

Wyoming Game & Fish Department's

Private Lands Public Wildlife Access Program



Annual Report 2002

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For more information, call the PLPW Access Program at (307) 473-3400 or visit the Wyoming Game & Fish Departments website at <http://gf.state.wy.us>.

Introduction

The Private Lands Public Wildlife Conservation Initiative became a permanent Department program at the end of 2001 titled the Private Lands Public Wildlife (PLPW) Access Program. In December 2001, five permanent personnel were added to administer the PLPW Access Program. The new personnel are: Matt Buhler (State Coordinator), Bart Morris (Laramie Regional Coordinator), Brian Olsen (Casper Regional Coordinator), Dan Smith (Cody Regional Coordinator) and Valerie Sailer (Administrative Assistant). The State of Wyoming was divided into three regions (Appendix A) with a Regional Coordinator responsible for each area. The State Coordinator and Administrative Assistant are stationed in Casper to oversee the operations of the PLPW Access Program.

The goals of the Initiative and permanent Program are to increase and maintain access and wildlife habitat on private lands as well as to provide access to public lands. There has been an overall increase in hunting and fishing access throughout the state since 1998. This includes access to private lands as well as previously inaccessible or hard to reach public lands. Emphasis on wildlife habitat has been modified to small projects since the implementation of the Strategic Habitat Plan by the Habitat Section.

There have been numerous changes made to the PLPW Access Program this first year of permanent status. Most notably, prior to 2002 the PLPW Access Program duties were divided among Department personnel. The new PLPW Access staff has assumed as much of the daily operations as possible. Numerous field personnel have remained active in the PLPW Access Program and continue to sign up landowners and put up signs. However, the PLPW Access staff currently performs the majority of field and office work.

In 2002, the number of acres enrolled in the PLPW Access Program remained essentially the same as 2001. The number of Hunter Management Areas (HMA) increased from 12 to 16 areas and from 441,947 to 558,630 private acres respectively. Walk-in Hunting Areas (WIHA) increased from 376 to 399 areas, but decreased in acreage from 431,180 to 417,691 acres. Walk-in Fishing Areas (WIFA) decreased from 61 to 58 areas and from 464 lake acres and 72 stream miles in 2001 to 195 lake acres and 68 stream miles in 2002. There were four primary reasons for the decrease in both Walk-in hunting and fishing. They include competition from outfitters, drought, landowners changing their minds and landownership changes.

The Wildlife Habitat Enhancement (WHE) Program began its pilot year in fiscal year 2003 (July 1, 2002 – June 30, 2003). During this trial phase, \$22,500 is available for habitat projects. Up to \$1,500 may be allocated for each project to increase or enhance wildlife habitat on private lands enrolled in either a Walk-in or Hunter Management Area. Due to drought conditions that persisted throughout 2002, many potential habitat projects were terminated. To date we have completed one project for a total cost of \$1,499. Currently there are several projects that are planned for the spring of 2003. Weather permitting, the PLPW Access Program will identify additional areas in which wildlife habitat enhancement would benefit wildlife, landowners and sportspersons.

The Access Yes Program continues to expand. During the fiscal year 2002 (July 2001 - June 2002), \$150,521 was donated to the PLPW Access Program from hunters and anglers. Sportspersons can make donations when purchasing or applying for licenses. These funds can only be used for purchasing access for hunting and fishing. Donations from applications were \$106,000 with \$71,200 from nonresidents and \$34,800 from residents. Over-the-counter license sale donations totaled \$31,831. Several organizations such as Pheasants Forever, Stoval

Beverage (Miller Distributing), and the Torrington's two-shot Goose Hunt Association donated directly to the PLPW Access Program.

