

Wyoming Game & Fish Department's

Private Lands Public Wildlife Access Program



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Annual Report 2003

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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. They 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 PLPW Access staff has assumed as much of the daily operations as possible. Numerous field and office 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 2003 the number of Hunter Management Areas (HMA) increased from 16 to 21 areas and from 560,190 to 672,367 private acres. Walk-in Hunting Areas (WIHA) increased from 401 to 402 areas, and increased in acreage from 422,891 to 426,695 acres. Walk-in Fishing Areas (WIFA) increased from 58 to 61 areas. Lake acres decreased from 195 in 2002 to 110 in 2003, while stream miles increased from 68 miles in 2002 to 81 miles in 2003. Similarly as in 2002, there were four primary reasons why landowners chose not to re-enroll in the PLPW Access Program. 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 was available for habitat projects. Up to \$1,500 could be allocated for each project to increase or enhance wildlife habitat on private lands enrolled in either a Walk-in or Hunter Management Area. Fifteen projects were completed including fencing (3), tree & shrub plantings (3), food, nesting & cover plots (7) and water guzzlers (2). In FY 04 wildlife habitat enhancement money was cut from the budget; however, for the 05 Fiscal Year, the PLPW Access Program is scheduled to receive \$10,000 for more WHE projects.

Access Yes Program donations dipped slightly in Fiscal Year 2003. During the fiscal year 2002 (July 2001 - June 2002), \$150,521 was donated to the PLPW Access Program from hunters and anglers. However, in FY 2003, donations decreased to \$143,291. Sportspeople can make donations when purchasing or applying for licenses. These funds can only be used for purchasing access for hunting and fishing. Donations in FY 2003 from applications totaled

\$105,393 with \$72,300 from nonresidents and \$33,100 from residents. Over-the-counter license sale donations totaled \$26,250. Several organizations such as Pheasants Forever and Miller Distributing donated directly to the PLPW Access Program. Contributions to Access Yes include donations, conservation stamp revenue (\$2.50 per stamp) and earned interest. Overall Access Yes funds received for FY 03 totaled \$607,282, which is a \$25,532 decrease from FY 02 (\$632,814). There are several possible reasons for this decrease. They include the novelty of the PLPW Access Program decreasing, License Selling Agents not collecting donations and increasing license costs. It is hoped that if the computerized license-selling program is completed, License Selling Agents will begin asking for donations since they will no longer have to total up the donations by hand. Even so, it is unclear why more License Selling Agents don't participate since the amount of Access Yes donations directly correlates to the number of PLPW Access Program areas through both WIA and HMA locations, which correlates to more sportspeople out enjoying increased hunting and fishing opportunities and more people buying goods and services from the License Selling Agents.

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's two main objectives were 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 initiated first. From 1998 to 2003, the number of WIHA's increased each year from 99 areas in 1998 to 107, 302, 376, 401 and 402 respectively for subsequent years. Acres enrolled in WIHA's also increased from 27,000 acres in 1998 to 120,000, 300,000, 431,180, 422,891 and 426,695 respectively for years 1999-2003. Hunter Management Areas began with three areas (123,522 acres) in 1999 and increased to seven (357,892 acres), 12 (441,947 acres), 16 (560,190 acres) and 21 (672,367 acres). Walk-in Fishing also began in 1999 with a total of 37 areas. From 2000 to 2003, the number of areas totaled 57, 61, 58 and 61 respectively.

During 2001, an evaluation took place in which landowners, sportspeople 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 2003, 672,367 private acres were enrolled in the HMA Program, which is an overall net increase of 112,177 acres from 2002 (Figure 1). The Southfork HMA chose not to participate as the TE Ranch decided to handle its own hunting operations. Six additional areas were added for a total of 21 HMA's throughout the State (Appendix B). The new HMA's include the Broom Creek, North of Guernsey; Soldier Creek, West of Sheridan; Como Bluffs, North of Rock River; Diamond Lake, Northwest of Laramie; Homestake, Southeast of Sundance; and Strouss Hill,

West of Laramie. Harris Ranch HMA was expanded and renamed to Laramie River HMA. The number of landowners participating also increased from 70 in 2002 to 78 in 2003.

Figure 1. Hunter Management Area acres from 1999 to 2003.

