

Feds Push For Private Land Access to Hunt

Local News

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Posted on : June 22, 2011 at 5:19 am

OLYMPIA — The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) will accept public comments through July 21 on a \$1.5 million federal grant designed to encourage more private landowners in Washington to open their lands to hunting and other forms of outdoor recreation. The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) was one of 17 agencies nationwide to qualify for a three-year grant under the new Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program administered by the USDA under the 2008 federal Farm Bill. In accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act, USDA's Farm Service Agency recently determined that the department's plans for the grant money would not have a significant effect on the environment. The federal findings are posted at <http://bit.ly/mpufNQ>. Public comments on those findings may also be submitted on that site.

Dave Ware, WDFW game manager, said the state agency has already raised \$400,000 to expand hunter access to private lands through additional fees paid by hunters who apply for new permit-only hunts. "Hunters consistently rank access to suitable hunting areas as one of their top concerns," Ware said. "With the additional federal funding, we'll be able to build on current state efforts to expand hunting opportunities for years to come." In addition, WDFW plans to establish at least five new wildlife-viewing areas near urban areas of the state. Key initiatives planned by WDFW include: **Access Near Urban Centers** (\$437,240): Increase acreage enrolled in the Snow Goose Hunting Program and the number of waterfowl hunting blinds available through such programs as "Feel Free to Hunt," "Register to Hunt" and "Hunt by Written Permission" from 10 blinds to 25 blinds; establish public big game hunting access on at least 5,000 acres of private forest lands; and establish at least five new watchable wildlife opportunities on private farmlands. **Snake River Conservation Reserve Program** (\$387,300): Establish public hunting access on at least 12,500 additional acres of private farm land and establish public access for hunting on an additional 15 farms also enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP). **Corn Stubble Retention** (\$63,000): Double the amount of acres enrolled in the program to attract game birds to farmlands. **Southwest Washington Private Forest Land Access** (\$499,680): Establish public hunting access on at least 50,000 additional acres of private forest lands. **Improved Use of Technology** (\$155,000): Develop a new GoHunt interactive mapping program and an automated system for reserving hunting days on private lands enrolled in WDFW's programs. Ware said WDFW has bolstered its Private Lands Access program to reverse the steady decline of land open to hunting due to population growth, suburban sprawl and crowding on public lands. Just over one million acres of private land is currently open to hunting under agreement with WDFW, compared to three million in the late 1990s, he said. "Our staff is out working with farmers, ranchers and owners of private timberlands on multi-year agreements right now," he said. "We want to have as many of these agreements in place as possible by the time fall hunting seasons get under way."