Background

The PLPW Conservation Initiative began in 1997 and was managed by Mr. Kaush Arha. The Initiative was carried out for three years to determine the need and success of the program. Mr. Arha oversaw the general operations while field and administrative staff performed the majority of duties. The Initiative had two main objectives to maintain and enhance both access and habitat on private lands. Interest in the PLPW Conservation Initiative increased each year as more people became aware of the Initiative and the increased access to hunting and fishing areas. Walk-in Hunting Areas were the initiated first. From 1998 to 2002, the number of WIHA increased each year from 99 areas in 1998 to 107, 302, 376 and 399 respectively for subsequent years. Acres enrolled in WIHA also increased from 27,000 acres in 1998 to 120,000, 300,000, 431,180 and 417,691 respectively for years 1999-2002. Hunter Management Areas began with three areas in 1999 and increased to seven, 12 and 16. Walk-in Fishing also began in 1999 with a total of 37 areas. From 2000 to 2002, the number of areas totaled 57, 61 and 58 respectively.

During 2001, an evaluation took place in which landowners, sportspersons and Department personnel were surveyed to determine how successful the PLPW Conservation Initiative was and if it should be continued. It was determined that the Initiative was very successful and continuation was desired. The Game and Fish Commission directed that the PLPW Access Program become a permanent part of the Wyoming Game and Fish Department. As previously stated, a permanent staff was hired to administer the program.

Hunter Management Areas

Hunter Management Areas continue to be very popular with hunters and landowners. During 2002, 558,630 private acres were enrolled in the HMA Program, which is an overall net increase of 116,683 acres from 2001 (Figure 1). The Program chose not to re-enroll one HMA, but gained five additional areas for a total of 16 HMA's throughout the State (Appendix B).

Figure 1. Hunter Management Area acres from 1999 to 2002.

Year	HMA's	Private Acres	Landowners
1999	3	123,522	8
2000	7	357,892	26
2001	12	441,947	50
2002	16	558,630	70

The Overland Trail HMA was not renewed in 2002 due to limited hunting opportunity. However, five additional HMA's were added. The new HMA's include the Harris Ranch North of Laramie, Knight Ridge Southeast of Evanston, Monolith Ranch South of Laramie, Pitchfork Ranch West of Meeteetse, and Simpson Ridge North of Elk Mountain. The number of landowners participating also increased from 50 in 2001 to 70 in 2002.

One of the goals of the PLPW Access Program is to increase access to public lands. During 2002, in addition to the 558,630 private acres that were accessible to the public, there were approximately 735,000 additional public acres available (Figure 2) for an estimated total of

1.3 million acres. This includes public lands that were either landlocked within private lands or to which access was gained to public lands across private lands. This figure is conservative and only includes public acres located within private lands or within one section immediately adjacent to private lands. Please see Appendix B for map of HMA locations.

Figure 2. Private and public HMA acres opened to access during 2002.

HMA	Private Acres	Public Acres*	Combined Acres
Absaroka Front	28,200	96,000	124,200
Big Piney	26,080	74,240	100,320
Carter Mountain	77,584	32,640	110,224
Chimney Butte	9,330	15,360	24,690
Deer Creek	33,820	25,600	59,420
Elk Mountain	3,280	3,840	7,120
Harris Ranch	29,800	10,880	40,680
Horse Creek	68,160	12,160	80,320
Knight Ridge	22,642	14,720	37,362
Medicine Butte	7,475	12,800	20,275
Monolith Ranch	10,500	960	11,460
Muddy Mountain	46,514	129,280	175,794
Pitchfork Ranch	60,200	71,040	131,240
Rattlesnake Mountain	68,500	186,880	255,380
Simpson Ridge	44,545	31,360	75,905
Southfork	22,000	17,280	39,280
TOTALS	558,630	735,040	1,293,670

*Estimated public land acres

Walk-in Hunting Areas

Walk-in Hunting Areas also remain popular with the public, although there were fewer acres enrolled in 2002. This was attributed to several factors including outfitter competition, sale of lands to non-interested landowners, drought and landowners deciding not to renew contracts with the Department. The Department also chose not to re-enroll several areas because of the decreased habitat quality or a low potential to harvest an animal. During the Fall 2002 - Spring 2003 hunting seasons, there are 417,691 private acres enrolled (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Walk-in Hunting Areas from 1998 to 2002.