Year	HMA's	Private Acres	Landowners
1999	3	123,522	8
2000	7	357,892	26
2001	12	441,947	50
2002	16	560,190	70
2003	21	672,367	78

Hunter Management Areas have a target goal of 1,000 big/trophy game hunter days of recreation over the course of a year. This can range from a single large landowner to multiple smaller landowners who combine their lands. Several factors are taken into consideration for HMA's. They include decreasing damage to agricultural products, management objectives, species population objectives, public recreational opportunities and access to landlocked/inaccessible public lands.

Access to public lands is a major consideration. During 2003, in addition to the 672,367 private acres that were accessible to the public, there were approximately 777,600 additional public acres available (Figure 2) for an estimated total of 1.45 million acres. This includes public lands that were either landlocked within private lands or to which access was gained to public lands by crossing 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.

Several important issues continue to affect WIHA's during 2003. The severe drought caused the habitat quality to decrease in some areas, which affected hunting opportunities. The Pheasant Management Stamp was still required on all WIHA's where Department-raised pheasants were released. The stamp costs \$10 and recovers some of the costs of raising and releasing pheasants. The stamp was only required in Sheridan, Johnson, Campbell, Goshen, Platte and Laramie Counties. Depending on the total number of pheasants raised, each pheasant costs the Department between \$12-\$18/bird. All hunters who hunt on WIHA's where pheasants are released are required to purchase the stamp.

Outfitter competition and sale of Wyoming lands to nonresidents continue to affect lands enrolled in the PLPW Access Program. 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. Wyoming has also 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.

Figure 2. Private and public HMA acres opened to access during 2003.

HMA	Private Acres	Public Acres*	Combined Acres
Absaroka Front	28,200	99,200	127,400
Big Piney	27,640	74,240	101,880
Broom Creek	33,000	1,280	34,280
Carter Mountain	77,584	37,480	115,064
Chimney Butte	9,630	15,360	24,990
Como Bluffs	12,562	5,760	18,322
Deer Creek	37,200	32,600	69,800
Diamond Lake	33,945	10,240	44,185
Elk Mountain	3,280	3,840	7,120
Homestake	26,000	5,760	31,760
Horse Creek	67,800	12,160	79,960
Knight Ridge	22,642	14,720	37,362
Laramie River	36,415	16,000	52,415
Medicine Butte	9,535	12,800	22,335
Monolith Ranch	10,500	960	11,460
Muddy Mountain	48,131	140,160	188,291
Pitchfork Ranch	60,200	71,040	131,240
Rattlesnake Mountain	68,500	186,880	255,380
Simpson Ridge	44,545	31,360	75,905
Soldier Creek	3,738	3,200	6,938
Strouss Hill	11,320	2,560	13,880
TOTALS	672,367	777,600	1,449,967

*Estimated public land acres

Walk-in Hunting Areas

Walk-in Hunting Areas also remain popular with the public. We lost and gained several areas throughout the State for a variety of reasons. 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 2003 - Spring 2004 hunting seasons, there are 426,695 private acres enrolled (Figure 3).

Similar to the HMA program, the WIHA's also try to increase access to public lands. In 2003, there was access to approximately 523,500 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 WIHA's.

Figure 3. Walk-in Hunting Areas from 1998 to 2003.

Year	WIA's	Private Acres	Landowners
1998	99	27,000	40
1999	107	120,000	--
2000	302	300,000	--
2001	376	431,180	--
2002	401	422,891	298
2003	402	426,695	317

Figure 4. Private and Public WIA Hunting Acres for 2003 by County.

County	#	Private Acres	Stream Mile	Lake Acres	Public Acres*	Combined Acres
Albany	6	21,550	5.00	80.00	21,120	32,540
Big Horn	62	32,820	9.4		58,240	93,125
Campbell	8	19,880			16,640	26,760
Campbell/ Johnson	1	3,680				3,680
Carbon	5	17,195			17,920	21,340
Carbon/ Sweetwater	1	8,800			6,400	8,800
Converse	6	9,410			5,120	6,130
Crook	4	4,431			640	4,633
Fremont	25	19,232			71,680	90,847
Goshen	82	52,741			8,320	58,429
Hot Springs	13	9,277			10,880	19,431
Johnson	9	18,403			39,040	45,723
Laramie	32	23,141	1.80		3,200	26,751
Lincoln	4	1,770			640	1,680
Natrona	15	59,180	0.30		145,280	206,245
Niobrara	3	7,320			14,720	21,040
Park	13	40,900	1.30		67,840	109,718
Platte	72	44,400			9,600	75,428
Platte/ Goshen	6	4,162				4,162
Sheridan	7	9,626			5,760	12,546
Uinta	3	6,880			5,120	3,040
Washakie	21	10,332	8.70		14,080	22,923
Weston	4	1,565	2.70		1,280	3,200
TOTALS	402	426,695	29.20	80.00	523,520	950,215

