dropped out and others have signed up.

The program, he said, doesn't cost any tax money. The landowners are paid for the lease with money brought in through the sale of hunting licenses.

With more area available to hunt, he said, the state has sold more licenses.

Landowners in the program seem to like it, said Odle. They don't have to worry about posting signs on their property. The state puts up the signs and patrols the areas.

If there are any issues, he said, the department handles them. It's almost like a one-on-one contract between the biologist and the landowner, said Odle.

The land has to have some huntable cover, he said. Tracts that look pretty bare, he said, might have been given to the department to use for free or for a reduced rate.

For example if a landowner has a quarter of land in the Conservation Reserve program and then a quarter of wheat beside it, they might lease the wheat field for walk-in hunting, too, but are only getting paid for the quarter in the reserve program.

Most of the land in the program, said Odle, is for pheasant and quail hunting, but much of it is also open for deer and turkey hunting. On some tracts, firearms deer hunting isn't allowed.

If a landowner wants to sign up for the program, he or she can contact any of Wildlife and Parks office, said Odle. The biologist will come out and talk with the landowner, see the land, work out a contract price and have the contract signed. Odle said the contract is a simple one-page document.

From an economic standpoint, he said, hunting generates a lot of revenue for Kansas towns, especially from November to January. Outside hunters stay in our motels, buy gas and eat in the cafes.

With the walk-in program, he added, landowners don't have to worry about people knocking on their doors asking if they can hunt.

On average, Odle said, landowners get \$2 an acre per year.

“If we do have a problem,” he said, “we try to make it right. We want to be good neighbors.”

The federal government, said Odle, realizes the importance of access to these private lands to keep outdoor recreation alive. Kansas has been awarded \$1.5 million a year for the next three years to expand its current program.

Odle said the department is going to get aggressive to sign up more land.

“We want to hit the ground running,” he said, “and get this money in the landowners' pockets.”

Walk-in program has 1 million acres

By Tom Betz

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The Goodland Star-News

The Walk-In Hunting Access program developed out of a pilot project started in 1995 when the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks leased 10,000 acres of private land and opened it to public hunting.

Today, that program has grown to more than 1 million acres throughout the state.

Participating landowners receive lease payments in exchange for allowing the general public hunting access. There is no charge to users of Walk-In Hunting tracts, which are leased for hunting access only and are open only during specified dates in the fall or spring. The program is paid for entirely by hunters, through their purchase of state licenses.

Of the more than one million acres enrolled in the program, 53 percent is Conservation Reserve Program grassland, 23 percent rangeland and woodland and 24 percent cropland, the department says.

A survey of participating landowners and users through the years has found great acceptance among both groups.

The program promises hunters who buy a Kansas hunting license the opportunity to enjoy the state's wildlife resources. Much of the comment on a Walk-In Hunting blog found on the department website is about the details of the program.

"Walk-In Hunting is a great program," wrote an anonymous hunter several years ago. "I am not sure my friends and I could pheasant hunt without it, as we do not have private land contacts in western Kansas, and the areas around the lakes just gets pounded.

"I would suggest the lease payments paid be set up on a sliding scale providing the highest payments to landowners who put in fields that are good, solid, well established native grass bounded by milo, corn or other late-season feed.

"The quality of the fields is more important than the number of acres. I would gladly pay double for a hunting license if every walk-in field I went to looked like it held birds."

That sentiment was repeated frequently, but there was no response from the department.

"I welcome non-residents with open arms because of the economic benefits and the fact our (hunting) tradition is strengthened with numbers," another hunter wrote. "Kansas has some great opportunities, and plenty of folks discover their passion for the outdoors right here. More hunters means hunting as a tradition will last longer.

"Some of the land is pretty worthless. I don't know what we can do about that, but I think hunters should be able to score tracts on a report card. From there, decisions could be made as to which tracts are kept and which are cut.

"I support the walk-in program. I have taken

many birds off of it and had many opportunities at deer."

In recent years, the department has included the GPS coordinates for the areas, and programs for downloading the coordinates can be found on the department web site at kdwp.state.ks.us. The department publishes an annual atlas with maps of Walk-In Hunting lands, and maps for the area of northwest Kansas are included in this special section.

The department has issued guidelines to help hunters use these tracts, including:

- Obey all Kansas hunting regulations. WIHA areas are for hunting only. Other activities, including trapping, are prohibited through the WIHA program. Hunting access is allowed by foot traffic only. Vehicles are not allowed. Do not trespass on neighboring property. Signs will mark property lines.

- Hunt and walk only on the side which is enrolled in WIHA, especially if the area is bordered by a creek or hedgerow. WIHA tracts are open to hunting Sept. 1 to Jan. 31, or Nov. 1 through Jan. 31... (A few areas in the east may be open through March 31.)

Entering a WIHA tract prior to or after the contract period without landowner permission for any reason is trespassing. Any game species with an open season during the contract period may be hunted on WIHA, using the legal means and methods, with the exception of some WIHA tracts designated as "No Firearm Deer Hunting."

- Hunters must be ethical, respectful and sportsmanlike.

- Obey the safety zone concept. Maintain a buffer around buildings, homes, and livestock. Respect the rights of the landowner and others using the area.

- Do not litter. Take all trash with you. Do not enter abandoned or maintained buildings on the area. Do not leave game remains in parking areas or along roads. Treat the land as if it were your own and act responsibly.

- Do not destroy or damage any equipment, machinery, or other items left on the area. Take precautions to avoid starting a fire, especially during dry periods.

- Do not block access drives to crop fields or pastures on WIHA tracts or neighboring properties. Park only in designated parking areas or along the road. Leave gates as you found them and avoid stretching or damaging fences when crossing them.

- All regulations for KDWP public lands apply to WIHA. Many activities are NOT permitted through the WIHA program: Target practice, trapping, commercial or noncommercial dog training, camping, horseback riding, stocking or releasing of wildlife, operation of vehicles, discharge of fireworks, fires, littering, drinking and destructive acts, including digging, destruction, or removal of signs or vegetation.

- Respect unharvested crops and wheat



Dallas and Derick McMullen, former Norton residents, along with some friends, hunt for pheasants on some local Norton County CRP ground. Hunting is a McMullen family tradition passed from generation to generation.

—Courtesy photo by Paul Cummings

stubble fields. Department biologists negotiate agreements with farmers well in advance of harvest. In some cases, in order to obtain the property, it is agreed access is limited until crops are harvested. Such fields will be posted with "No hunting in unharvested crop." If land is included in the same area that does not have unharvested crops, that property may be hunted. If the property does not have signs, it may be hunted. However, be careful not to cause crop damage.

- The majority of land leased for WIHA is Conservation Reserve grass. Occasionally, the government releases this land for emergency haying and grazing. The department has no control whether WIHA property is hayed or grazed. However, if WIHA is hayed or grazed, the cooperator may receive a reduced payment.

Less than 25 percent of land enrolled in WIHA is cropland. This may include wheat or milo stubble and winter wheat. In some cases, tracts are in crop rotation; one year a tract may be winter wheat and the next it may be milo stubble. In other cases, the cropland portion is accepted to round out the other acres and make signing and access easier.

Some winter wheat is specifically enrolled for goose or crane hunting. WIHA contracts are signed months in advance of the season, and at the time the contract was signed, the area has suitable habitat and hunting opportunity.

As part of the agreement, livestock may be present on some tracts. These areas may still be hunted, but hunters must use common sense to avoid harassing or injuring livestock.

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