Year	WIA's	Private Acres	Landowners
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1998	99	27,000	40
1999	107	120,000	--
2000	302	300,000	--
2001	376	431,180	--
2002	399	417,691	296

Similar to the HMA program, the Walk-in Areas also try to increase access to public lands. In 2002, there was access to approximately 543,000 public acres due to the WIHA program (Figure 4). As with the HMA estimations, this only includes land-locked public acres and those acres immediately adjacent (within one section) to WIA's.

Figure 4. Private and public WIA Hunting acres for 2002 by County.

County	#	Private Acres	Stream Mile	Lake Acres	Public Acres*	Combined Acres
Albany	6	12,700	5.00	80.00	19,840	32,540
Big Horn	57	31,045	8.90		62,080	93,125
Campbell	6	12,680			14,080	26,760
Campbell/ Johnson	1	3,680				3,680
Carbon	6	21,340				21,340
Carbon/ Sweetwater	1	8,800				8,800
Carbon/ Albany	5	27,360			35,200	62,560
Converse	5	3,250			2,880	6,130
Crook	3	3,993			640	4,633
Fremont	20	14,047			76,800	90,847
Goshen	91	47,549			10,880	58,429
Hot Springs	11	8,551			10,880	19,431
Johnson	6	11,803			33,920	45,723
Laramie	34	23,551	1.75		3,200	26,751
Lincoln	3	1,040			640	1,680
Natrona	13	57,765	0.25		148,480	206,245
Niobrara	3	6,320			14,720	21,040
Park	18	47,638	1.55		62,080	109,718
Platte	77	54,308			21,120	75,428
Platte/ Goshen	6	4,162				4,162
Sheridan	7	6,786			5,760	12,546
Uinta	1	480			2,560	3,040
Washakie	15	7,563	7.85		15,360	22,923
Weston	4	1,280	4.81		1,920	3,200
TOTALS	399	417,691	30.11	80.00	543,040	960,731

*Estimated public land acres.

Several important issues affected WIHA's during 2002. The severe drought caused the Department of Agriculture to decrease the restrictions on Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) lands. Landowners who were enrolled in CRP could graze or hay their CRP lands without losing their CRP payments. This raised concern from the Department that upland game bird populations or the area itself may be severely impacted by these two activities. A concerted effort took place to identify how many landowners planned on either grazing or haying their property and how this would affect the wildlife. As a result, three contracts were amended to exclude the CRP acres from the WIHA Program.

Another issue was the reinstatement of the Pheasant Management Stamp, which was required on all WIA's where Department-raised pheasants were released. The stamp costs \$10 and recovers some of the costs of raising and releasing pheasants. Depending on the total number of pheasants raised, each pheasant may cost the Department between \$12-\$18/bird. All hunters who hunt on WIA's where pheasants are released are required to purchase the stamp.

Outfitter competition also caused several landowners to drop out. Outfitters generally pay more for hunting and fishing rights and limit the number of people accessing the area. The result is decreased areas available to the general public.

As with the rest of Western states, Wyoming has seen an increase in nonresident landowners buying ranch and farmlands and not allowing access. This appears to be done for two primary reasons, they either want their own hunting/fishing areas or a personal wildlife preserve to visit.

Walk-in Fishing Areas

The drought conditions decreased fishing opportunities throughout Wyoming. The lack of water caused several WIFA's to dry up. During 2002, there were 195 lake acres and 68 stream miles available to anglers (Figure 5).

Figure 5. 2002 Walk-in Fishing Areas.

Year	WIA's	Lake Acres	Stream Miles	# of Landowners
1999	37	120	30	--
2000	57	333	71	--
2001	61	464	72	59
2002	58	195	68	59

Since Wyoming is considered a high desert, fishing opportunities are limited. The PLPW Access staff has been searching for more areas with the help of the Fish Division. Before a new area is signed up, the Fish Division is consulted to determine the potential of the fishery. Additionally, if Fish Division personnel determine that an existing area no longer contains a viable fish population or does not help manage population objectives, the area is not re-enrolled.

