Hunter Access to Federal Public Lands

A Report from the

Congressional Sportsmen’s Foundation

and the

Wildlife Management Institute

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Executive Summary

Federal public lands are an important destination for American hunters, as nearly half of all hunters conduct a portion of their hunting activity on these lands (U.S. Department of the Interior 1996). However, segments of the hunting community believe that hunting access to public lands has been reduced during the last decade. Despite numerous reports suggesting public access to federal lands is inadequate, there is little quantitative information to refute or verify this perception.

To address this issue, in November 2001 the Congressional Sportsmen’s Foundation (CSF) and the Wildlife Management Institute (WMI) assembled a group of stakeholders (see Appendix II) with expertise and experience in federal public land access. The group identified 24 issues of concern, but determined the following eight issues and associated questions to be the most critical to the issue of access:

1. Public Land Management Agency Planning Process: How are access issues incorporated into the agency land-use planning processes?
2. Wildlife Resource’s Impact on Recreational Access: How do wildlife and habitat management decisions affect hunter access and hunter satisfaction?
3. Awareness of Land Ownership Patterns: Do checkerboard ownership patterns and inadequate signage affect hunter access to public lands?
4. Lack of Hunter Knowledge of Access Opportunities: Do agencies provide hunters enough information regarding access and do they provide it through effective channels?
5. Hunter Access through Private Property: What are the trends, impacts of and solutions to access problems caused by public lands that are “landlocked” by private property?
6. Inventory of Road Ownership: Is there a need for an inventory of road ownership so hunters can be certain which roads can be legally used for access to public lands?
7. Increased Demand for Public Land as a Result of Decreased Availability of Private Land: What is the trend for hunter use of public land, and the relationship between access to private lands and access to public lands?
8. Assessing Impacts of Land Exchanges, Disposal, etc. on Hunting Access: Is there a need for a centralized clearinghouse that can be used to assess both the quantitative and qualitative impacts of these actions on hunter access?

This report discusses each issue and how it could affect hunter access, as well as a list of issues that need to be researched further in order to fully understand the trends of hunting access to federal lands. A list and brief description of all the issues discussed is included in Appendix I of this report.

Work on this issue will not end with the publication of this paper. The CSF, working with its partners in the hunting/conservation community, intends to conduct detailed studies of the specific, critical issues identified in this report with the objective of recommending and developing potential solutions that will aid Congress, federal agencies and the hunting and
conservation community to make informed decisions to achieve the goal of improving hunter access to federal public lands.

The CSF and WMI would like to thank the National Rifle Association of America, the National Wild Turkey Federation, the Pope and Young Club and the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Alliance for helping to make this report possible.
Background

Federal Public Lands are important to American hunters. According to the 1996 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife Associated Recreation, approximately 47 percent of all hunters hunt on public lands. Of these, 17 percent hunt exclusively on public land, while 30 percent hunt on both public and private land. Much of this hunting occurs on land managed by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) or the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Collectively, the USFS and the BLM manage over 455 million acres, with 191 million acres of national forests under the jurisdiction of the USFS and 264 million acres of BLM controlled land.

There is a belief among segments of the hunting community that access to federal public land by hunters has been reduced through road closures, lack of access across private land, area restrictions, policy changes, etc. However, little quantitative information exists to refute or verify this perception.

Regardless of the perception, it is important to remember that the phrase “access to public land” refers to a complex array of intermingled issues. Improving access to federal public lands is a complicated issue that will require a continuous, concerted effort to resolve. Simplistic answers, likely, will not have much success.

The issue of access is not new and concerns have been expressed in various forums for more than 40 years. More than a decade ago, Congress requested that the General Accounting Office (GAO) review the adequacy of public access to land managed by the USFS and the BLM. The GAO subsequently published a report, estimating that 50.4 million acres (14%) of these lands had inadequate access (GAO 1992). Other reports have similarly suggested that access to federal land is inadequate (Davis 1991, Keystone Center 1989). However, more information about the nature and scope of the issue is needed before recommendations can be made.

