

Six Month Progress Report
Natural Resources Conservation Service
Voluntary Public Access-Habitat Incentive Program
Grant Award # 69-3A75-16-514
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Prepared by
Isaac Sanders
Statewide Coordinator
Access & Habitat Program
Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife

Oregon Open Fields VPA-HIP Progress Report

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The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (Department), through the Access & Habitat (A&H) Program, has used Natural Resources Conservation Service Voluntary Public Access-Habitat Incentive Program funds for eight hunting access areas, two habitat projects and two Open Fields Coordinators. The Department has obligated \$1,461,681 of the \$1,560,122 grant award leaving \$98,440 for additional access and habitat projects. See appendix A for details on projects funded.

Department Grant Responsibilities:

- 1) *Expand its existing Access and Habitat (A&H) Program to provide more opportunities for hunting, fishing, and other wildlife-dependent recreation with goals of securing 50,000 acres of new access in year 1 (enrolled for 5 years), 25,000 acres of new access in year 2 (enrolled for 4 years), 15,000 acres of new access in year 3 (enrolled for 3 years), and spending \$100,000 on habitat projects during each of the three years.*

Year 1

A total of 12,012 acres of hunting access in the Willamette Goose Hunter Access and Columbia Basin Upland Initiative target areas enrolled during the first year of the grant period falling short of our goal of securing 50,000 acres of access. The two dedicated Open Fields Coordinators made numerous contacts with landowners, attended various farm and ranch meetings and generally promoted the programs, but were unable to secure additional acreage in the two target areas. Multiple leads developed in both areas but ultimately the landowners declined to participate in the program. Several issues cited by landowners for not participating are below:

The potential for hunters to introduce or spread invasive weeds in grass seed fields in the Willamette Valley target area is an impediment to securing additional access. The cost of treating a field easily exceeds the benefits the producer receives in reduced crop depredation and the payments for access. At this point ODFW has not identified an effective method to address hunters as a vector for the introduction of weeds to grass seed fields.

The requirement to advertise and publicly promote the access is cited by landowners as an issue, they fear that widely promoting the opportunities will lead to overuse and trespass issues onto neighboring fields. While all the Open Fields project are well signed and boundaries of the hunting area are on the Oregonhuntingmap.com the concern remains.

Finding additional areas with suitable habitat and willing landowners in the Columbia Basin Upland Initiative target area has proven more difficult than anticipated. Most of the areas with good upland bird hunting have enrolled in an access program or have private hunting leases. Similar to the Willamette Valley the requirement to promote the access areas is cited as an issue for not participating.

Year 2

The beginning of year two grant funds were used in combination with hunting license dollars to secure access to 250,000 acres of industrial timberlands managed by Hancock Forest Management (HFM). The acres secured in year 2 of the grant far exceeded the Department's goal of securing 25,000 acres and easily filled the gap created in year one. The project provides year-round public access for hunting, fishing, and general recreation on 250,000 acres, for \$1 per acre, for five years on HFM managed properties in northeast Oregon. Providing access to highly desired mule deer, Rocky Mountain elk, bear and turkey hunting, the project also maintains access to popular shed hunting areas and a very popular winter steelhead fishery on the Grande Ronde River.

- 2) *Encourage willing landowners to participate in the A&H program by offering per-acre access payments, posting boundary signs and informational kiosks, and providing enforcement patrols to landowners whose projects are approved through the A&H review process.*

To date the Department Open Fields program has used VPA-HIP grant funds to secure public hunting access to 275,847 acres of working private lands in Oregon at an average cost of \$2 per acre. The Department provides and posts boundary signs, typically provides at least one informational kiosk per site stocked with printed maps of the Access Area and user survey cards. Oregon State Police Fish and Wildlife Troopers patrol all A&H Access properties during open periods.

- 3) *Provide an opportunity for participating landowners to improve wildlife habitat on access lands by submitting a habitat improvement grant proposal. These habitat enhancement and restoration projects are expected to directly improve 3,000 acres of wildlife habitat and provide an indirect benefit to approximately 150,000 acres*

The Department exceeded the target of directly improving 3,000 acres of wildlife habitat by more than a third with two projects, Aspen Valley and Dixie Meadows. The two projects will improve 4,650 acres of working ranch lands in central Oregon at an average cost of \$47.84 per acre. The projects include; juniper treatments, water developments and invasive weed treatments.

The Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission approved \$50,000 in Open Fields VPA-HIP funds toward the creation of a 230 acre shaded fire. With approval of the fire break project, the Department will have obligated \$272,479 of the \$300,000 of the grant funds earmarked for habitat work under Department responsibilities # 1 above. At this time the Department anticipates obligating all \$300,000 identified for habitat work on habitat projects prior to the end of FY 2018.