Several of the WIFA locations provided additional fishing opportunities due to their proximity to public lands which allowed anglers to access previously inaccessible fishing

locations on public lands. It is difficult to determine how much additional fishing access was gained on adjacent public lands as rivers and streams typically run through a mixture of private and public lands.

Wildlife Habitat Enhancement Program

Beginning July 1, 2002, the PLPW Access Program began the WHE Program to help landowners who provide hunting and/or fishing access to enhance wildlife habitat. Each project is eligible for up to \$1,500 for a variety of projects designed to increase habitat. Examples include shelterbelt plantings, riparian habitat, cover plots, food plots, fencing and deferred grazing. The drought conditions that persisted during 2002 limited the number and scope of habitat projects. Several were cancelled due to lack of moisture needed to perform the project. To date, only one project has been completed for a total expenditure of \$1499.00.

There are several projects planned for the spring of 2003 including inter-seeding with legumes on CRP areas, shelterbelt and shrub planting, food plots and cover plots. Through the help of Habitat Section personnel, this program has the potential to help landowners who are interested in developing/enhancing wildlife habitat. The Habitat Section spends most of its time working on large-scale habitat projects and often does not have the resources to deal with small projects. The WHE program allows small habitat projects to be completed with minimal administrative costs and time. If the drought continues, however, options for habitat enhancement may be severely limited to only irrigated areas and associated projects.

Access Yes Program

Access Yes donations have steadily increased each year as more people have become aware of the program and understand that donations provide hunting and fishing access (Figure 6). During the 2002 fiscal year (July 1, 2001 – June 30, 2002), there was \$150,521 donated to Access Yes. Donations continue to increase as more individuals become aware of the Program. Access Yes donations can only be used to purchase access for hunting and fishing on private lands. There has been a concerted effort to educate the sporting public about the Access Yes program and how the money is expended. In 2002, approximately 21,000 individuals donated through the limited quota application process of which 45% were residents and 55% nonresidents. Nonresidents donated approximately \$71,200 with residents contributing \$34,800. Access Yes donations continue to increase with the majority of donations coming from nonresidents.

Figure 6. Access Yes donations by fiscal year.

Fiscal Year	Donations			Total by FY
	Organizations	Limited Quota Draw	License Agents	
2000	\$5,165	\$78,580	\$13,908	\$97,653
2001	\$6,862	\$97,361	\$35,296	\$139,519
2002	\$12,690	\$106,000	\$31,831	\$150,521
Total by Donation	\$24,717	\$281,941	\$81,035	\$387,693

Currently, there are plans for further news releases, articles, posters and informational brochures to inform the public of the Access Yes Program. The PLPW Access staff is also visiting license-selling agents trying to increase donations. Agents are informed that donations made to Access Yes equates to more areas enrolled in the Program, which in turn means more people may be out hunting and fishing thus spending more money on equipment and supplies. During FY 2002, nonresidents donated over \$2 for every \$1 residents donated through applications. It is not clear why residents donate less than nonresidents. Additionally, license-selling agents may not ask for donations due to the existing method of selling licenses. Currently all transactions are compiled by hand and keeping track of donations is labor-intensive. If the Department makes the transition to computerized license sales, this could have a tremendous effect on donations. The current system places increased time demands on the agents to keep track of each donation, which may make some agents reluctant to encourage donations. The computerized system may allow agents to automatically keep track of transactions, which will decrease their workload.

Summary

2002 was the first year the PLPW Access Program was a permanent program. The first year saw many changes to the program as it switched from a Department-wide initiative to a consolidated program with permanent staff. From 1997-2001, the program was a pilot initiative of the Game and Fish Commission to determine landowner and sportsperson acceptance and whether the need existed for a permanent program. There was overwhelming support for the Program and in late 2001, the Commission made the PLPW Access Program a permanent part of the Game and Fish Department.