Past reviews recommended that agencies systematically collect information on access trends and types of restrictions as well as solutions to access issues. Unfortunately, this information has not been collected at a national or regional level. As a result, most information available is anecdotal or limited to small, specific areas. In an attempt to obtain information and examine the access issue more closely, the CSF and WMI assembled a group of stakeholders (see Appendix II) with expertise and experience on the issue of access to federal public land in November 2001. During this two-day meeting, participants identified all the issues that could potentially affect access for hunters and what information was lacking to fully understand and address these issues.

This report summarizes the issues discussed at that meeting. The body includes a discussion of the critical issues identified by the group, as well as the information that is needed to better understand these issues. A list and brief description of all the issues discussed is included in Appendix I of this report.

As mentioned before, work on this issue will not end with the publication of this report. The CSF, working with its partners in the hunting/conservation community, intends to conduct detailed studies of specific, critical issues identified in this report to identify recommendations.
and develop solutions to aid Congress, federal agencies and the hunting/conservation community to make informed decisions to achieve the goal of improving access to federal public land.

**Critical Issues**

**Public Land Management Agency Planning Process**

Hunter access to federal public land is largely determined during the planning process at the local level with little or no direct involvement from the national headquarters of the USFS or the BLM. Therefore, the best, and often the only, opportunity hunters have to influence access decisions is by becoming involved during the planning process.

It is expected that approximately 150 national forest plans and 160 resource management plans for lands managed by BLM will be developed during the next ten years. These plans, typically, remain in affect for at least 15 years before they are revised. Therefore, decisions made in these plans for more than 300 federal public lands will have an impact on hunter access for the foreseeable future. Hunter involvement in this process is critical to resolving access issues.

The data needed to demonstrate the involvement of hunters in the development of these plans or the degree to which their involvement is having an impact does not exist. In fact, many land use plans do not contain a category to address the hunter access issue.

In addition, there is no mechanism to systematically collect or examine the decisions made at the local level to obtain an accurate account of the trends in access, types of restrictions being considered or implemented, impacts of those decisions, or successful resolution to identify access problems. Accordingly, the following need to be determined:

- What is the demand for of the four modes of access (foot, horse, ORV, vehicle)? Are these demands being met?
- What is the availability of the four modes of access?
- What are the trends in available roads and trails for mechanized access?
- What are the impacts of road closures and the creation of new roads on hunter access?
- What are the conflicts between these modes of access and how are those conflicts being resolved?
- How well have past planning efforts addressed access issues and how have those efforts been implemented on the ground?
- How have the recommendations of previous reviews and studies been addressed and implemented?
- What is the feasibility of developing a mechanism to systematically collect and examine access decisions made at a local level?
Wildlife Resource’s Impact on Recreational Access

In addition to managing access, the federal land agencies are charged with managing the natural resources that exist on federal lands. Since healthy wildlife populations are key to a quality hunting experience, it is important to understand the impact that decisions made to manage or benefit wildlife and habitats have on hunter access, and how the demand for access is balanced against the resource impacts of this access. In addition, information needs to be available to hunters explaining management decisions and the issues that impact access. Accordingly, further information is needed on:

- How, when and where has hunter access been changed as a result of biological impacts and what is the duration and impacts of these changes?
- What were the biological, social and economic impacts of those changes?
- What are the biological, social and economic impacts of other kinds of activities (e.g. road building) that have affected access?
- What are the biological, social and economic impacts, resulting from road closures?
- What, if any, impacts have federal and state laws and regulations, such as the Endangered Species Act, had on access?

Awareness of Land Ownership Patterns

A key issue impacting hunter access is the knowledge of where public land exists and how to access it. A source of confusion for accessing federal public land is the checkerboard land ownership patterns (public and private land) that exist in many areas of the country. Research is needed to determine what impact this has on preventing or discouraging access. Further work also needs to be done to determine:

- If agencies need to be encouraged to identify and post key access points and boundaries?
- If agencies have the tools to address or modify ownership patterns (land exchanges, conservation easements, etc.), if they are using them, and how well they are working?