*Estimated public land acres.

Walk-in Fishing Areas

Drought conditions continue to affect fishing opportunities throughout Wyoming. The lack of water caused several WIFA's to dry up. During 2003, there were 110.4 lake acres and 81.11 stream miles available to anglers (Figure 5).

Figure 5. 2003 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
2003	61	110.4	81.11	60

The PLPW Access staff continues to search 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

The PLPW Access Program began the pilot WHE Program in July 2002, which lasted until the end of June, 2003. The WHE Program was designed to help landowners who provide hunting and/or fishing access through the WIA or HMA Programs to enhance wildlife habitat. Each project, which either increases or enhances wildlife habitat, is eligible for up to \$1,500. Examples include shelterbelt plantings, riparian habitat enhancement, cover plots, food plots, fencing and deferred grazing. The drought conditions have determined the types and scope of projects. During the first year of the pilot WHE Program, 15 habitat projects were conducted for a total of \$22,500. Projects included water guzzlers (2), tree/shrub plantings (3), food/cover/nesting cover planting (7) and fencing (3).

The pilot WHE Program was suspended for the 2004 Fiscal Year (July 1, 2003 – June 30, 2004) but will resume for FY05. Preliminary indications suggest there will be \$10,000 available for habitat projects for the upcoming fiscal year. Through the help of Habitat Section personnel, this program has the potential to help landowners who are interested in developing/enhancing wildlife habitat on lands enrolled in either a Walk-in or Hunter Management Area. 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.

Access Yes Program

Access Yes donations have steadily increased from fiscal year 2000 thru 2002 but dipped slightly in FY 03 (Figure 6). During the 2003 fiscal year (July 1, 2002 – June 30, 2003), there was \$143,291 donated to Access Yes. Access Yes donations can only be used to purchase access easements 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 2003, approximately 21,000 individuals donated \$105,393 through the limited quota application process of which 45% were residents and 55% nonresidents. Nonresidents donated approximately \$72,300 (69%) with residents contributing \$33,100 (31%). Nonresidents continue to donate more than 2:1 over residents.

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
2003	\$11,648	\$105,393	\$26,250	\$143,291
Total by Donation	\$36,365	\$387,334	\$107,285	\$530,984

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 2003, nonresidents continue to donate 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

2003 was the second year the PLPW Access Program was a permanent program. The Program continues to change and modify its methods of operation to best work with sportspersons, landowners and Department personnel. 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 and obtain desirable population levels or decrease wildlife damage problems in addition to providing hunting or fishing opportunities.

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 fiscal year 2003, which runs from July 1, 2002 – June 30, 2003. A total of \$22,500 was spent on 15 habitat projects. Due to budget constraints in FY 04, the PLPW Access Program did not receive money for WHE projects. However, approximately \$10,000 will be available to the PLPW Access Program during Fiscal Year 2005.

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 was completed June 30, 2003.

Each year, HMA's and WIA's that are enrolled are evaluated to determine if they should be kept in the program. If it is determined that the habitat or management practices can no longer support sustainable wildlife species or provide reasonable opportunity for sportspersons, 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 may become less desirable. Only the areas that were still sustaining fish were re-enrolled for 2004.

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.

