

Surveying landowners to understand barriers to hunting access

SUMMARY

In 2003, Ohio received a \$30,000 HHP grant to survey private, agricultural landowners. The goal was to identify barriers that limited the willingness of landowners to give hunters access to private lands, as well as to identify ways to improve landowner's willingness to allow access on their grounds. Barriers to access are a major factor impacting hunting participation and state revenues generated by hunters. Ohio's survey provides valuable insights on how the agency can address these issues in a cost-effective manner.

KEY AGENCY	Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Division of Wildlife
EXTERNAL PARTNERS	Ohio State University, School of Natural Resources; USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service; Ohio State University Extension; Ohio Farm Bureau Federation
INTERNAL PARTNERS	Luke Miller, private lands wildlife program administrator
PROJECT DATES	January-September 2004
CONTACT	Dave Scott, wildlife research administrator, ODNR Division of Wildlife, (614) 265-6338, dave.scott@dnr.state.oh.us
RESOURCES	HHP final report and statistical results; PowerPoint presentation from The Wildlife Society's 11th Annual Conference (Calgary, Canada)

BACKGROUND: Why this effort?

The Ohio Division of Wildlife's Strategic Plan specifically identifies both access and opportunities and recruitment and retention as important programmatic areas of emphasis for the near future. In Ohio, there also is a clear need to: 1) improve the use of recreational hunting to manage a growing deer population and reduce deer-human conflicts on private lands, and 2) provide increased hunting opportunities to encourage participation in wildlife-based recreation and boost license sales. Hunting license sales in Ohio currently are decreasing at about 1 percent per year.

Not enough public land: Making a dent in the deer population through hunting is a challenge. For many Ohioans, there simply aren't enough close, available hunting grounds. Ohio ranks 47th out of 50 states in per capita area of public lands available for hunting. Public lands also are concentrated in the southeastern part of the state, while major population centers are in metro areas from northeastern through southwestern Ohio. "Many hunters must travel long distances to hunt," says Dave Scott, wildlife research administrator. "We need to find better opportunities for them closer to home, especially in areas where deer numbers are higher."

Focus on private lands: One way to improve land access for recreation is to focus on large tracts of private lands currently used for agriculture (56 percent of Ohio's private lands—14.5 million acres—are currently devoted to farming). However, many private landowners frown on giving

access to people they don't know. Unless Ohio understands landowners' trepidations, current or future programs to increase hunter access on private lands are likely to be ineffective.

Landowner research needed: Scott and his Ohio colleagues identified survey research as a first priority. Objectives of their research were to:

- Understand barriers to, and potential benefits of, enhanced access to agricultural lands by hunters
- Identify components of an access program that landowners would find acceptable and support to increase hunting on their lands
- Meaningfully involve landowners in shaping research and developing options.

What was delivered?

Ohio's landowner survey resulted from a two-phase research design. Phase one included indepth, structured focus groups that targeted key stakeholders (landowners, interest groups and Ohio Division of Wildlife managers) involved in hunter access issues. Scott focused on getting input about:

- Individuals, recreational activities and types of hunting allowed or acceptable on private lands
- Methods used to control or prohibit access to land for hunting
- Concerns about allowing private lands access
- Perceptions of benefits associated with hunter access.

Using the focus group information, the agency embarked on the second phase—an indepth telephone survey of randomly selected agricultural landowners across all counties. (Ohio State University partners developed the questionnaire and overall survey design, USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service conducted the telephone survey and the Ohio Farm Bureau Federation endorsed the project to encourage participation among targeted landowners.) Scott wanted answers to the above bullet points. He also wanted to evaluate strategies to encourage landowners to give private lands access for hunting.

SUCCESSSES AND OUTCOMES

Ohio discovered information about landowners that allowed them to come up with the following recommendations:

- Explore a legal defense fund for landowners. Ohio law is such that if landowners and operators do not accept payments from recreators, they are protected from liability. However, protection from liability does not afford protection from frivolous lawsuits.
- Do not invest in payment/lease plans. Ohio's research revealed that landowners do not value state-sponsored payment or lease plans, nor was there support for private lease arrangements. Such payment plans likely are unpopular because of the laws described above.
- Build relationships between landowners and recreators. Landowners most often give access to hunters with whom they've developed a personal relationship.
- Develop programs that also encourage access to private land for non-consumptive activities. Some landowners are more likely to give access to land for non-consumptive activities. Scott

believes that programs that build trust based on low-impact activities might pave the way to allow consumptive activities such as hunting.

- Landowner outreach should focus on tangible benefits, not just concerns. Landowners showed moderate concern about personal injury, liability, and a general feeling that giving access equals a loss of control over their properties. Outreach should show the positive outcomes of allowing access, such as the economic benefits of reducing wildlife damage.

PARTNERS

Confidence: “There is great value to gathering information to make better decisions,” Scott notes. “We can show research and evaluation results to our leaders and partners. While research often seems inactive compared to just doing something, what we’re doing is setting the stage by gathering relevant information, rather than simply making best guesses. This builds our leaders’ confidence in our ability to develop and implement projects that matter. Even if our projects don’t always provide the answers we want, we receive the support and resources to build long-term R&R programs as long as we effectively evaluate our strategies.”

Good relationships: In addition to the great support within the agency, Ohio has good relationships with conservation clubs and NGOs that can help build a landowner outreach effort. “This HHP project’s success results from our relationships with our Ohio State University, USDA and Ohio Farm Bureau partners. We never would have the time or resources to take on this effort by ourselves. But with good partnerships, we could move forward, based on common ground and solid agreement.”

LIMITATIONS

Based on the HHP grant’s tight time frame, Scott couldn’t design his project to the detail he preferred. USDA’s National Agricultural Statistics Service opened its database of landowners to Scott for the survey; if more time were available, he’d have increased the sample size for telephone interviews. “We received great support and buy-in from all our partners,” Scott notes. “But if we had more time, I’d have worked with them to build a slightly larger sample size of landowners. This would have given us even more confidence in our results. Despite that, we’re happy with the outcome.”

CURRENT STATUS

The results have been shared within the professional wildlife community and with key partners like the Ohio Farm Bureau Federation. Scott and his staff currently are evaluating next steps and best ways to implement the results of their research.