Lack of Hunter Knowledge of Access Opportunities

In addition to having land available for hunting, information pertaining to these opportunities on federal land needs to be made readily available. Further information is needed to determine:

- How information on hunter access is provided, if this information is adequate and if there is a need to improve the dissemination of this information?
• Does the fact that BLM lands have no formal name, are not signed on the ground and are not considered part of a national public lands system, affect hunters’ opportunity for hunting on BLM lands?

• Are federal land management agencies making hunters aware of the implications that resource management decisions have on access?

**Hunter Access Through Private Property**

In many areas, the only access to federal land is across private property. Some of this access is by legal right-of-way, some by easements and some by the graciousness of the landowner. Understandably, many private property owners are reluctant to allow complete access to the public across their lands. The checkerboard pattern of ownership exacerbates this problem. In some areas, private outfitters and guides lease private land for the exclusive use of their clients and thereby gain exclusive use to adjoining public lands. It is important to understand the extent to which this occurs, as well as ways to work with private landowners to address it. More research is needed to determine:

• How many acres of federal public land are completely “landlocked” by private lands, and how many have inadequate (i.e., restricted or partially restricted) public access?

• What are the impacts of these restrictions?

• What are the regional and national trends in obtaining access across private lands?

• What programs are currently used by federal and state agencies to address this issue and how well are they working?

• What are the barriers to progress?

• What would motivate private landowners to allow increased access across their property?

• What would cause them to restrict access that they currently allow?

• What are the economic aspects of leasing private land to hunters and/or private outfitters and guides?

• What role does this play in the financial aspects of private land ownership?

• To what extent do private property owners advertise that the use of their lands provides exclusive access to adjacent public land?

• What are additional solutions?

**Inventory of Road Ownership**

Roads are often the primary means by which hunters access federal land. However, in many parts of the country, a complete and accurate inventory of roads, particularly county roads, does not exist. As a result, hunters are unclear if certain roads are public or private and whether or not
these roads may be legally used to access federal lands. Therefore, there is a need for an inventory of roads and an assessment of their legal status. More research is needed to determine:

- Which agencies have conducted an inventory of roads, how successful these efforts have been and how might they be improved and expanded?

**Increased Demand for Public Land as a Result of Decreased Availability of Private Land**

A key to determining future access to federal land by hunters is to accurately determine the level of demand for these lands. There is a belief that, as the availability of private land for hunting decreases, the demand for hunting opportunities on public lands will increase. To ensure federal lands are managed for optimum hunter access, there is a need to know:

- What are the demands for hunter use of public land?
- To what extent has this increased with urban sprawl?
- What is the relationship between access to private land and access to public land?
- How does development on private land adjacent to public land impact hunter access?
- What are the consequences of increased use of public land on the quality of the hunting experience on those lands?

**Assessing Impacts of Land Exchanges, Disposal, etc. on Hunting Access**

Similar to the planning process for federal lands, land exchanges and disposal decisions are usually decided at the local level. Unfortunately, there is no formal process for evaluating the effect of land exchanges or disposals on hunter access. Having this information is important to evaluate the trends in hunter access as well as to ensure that decision makers have all the necessary information on the impact of their decisions on hunter access before decisions are finalized. Accordingly, the following questions need to be answered:

- Is there a need for a national database to assemble this information in a central location?
- How do agencies weight the issue of public access when they make land exchange and land disposal decisions, and where does access rate in land management agencies priority ranking system?
Appendix I

Following is a list of all the issues affecting hunter access to federal land, discussed at the stakeholders meeting held in Washington, DC, November 2001:

- **Access through private property**: What are the barriers to access associated with public land access being blocked or limited by private property holdings?
- **Land ownership patterns**: Do mixed private and public land, including in holdings and isolated tracts, create confusion over what is legally accessible?
- **Lack of awareness of public land**: Are public land boundaries and access points to public land holdings adequately identified?
- **Lack of hunter knowledge about hunting access and opportunities**: Are hunters aware of the multitude of opportunities that exist for hunting on public lands?
- **User conflicts**: What conflicts exist among access modes, as well as with other recreational and commercial users?
- **Inventory of road ownership**: What is the status of road ownership identification on maps?
- **Trends in road management**: What are the trends in the use of road closures by USFS and BLM and are these closures understood by the hunting community?
- **Lack of adequate transportation planning**: Do agencies consider how road systems affect public access when planning new roads or road closures?
- **Lack of conservation education information**: Is there a need for better public education on proper use and not abuse of public lands?
- **Access as a function of quality of existing opportunities**: Do some hunters prefer that certain public lands to not have additional access or specific types of access because it reduces the quality of their experience (limited pressure, quality of animals, etc)?
- **State regulations**: What impact do state regulations have on hunter access to public lands? For example, certain states require non-resident hunters to hire a guide when hunting in wilderness areas.
- **Relationship of hunter support for conservation spending to public access rights**: Would hunters be more supportive of increased conservation spending if they had additional access?
- **Resource and recreational consequences of access**: Does increased public access or changes to access modes result in damage to natural resources or recreational experiences?
- **Increased demand for public lands**: Is there an increase in demand for access to public land as access to private land for hunting decreases or comes with a fee?
- **Urbanization and low-density development**: Does development around public land impact access as well as management of resources on public land?

- **Lack of a formal process for assessing the impacts of land acquisition, transfer and disposal on hunting opportunity**: Is there a need for a centralized clearinghouse that can be used to assess both the quantitative and qualitative impacts of these actions?

- **Failure to articulate access issues in the agency planning process**: Are access issues fully explored and developed in the agencies’ land-planning processes?

- **Demographic trends**: How do changes in demographics (i.e., mobile citizenry, single-parent households, suburban sprawl, etc.) affect hunter access?

- **Economic impact of access to rural communities**: How valuable is providing hunting access to local communities that provide goods and services to hunters?

- **Need for zoning access**: How are the modes of access zoned on public land on a landscape and regional level? Is more zoning needed?

- **Regulatory/enforcement impacts**: What are the impacts of regulatory and enforcement decisions of agencies on hunter access?

- **Access to shooting ranges**: Are decreasing opportunities for recreational shooting on public lands having a negative impact on hunting on public lands?

- **How important/valuable is increasing access to hunters**: How much do hunters care about this issue and how willing are they to become involved?

- **Temporal accessibility**: How does hunter access change with hunting seasons or during the course of the year?
Appendix II

Following is a list of organizations, agencies and participants who attended the stakeholders meeting on hunter access to public lands held in Washington, DC, November 14-15, 2001.

- Bureau of Land Management    Henri Bisson
- Bureau of Land Management    Mike Mottice
- Colorado State University     Mike Manfredo
- Congressional Sportsmen’s Foundation    Melinda Gable
- Congressional Sportsmen’s Foundation    Matt Hogan
- D.J. Case & Associates, Facilitator    Phil Seng
- Izaak Walton League of America    Jim Mosher
- National Rifle Association    James Baker
- National Rifle Association    Susan Lamson
- Public Lands Council    Jason Campbell
- Public Lands Foundation    George Lea
- Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Alliance    Tim Richardson
- U.S. Forest Service    Kimberly Anderson
- U.S. Forest Service    Dave Cross
- U.S. Forest Service    Linda Langner
- U.S. Forest Service    Chuck Myers
- U.S. Forest Service    Ron Archuleta
- Wildlife Management Institute    Bob Byrne
- Wildlife Management Institute    Rollin Sparrowe
- Wyoming Game & Fish Department    Kaush Arha
References