At the conclusion of the Initiative in 2001, an evaluation was conducted to determine its effectiveness. Both landowners and sportspersons were surveyed to determine their feelings. Landowner's expectations and satisfaction with sportspersons behavior was high as well as improved relationship and cooperation with the Department. Nearly 80% of sportspersons were satisfied with the Program and felt that relationships between them and landowners as well as the Department improved. The survey also indicated that sportspersons felt that the Program allowed them to hunt and/or fish more than they normally would.

The PLPW Access Program provides benefits for both landowners and sportspersons. Hunters and anglers have access to both private and isolated public lands that may have been previously inaccessible. On Walk-in Areas, sportspersons do not need and are encouraged not to ask permission, simply locate the area and walk on in. For those lands enrolled in a HMA, the Department manages hunters through issuing permission slips for the landowner. Through the Program, landowners no longer have to deal with sportspersons, which was a major concern. Landowners also receive a small monetary payment based on acreage enrolled, plus they receive additional law enforcement coverage for those lands.

One of the major changes that has taken place is a switch from signing up as much private land as possible to signing up only quality areas. During the trial phase, all lands were signed up in order to get landowners familiar with the program as well as build relationships between landowners and the Department. The PLPW Conservation Initiative allowed the

Department to improve communications and cooperation with landowners. Currently, there are landowners contacting the Department to enroll their lands. In 2002, the switch was made to enroll only quality lands that would provide sportspersons the opportunity to harvest a game animal or catch fish. Some areas are enrolled to help the Department manage wildlife to obtain desirable population levels or decrease wildlife damage problems in addition to providing hunting or fishing opportunity.

During the Initiative phase, the objectives included maintaining and enhancing both access and habitat on private lands. Emphasis of the PLPW Access Program was placed on access as the Department was also developing a Statewide Habitat Management plan. The habitat plan became permanent in 2002 and consequently the PLPW Access Program shifted primarily to providing access. The Habitat Section, however, deals mainly with large-scale habitat projects. Small habitat projects were rarely conducted due to limited resources. The PLPW Access Program initiated the Wildlife Habitat Enhancement Program to complete small-scale habitat projects that could be handled easily and quickly.

The WHE pilot program began during the fiscal year 2003, which runs from July 1, 2002 – June 30, 2003. A total of \$22,500 is available for habitat projects. Several projects were to be conducted during the late summer and fall of 2002. However, drought conditions resulted in all but one project being terminated. Several more projects are planned for the spring of 2003 but will be dependent on environmental conditions. The WHE program was initiated to assist landowners enrolled in either a HMA or WIA who wanted to enhance or develop wildlife habitat on their land. Projects consist of, but are not limited to, shelterbelt planting and maintenance, food and cover plots, water guzzlers, deferred grazing, stripper-head harvesting (increased stubble), wetland habitat and restoration, fencing, dense nesting cover, and shrub/wood plantings. The first year for the WHE initiative will not be completed until the end of June 2003. There will hopefully be a second year (July 1, 2003 – June 30, 2004) of this pilot program before a formal evaluation will take place to determine if there is a need to continue this initiative.

Each year, HMA and WIHA's that are enrolled are evaluated to determine if they should be kept in the program. If it is determined that the habitat can no longer support wildlife species, the area is not re-enrolled in the PLPW Access program.

One problem encountered is that the landowner sign-up period is January through April for both WIHA and HMA's. Unforeseen conditions in the spring, such as drought, may have severe impacts on the quality of hunting later that fall.

The Department will sign up an area and list as many species as available, but this does not mean all species are present in the same quantities. For example, an area may be signed up primarily for doves and deer, but also include pheasants. The pheasant populations may be lower in the area, but there is still a chance that a hunter may harvest a pheasant. Sportspersons should keep in mind that variations in animal population numbers, drought conditions, previous hunting pressure, etc. will influence their chances of harvesting an animal.

