



*Shareable media promoting conservation from the Outdoor Industry Communication Council (OICC) – see below for more details.*

## **The United States of Access**

For years, when former hunters and anglers were asked why they stopped hunting or fishing, they often cited a lack of access to places to hunt and fish. Maybe an upstate relative sold the family farm, or the neighbor's woodlot where they had been given permission for years was sold to a housing developer.

Over generations, Americans have lost the sort of informal recreational access that provided millions of acres of places to hunt deer, or to fish for farm-pond bass, or to flush pheasants and quail, or to camp with their family. That's the bad news.

The good news is that our network of informal access has been replaced by more formal access arrangements on private land and by prioritizing access, along with resource management, on our public lands. A recent survey of huntable public land in America pegged the total at just under 700 million acres. Granted, that includes about 200 million acres in Alaska alone, but it's a huge estate of land managed by the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, various state resource agencies, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, which manages federal wildlife refuges, and the U.S. Corps of Engineers, which manages many of our big-river dams and reservoirs.

When you add the nearly 50 million acres of access provided on private land through formal access programs, the amount of land that is open to hunting and fishing, along with hiking, camping, bird-watching, and overlanding is remarkable, and the even-better news is that you can expect those accessible acres to grow in number.

One of the provisions of the 2023 Farm Bill, which is scheduled for a vote if the House of Representatives gets its leadership back on plane, is a tripling of federal funding for private-land access. That investment would increase funding for the Voluntary Public Access-Habitat Improvement Act (VPA-HIP) from \$50 million in 2018 legislation to \$150 million.

That federal funding flows to state fish-and-wildlife agencies to compensate landowners who are both enrolled in Farm Bill programs like Conservation Reserve or Wetland Reserve programs and who allow public access for hunting, fishing, and other recreation. The funding boost is likely to encourage even more private landowners to offer managed recreational access going forward.



State agencies manage robust private-land access programs, some funded by the VPA-HIP contributions, and some from other funding sources. In Montana, some 8 million acres of private land is enrolled in Block Management, which is largely funded by non-resident hunting license fees. In South Dakota and Kansas, this private-land access program is called Walk-In. In North Dakota, it's called PLOTS, for Private Land Open To Sportsmen. And in Missouri, it's called MRAP, for Missouri Outdoor Recreational Access Program. Regardless of what it's called in your state, you have some sort of access to private parcels through your state wildlife agency.

The digital mapping platform onX recently quantified the amount of accessible private land, and noted that "landowners' appreciation for hunting, public access, and habitat are core to the success of these [access] programs, but lease fees from the states as well as benefits like liability coverage and regulation enforcement help make the success of these programs possible."

By assuring that hunters and anglers have places to recreate, our collective community is addressing one of the biggest reasons that participants drop out of those activities, which fund conservation in America through hunting and fishing license sales and taxes paid on sporting goods equipment. That's the good news.

The bad news is that while the number of accessible acres in the United States is large and growing, it's not permanent. A landowner might decide to lease their ground to an outfitter, or keep the public away because of a bad experience with a hunter or angler.

As onX noted in their study, "the programs are threatened by hunter misbehavior and funding uncertainty. Hunters respecting landowners and taking extra consideration on these private lands is critical to keeping landowners enrolled and maintaining this access into the future."

**Link to onX Private Land Public Access report: <https://www.onxmaps.com/onx-access-initiatives/private-land-public-access>**

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### **About the Outdoor Industry Communication Council (OICC):**

Formed around the commitment to educate all Americans about the origins of conservation funding in America, the Outdoor Industry Communication Council (OICC) is managed by Outdoor Stewards of Conservation Foundation (OSCF) and Wildlife Management Institute (WMI). OICC works with outdoor writers to develop informative content that is available to all outdoor organizations and media at no cost. A primary goal of the OICC is to better inform and promote the positive contributions that wildlife agencies, industry manufacturers, NGOs and end users such as hunters, anglers, trappers and target shooters make to conservation. Outdoor



organizations interested in conservation are welcome to use any OICC content to expand the reach of messages created by the OICC. To become a member of the Outdoor Industry Communication Council, contact Jim Curcuruto of OSCF (203) 450-7202 [jim@stewardsofconservation.org](mailto:jim@stewardsofconservation.org) or Jon Gassett of WMI at (502) 330-9025 [jgassett@wildlifemgt.org](mailto:jgassett@wildlifemgt.org). There are no costs involved to become a member of the OICC. Members may utilize OICC materials as they see fit with no restrictions. For additional information and free materials visit <https://www.outdoorstewards.org/outdoor-industry-communication-council-oicc/>

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