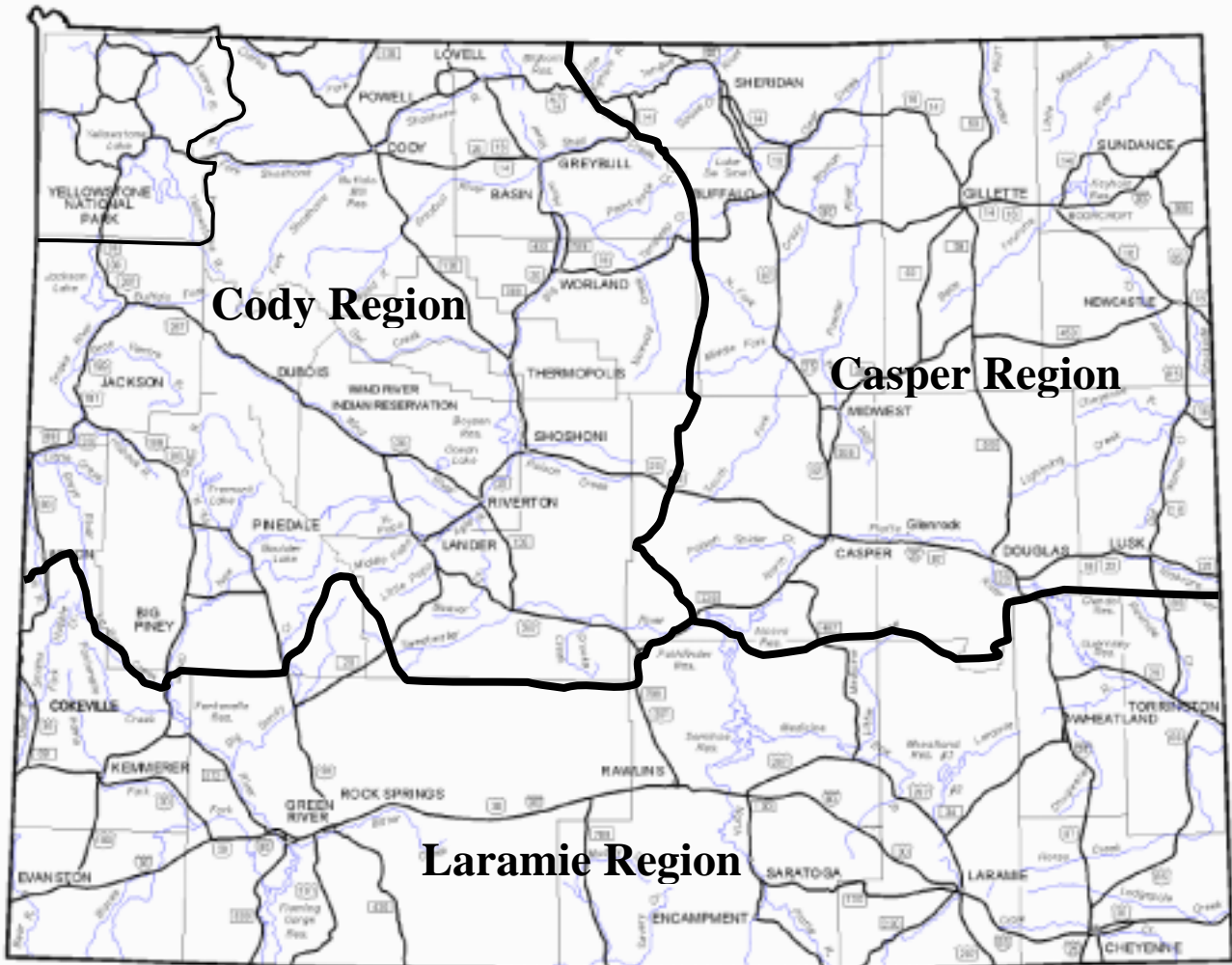
One of the biggest obstacles to people gaining access to private lands is the actual people themselves. There have been several situations that prompted landowners not to renew their contract in the PLPW Access program, thus their lands are no longer accessible. The Department offers additional law enforcement 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 funds increased from \$97,653 in FY 2000 to \$632,814 in FY 2002. However, in FY 2003, Access Yes funds decreased to \$607,282. This includes \$143,291 through direct donations from sportspersons, \$443,172 in conservation stamp sales and \$20,819 in earned interest. Of that, \$26,250 was donated when hunting and fishing licenses were purchased over-the-counter. Donations can also be made when submitting big game applications. Nonresidents contributed \$72,300 and residents \$33,093 for a total of \$105,393. 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 Public 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.



Appendix B. Hunter Management Areas in Wyoming.