4) *Utilize the VPA-HIP funds to target four priorities not presently being met by current funding:*

- *Columbia Basin Upland Initiative which includes Morrow, Gilliam, Umatilla, Sherman, and Wasco counties*
- *Willamette Goose Hunter Access in western Oregon*
- *Access projects located outside of the first two target areas*
- *Enhance habitat for big game and other wildlife on enrolled access properties to complement the hunting access initiatives outlined in the first three priorities*

The Columbia Basin Coordinator secured 9,890 acres of access, primarily for upland bird hunting, across the five county target area. Access to upland bird hunting areas is important in efforts to recruit, reactivate, and retain hunters, a priority for the Department. The Columbia Basin Open Fields acres along with two other Department projects, the Upland Cooperative Access Program and the Heppner Regulated Hunt Area, both funded by hunting license dollars, combine to create over 52,000 acres of quality hunting in the Columbia Basin. The combined projects create a destination area for upland bird hunters throughout the state, for many that return year after year, the trip is the highlight of the season.

The dedicated Willamette Open Fields Coordinator has secured access to 2,122 acres for waterfowl hunters in the Willamette Valley. Providing access to mostly dry land goose hunting, the project also provides a tool for the Department and landowners to address crop damage from foraging geese. With several of the properties minutes away from Eugene, the third largest city in Oregon, the Willamette Open Fields properties provide hunters the opportunity, before work or school, to take advantage of the additional hunting hours offered by the September Canada Goose season.

Located outside of the Columbia Basin and the Willamette Valley, the Hancock Forest Management NE Access project discussed under responsibility #1 provides access to 250,000 acres of industrial timberlands in northeast Oregon outside of the target areas.

The Aspen Valley and Dixie Meadows in addition to the habitat improvements, provide "By Permission" hunting to 13,825 acres of working ranch and timberlands near Prineville in central Oregon.

The Department's A&H program uses hunting license dollars to reimburse the cost of supplies used for wildlife habitat projects in the Columbia Basin. A wildlife habitat technician, based out of Heppner, Oregon focuses on Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) lands enrolled in the Upper Columbia Access Program, Heppner Regulated Hunt Area and Columbia Basin Open Fields access programs, totaling just over 52,000 acres. To date the technician has directly improved over 12,500 acres of habitat in the target area. Habitat activities include improving CRP areas by reseeding with native grasses and forbs, planting shrubs and invigorating decadent stands through burning, disking and mowing. The habitat work conducted by the technician directly contributes toward achieving the first habitat management objective identified by Oregon's Mule Deer Initiative for the Heppner WMU of improving habitat on 10,000 acres of winter range.

5) Target historically underserved landowners, including those that are socially disadvantaged, limited resource or beginning farmers or ranchers, for inclusion in the VPA-HIP Open Fields Program

Without a method for locating Oregon's historically underserved landowners for targeting, the Department chose to have the Open Fields Coordinators approach every viable landowner in the target areas about joining the program. During the first two years of the grant, the Coordinators; knocked on doors, attended agricultural trade shows, local grange hall meetings, Farm Bureau events and anywhere landowners may congregate to reach as many landowners as possible. To date all landowners willing to participate in an Oregon Open Fields grant have received funding.

Identifying and targeting historically underserved landowners for inclusion in the VPA-HIP Open Fields Program is the biggest challenge faced by the Department with this grant. A review of the landowners enrolled in the Open Fields program fails to produce any landowners identified as underserved. While no single factor can identify why the Department has been unable to advantage historically underserved landowners, several issues likely predominate.

Controlling large acreages, legacy family and commercially owned farms dominate the Willamette Valley grass seed industry leaving little room for historically underserved landowners. Another issue in the Willamette Valley, and across the state, is that small parcels and areas near homes and communities are not conducive to public hunting access. It is possible a majority of Oregon's underserved landowners own smaller parcels and/or are located in rural residential areas and that is why the Department has not been able to steer VPA-HIP funds to them. Lacking comprehensive demographic information on Oregon's landowners the Department can only speculate on the reasons why some landowners remain underserved.

A similar situation exists in the Columbia Basin Upland Initiative areas with the majority of property controlled by a small number of individual families or corporate

interests. The majority of quality upland bird lands are already enrolled in an access project, have existing private hunting leases, or have declined to participate in the program, leaving very little additional acreage to enroll.

- 6) *Facilitate reservations for participating landowners who choose to open their property on a "by permission" or reservation basis to limit the volume of hunters and account for individuals using the property*

The Department handles reservations for landowner's participating in the VPA-HIP Open Fields Program. Reservations are made online starting August 1st of each year are on a first come, first served basis. Hunter's that successfully register for a hunt are contacted by the Department and provided with information on the hunt. The Department maintains a webpage dedicated to VPA-HIP Open Fields projects, www.oregonopenfields.com with information on; how to register, hunt areas, maps of the properties, access periods, species distribution, fire information and more.

- 7) *Inform potential A&H participants about the VPA-HIP program and opportunities by conducting Outreach through newsletters, websites, press releases, local newspaper articles, through other government and NGO partners, and by direct mail*

The VPA-HIP Open Fields project is featured in the Access & Habitat program's 2015-2017 Biennial Report to the Oregon Legislature, has several Department webpages dedicated to the VPA-HIP Open Fields Projects, informational kiosks at project sites, social media postings, and by direct email.