The same is true for the WIFA program. These landowners are enrolled June through September for the following calendar year with the majority of areas open for the entire year.

Winter snow pack and spring/summer rains significantly affect the quality of the fishery. With the continued drought, several areas were very poor by the fall of 2002. Only the areas that were still sustaining fish were re-enrolled for 2003.

One criticism that has been raised is that the Department is paying for areas that were previously open to the public. One of the goals of the PLPW Access Program is to maintain access. Just because an area was open to hunting or fishing previously, does not guarantee it will remain open in the future. Numerous landowners have expressed concern about increased numbers of sportspersons each year, problems with the public, and habitat degradation. They have stated that they were thinking about closing their lands due to these concerns. Several landowners even stated that without the PLPW Access Program, their lands would no longer be open to the public even though they had previously allowed access. It is hard to quantify how many areas have remained open to access due to the PLPW Access Program.

Another goal of the PLPW Access Program is to increase access to public lands. As stated in Figures 2 & 4, there is approximately double the amount of public acres compared to private acres that were available to sportspersons. Again it is difficult to quantify the total number of public acres opened by the PLPW Access program. A conservative figure was calculated by adding the public acres within the private holdings and/or immediately adjacent to private lands. Although the entire public block is available, the whole area was not counted, only the section (640 acres) immediately bordering the private lands was included. Additionally, some of these public acres may have already been accessible from another public area/road. However, sportspersons may have had to travel a greater distance to gain access.

One of the biggest obstacles to people gaining access to private lands is the actual people themselves. There have been several situations that prompted landowners not to renew their contract in the PLPW Access program, thus their lands are no longer accessible. The Department offers additional law enforcement presence from local wardens and the Regional Access Coordinators, but constant enforcement presence is impossible considering the size of the State and limited number of law enforcement personnel. One way sportspersons can assist the Department in ensuring continued participation by landowners is to help the Department by reporting violations. Concerned sportspersons can have a positive effect on access by decreasing violations, increasing rule compliance and helping to keep private lands enrolled in the PLPW Access Program.

Access Yes donations have continued to increase. During fiscal year 2002, \$150,521 was donated to the program. Of that, \$31,831 was donated when hunting and fishing licenses were purchased over-the-counter. Donations can also be made when submitting big game applications. Nonresidents contributed \$71,200 and residents \$34,800 for a total of \$106,000. Many sportspersons do not contribute to the program even though they use Walk-in or Hunter Management Areas. Several reasons may exist for this. One is that many individuals still do not know that Access Yes donations go directly to providing them hunting and fishing access opportunities. The second is that some individuals resent being asked to donate money. It is also not clear why nonresidents contribute 2:1 over residents. The Department has, and will continue, to inform the public about the program. A concerted effort will be made to contact license-selling agents to promote Access Yes stressing the fact that increased donations equal

more funds available to enroll private lands. More private acres could in turn equate to more people hunting and fishing, which means they may be spending more money on hunting and fishing equipment and supplies.

The PLPW Access Program has evolved continually to address the concerns and ideas expressed by sportspersons, landowners and the Department. The ability to deal effectively with historically opposing groups has allowed the Program to address problems and foster effective working relationships. These concepts have allowed the PLPW Access Program to become a semi-finalist in the Innovations in American Government Award for two consecutive years. The PLPW Access Program was selected as one of the top 100 programs in the Country.

For additional information about the PLPW Access Program, please visit the Wyoming Game & Fish Department's website at <http://gf.state.wy.us> under Hunting, Fishing or Recreational Access. Specific information is available for Walk-in Hunting, Walk-in Fishing and Hunter Management. Both Walk-in Hunting and Hunter Management Areas are updated August 1st of each year for the fall/spring hunting seasons. Walk-in Fishing is updated January 1st for the proceeding calendar year.

Appendix A. Regional Access Coordinator Boundaries.

* Please contact the Access Program for a copy of the map.

Appendix B. Hunter Management Areas in Wyoming.

