

Grants for Outdoor Habitat

LINCOLN – Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack recently announced that the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) will invest \$20 million to partner with 15 state agencies to improve wildlife habitat and enhance public access for recreational opportunities on private farm, ranch and forest lands. The projects are being funded under the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentives Program.

State Conservationist Craig Derickson is happy to announce that the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission is one of the recipients of this funding.

"Game and Parks will receive \$1.35 million to expand their current public access program. The Open Fields and Waters program opens private land to hunting, fishing and other public recreation activities. NRCS is eager to work with Game and Parks to help expand this program to provide more recreational opportunities for all Nebraskans," Derickson said.

Kelsey Drey, Open Fields and Waters coordinating wildlife biologist with Pheasants Forever said, "NRCS has been a valued partner of Game and Parks for decades, and we look forward to growing that partnership with this new opportunity."

Under the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentives Program, state and tribal governments apply for grants to encourage owners and operators of privately held farm, ranch or forest land to voluntarily open that land for public wildlife-dependent recreation activities such as fishing, hunting and birding. State and tribal governments may use VPA-HIP funds to create new public access programs, to expand existing public access programs, and to improve wildlife habitat on enrolled public access program lands. Projects can span up to three years.

USDA's Natural Resources Conservation (NRCS) awarded grants for projects in Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Kansas, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Oregon, Washington, Wisconsin and Wyoming.

"The Nebraska Game and Parks is a well-deserved recipient of this funding. Connecting outdoor recreation to private lands conservation is good for wildlife, people, and rural economies," said Derickson. "Conservation matched with good partnerships and land management will lead to sustainable recreational and economic opportunities for years to come."

According to a 2013 study commissioned by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, the outdoor recreation economy in the United States supports 6.1 million jobs, \$80 billion in federal, state and local tax revenue, and \$646 billion in spending each year.

In evaluating proposals for funding, NRCS looked for projects that would:

- Increase private land acreage available for public use;

- Offer a public access program that gains widespread acceptance among landowners;

- Make special efforts to reach historically underserved or socially disadvantaged landowners;

- Ensure appropriate wildlife habitat is located on enrolled land;

- Strengthen existing wildlife habitat improvement efforts;

- Follow NRCS conservation practice standards for VPA-HIP habitat improvement activities; and

Inform the public about the locations of existing and new lands where public access is available.

More detailed information about the fiscal year 2015 awardees is available at the NRCS VPA-HIP website. More information about the Nebraska grant is available from Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. Game and Parks publishes a Nebraska Public Access Atlas, which includes Open Field and Water access sites, as well as all public lands open to hunting, fishing and trapping. It is available at OutdoorNebraska.org.

Many Signals Communications