Summer of 2017 saw the Departments first effort to advertise "By Permission" hunts directly to hunters with the appropriate tag by direct email. The Aspen Valley and Dixie Meadows habitat projects provide "By Permission" hunting for mule deer, pronghorn antelope and Rocky Mountain elk, all species require a controlled hunt tag specific to the Wildlife Management Unit the property is in. The targeted email generated significant interest, minutes after the message was sent the Department saw a bump of hunter reservations. Due to the limited number of tags the Department has refrained from widely advertising the properties in the past.

- 8) *Provide and install signs and kiosks to help direct hunters to appropriate parking areas and access points, and indicate boundaries, safety zones, and other "no hunting" areas.*

The Department ensures that every VPA-HIP Open Fields project is well identified by working with the landowners to post; entry points, hunt boundaries, parking areas, safety zones, open or closed roads and season dates. The Department provides all

signs, posts, kiosk materials, as well as maps (Printed and electronic) for each Access project.

- 9) *Evaluate the habitat condition of all proposed A&H projects through site visits and an established Project Evaluation Form which includes criteria ensuring that all necessary habitat elements to support species of interest are present*

As part of the grant application process the Regional ODFW Coordinator, generally a habitat biologist, conducts a site visit and completes the A&H Project Evaluation Form. The evaluation form addresses the habitat of the project site, wildlife species present, connection to public property, access and much more.

- 10) *Include all properties participating in this access program on the Department's Oregon Hunting Access Map (www.OregonHuntingMap.com), an interactive online tool that utilizes the base-maps and user familiarity of Google Maps™ and allows users to find access areas based on species or location of interest*

All of the Department's hunting access projects, including all VPA-HIP funded projects, are on the Department's www.OregonHuntingAccessMap.com website. The website has over 500,000 page views with usage peaking in mid-October during big game hunting season. The Department is committed to improving the application, recently adding data layers with historic fire data and public landownership, as well as general performance improvements.

- 11) *Include in the A&H Private Lands Hunting Opportunities Packet (distributed to hundreds of interested hunters and outdoorsmen/women each year or it is available as a pdf download from the website) detailed information on all access areas*

All VPA-HIP Open Fields projects are included in the Access & Habitat Private Lands Hunting Opportunities Packet (HOP) available August 1 of each year.

- 12) *Post, along public roads adjoining/intersecting A&H participating properties, large "Access Area" signs and, at many access areas, kiosks to provide hunters with all the information they need to successfully find publicly accessible areas that match their interests, to locate project area boundaries, and to understand associated rules and regulations*

All VPA-HIP Open Fields projects are signed, with large, two foot by three foot "Welcome to Hunt" or "By Permission" signs at entry points, along public access routes and property lines. As noted under responsibility #8 above, most of the access

properties have at least one kiosk with; maps, user survey cards, contact information and area use rules.

13) Give special media attention to newly-contracted VPA-HIP access area projects in the Big Game Regulations and appropriate credit to NRCS and other cooperators on all A&H-related publications

While Aspen Valley and Dixie Meadows are the most recent projects funded by the grant, as discussed under #7 above, the Department has chosen to advertise the projects in a more precise manner through direct email to hunters with the appropriate tags.

Approved by the Commission too late to make the printing deadline for inclusion in the 2017 Oregon Big Game Regulations, the 250,000 acre Hancock Forest Management NE Access Project will be advertised in the 2018 Oregon Big Game Regulations.

Appendix A

Open Fields VPA-HIP Grant Funds Obligated August 2017						
Project Title	Grant Agreement Period	Open Fields Funds	Annual Project Cost	Private Access Acres	Private Habitat Acres	Cost per Acre
Calvin Farms	9/10/2016-3/10/2021	\$1,800	\$360	150	-	\$2.40
Kropf Farms	9/10/2016-3/10/2021	\$10,956	\$2,191	913	-	\$2.40
Tenbusch Farms	9/10/2016-3/10/2021	\$3,576	\$715	298	-	\$2.40
Manning Farms	9/10/2016-3/10/2021	\$9,132	\$1,826	761	-	\$2.40
Bunker Hill Access	10/8/2016 1/31/2021	\$12,105	\$2,421	1,345	-	\$1.80
Four Mile Access	10/8/2016 1/31/2021	\$13,554	\$2,711	1,506	-	\$1.80
Social Ridge	10/8/2016 1/31/2021	\$63,351	\$12,670	7,039	-	\$1.80
Hancock Forest Mmt. NE	1/1/2016- 12/31/2021	\$750,000	\$250,000*	250,000	-	\$1.00
Aspen Valley	8/15/2017-12/31/2019	\$138,500	\$46,167	8,000	3,850	\$36
Dixie Meadows	8/15/2017-12/31/2019	\$83,979	\$27,993	5,835	800	\$105
Open Fields Project Total		\$1,086,953	\$247,055	275,847	4,650	
Open Fields Funds for Coordinators		\$374,728				
Total Open Fields Funds Committed		\$1,461,681				
Remaining Open Fields Funds		\$98,440				

*\$150,000 per year funded by Open Fields and \$100,000 per year funded by A&H