

# Private Lands Public Wildlife Access Program

## 2015 Annual Report



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Information about the Private Land Public Wildlife (PLPW) Access Program can be obtained from the Department’s website at <http://wgfd.wyo.gov>, Cheyenne Headquarters or any regional office (below). Access information for fishing is updated each December for the following year. Hunting information is updated each July for the fall hunting seasons.

Contact Information	In-State Toll-Free #	Out-of-State Phone #
Cheyenne Headquarters	1-800-842-1934	1-307-777-4600
Casper Regional Office	1-800-233-8544	1-307-473-3400
Cody Regional Office	1-800-654-1178	1-307-527-7125
Green River Regional Office	1-800-843-8096	1-307-875-3223
Jackson Regional Office	1-800-423-4113	1-307-733-2321
Lander Regional Office	1-800-654-7862	1-307-332-2688
Laramie Regional Office	1-800-843-2352	1-307-745-4046
Pinedale Regional Office	1-800-452-9107	1-307-367-4353
Sheridan Regional Office	1-800-331-9834	1-307-672-7418



# **Introduction**

In the past century, hunting and fishing has changed dramatically in the United States. Hunting and fishing activities, once required to feed one's family through the lean winter months, are now viewed more as recreation. This change has occurred for a variety of reasons such as the availability of other food sources, transition from a rural to urban setting and changing wildlife values. Twenty years ago, prospective hunters or anglers simply had to knock on a landowner's door and ask for permission to hunt or fish. Typically the landowner would grant free access. Today, this happens less frequently due to the monetary value of wildlife, complex land ownership and usage. An increasing number of traditional landowners are selling their properties to individuals who are not purchasing the land for farming or ranching, but for their own hunting pleasure, wildlife sanctuaries or even development. In many instances, landowners view wildlife as competition for livestock forage or crops and welcome hunters onto their land to manage wildlife populations. Conversely, some non-traditional landowners want to see increased wildlife on their land and, therefore, do not allow hunting. The amount of private lands leased by those in the outfitting industry has increased. With many traditional landowners now charging trespass fees to generate additional income, fewer people have the opportunity to hunt or fish on private and landlocked public lands.

Hunters and anglers in Wyoming have voiced their concerns and frustrations over declining access to private and landlocked public lands. During the 1990s, the Wyoming Game and Fish Commission (Commission) created a pilot program to explore ways to increase public access onto these lands. The Private Lands Public Wildlife (PLPW) Access Initiative was developed with three sub-programs:

- 1) Hunter Management
- 2) Walk-in Hunting
- 3) Walk-in Fishing

In 1998, the Walk-in Hunting Area (WIHA) Program started with a modest 27,000 private acres. By 2000, all 3 sub-programs were growing quickly and included more than 657,500 acres for hunting as well as 222 lake acres and 71 stream miles for fishing. Beyond providing public access, the program has also increased cooperation among landowners, hunters, anglers and the Wyoming Game and Fish Department (Department).

By increasing access to privately-owned, irrigated fields and riparian lands, which compose the majority of productive wildlife habitat in the state, the Department can be more effective at managing wildlife populations and mitigating agricultural damage.

The success of the PLPW Access Pilot Program led the Commission to make the program permanent in 2001.

## **Purpose**

The goal of the PLPW Access Program is to enhance and/or maintain public hunting and fishing access onto Wyoming private and landlocked public lands. This is accomplished by enrolling private landowners into one of the access programs (Hunter Management, Walk-in Hunting, and/or Walk-in Fishing). The landowner and Department personnel negotiate the terms of an agreement including: agreement length (one to five years), the species that can be harvested, the geographic location, dates access will be allowed and any other specific rules or stipulations. In return for access, landowners benefit in several ways including:

- A modest monetary payment based on the number of acres or stream length enrolled;
- Increased law enforcement presence;
- Increased wildlife management (population control and damage prevention); and,
- Management of sportsmen, alleviating phone calls and other disruptions to landowners (access maps, hunter instruction on ranch rules, etc.).

# Program Successes

The PLPW Access Program assists landowners through management of hunters and anglers, providing sportsmen and sportswomen places to hunt and fish and reducing agricultural damage through hunter harvest. The Department benefits through increased wildlife management opportunities, increased license sales, reduced agricultural damage and providing quality hunting and fishing access to the public. During 2015, the PLPW Access Program experienced many successes, including, but not limited to:

- Providing access to 2,809,153 acres (1,769,789 acres of enrolled private and state lands, and 1,039,364 of public lands) for hunting within the boundaries of the WIHA and Hunter Management Area (HMA) programs. This included land in every county within Wyoming.
- Providing additional access to 193,803 acres of public lands located outside the boundaries of the WIHA and HMA which would not have been accessible without the PLPW program.
- Providing fishing access to 3,919 lake acres and 94 stream miles through the Walk-in Fishing Area (WIFA) program.
- Provided landowners participating in the program an increase in the monetary payment made for allowing access. The most recent previous increase in payment was in 2005.
- Processed 612 PLPW agreements beginning with initial landowner contact to determine access submitting an agreement through the Attorney General's office (AG) for approval, obtaining landowner signatures on the AG approved agreements, and finally submitting to the Department Administration for final processing.
- Worked with the Department IT personnel to streamline the online permission slip process making it more user friendly for sportsmen and reducing problems associated with obtaining permission slips for the HMAs and the National Elk Refuge (NER).
- Issued 25,761 online permission slips to 14,610 individual hunters for access to the HMA program and the NER.
- Provided free hunting and fishing access on Walk-in Areas to anyone with the proper licenses. Many of the participants are families, contributing to the maintenance and enhancement of hunting and fishing traditions.
- Responded to 117 e-mails received through the PLPW website regarding hunting, fishing, or the PLPW Access Program. The majority of these e-mails (79%) were responded to within 1 day of receipt.
- Successfully applied for a Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP) grant. The Department was awarded \$1,198,122 over three years to be used for contract personnel time, supplies, promotion of the PLPW program, PLPW easements, and long-term easements.
- Hunters surveyed during the 2014 hunting season for harvest results indicated 21% of antelope hunters (25% of nonresident, 17% of resident), 14% of deer hunters (13% of nonresident, 15% of resident), and 13% of elk hunters (11% of nonresident, 14% of resident) used either a WIHA or HMA to hunt on. This would equate to an estimated 8,606 antelope, 8,554 deer, and 8,734 elk hunters having used either a WIHA or HMA to hunt.
- Increased hunting access translates into improved wildlife population management and decreased agricultural damage through harvest.
- Increased license sales in hunt areas with difficult public access.
- Hunters surveyed during the 2014 hunting season who indicated they were satisfied or very satisfied with the opportunity provided through the WIHA or HMA programs were 80% for antelope, 72% for deer, and 72% for elk.



## Landowner Survey

In 2015, the PLPW Access Program conducted a survey of landowners enrolled in the Walk-in Area (hunting and fishing) or Hunter Management Area programs. Survey questions were similar to those presented to landowners in 2005 and 2010. Surveys were distributed to all landowners by the regional access coordinators, and the survey received a 49.2% return rate.

Below is a summary of the landowner responses from Hunter Management Areas, Walk-in Fishing Areas, Walk-in Hunting Areas and Walk-in Fishing and Hunting Combined Areas:

- Of the landowners that responded, the average number of years they have participated in the Hunter Management Area and Walk-in Hunting Area Program is 8.8 years, and 10.2 years in the Walk-in Fishing Area program.
- 80.7% of them have a 5-year contract.
- 64.7% of the respondents said they signed a multi-year contract because of the ease of process, 49.8% said because of the payment incentive.
- 74.2% of the respondents said their desires and expectations in establishing a Hunting Walk-in Area or Hunter Management Area were the management of hunters by the Department, 65.6% said the management of roads and vehicle access. On Fishing Walk-in Areas, 78.6% of the respondents said their desires and expectations were to increase fishing opportunities.
- 90.4% of the landowners agree that the Hunting Walk-in Area or Hunter Management Area on their property met their expectations they had identified. 64.3% of the landowners agree that the Fishing Walk-in Area on their property met their expectations they had identified
- 72.7% of the landowners felt the number of hunters on their property was about right, and 62.5% of the landowners felt the number of anglers was about right.
- 37.6% of them said that the use of their property has increased, 41.4% stayed the same.
- 78.5% of the respondents were satisfied with the behavior of the hunters using their property, 71.4% were satisfied with the behavior of anglers using their property.
- 99% of the landowners felt that it was easy to establish the access area on their property.
- 90.8% were satisfied with the Department's efforts to place signs on their property.
- 77.5% were satisfied with the Department's presence on their property during the open season.
- 71.6% of landowners felt that the relationship with the Department has improved.
- 50% of the respondents felt their relationship with the hunters and anglers has neither improved nor worsened, 45.4% felt their relationship has improved.
- Landowners said the following aspects of the Walk-in Area or Hunter Management Area programs worked well: 68.4% listed signage, 65.6% listed improved access for hunters and anglers, 54.1% listed maps of the areas, and 50.5% listed Department presence on their property.
- 87.2% are satisfied with the landowner incentives.
- 61.9% allowed free access to their property prior to establishing a Walk-in Area or Hunter Management Area. Only 20.6% indicated they would allow free access if they decided not to participate in the programs in the future.
- 82.1% of the landowners felt that the programs had made it more convenient to provide access to hunters and anglers.
- Overall, 91.7% of the respondents were satisfied with the program.

# Hunting and Fishing Access Programs

Hunter Management Area – Walk-in Hunting Areas – Walk-in Fishing Areas

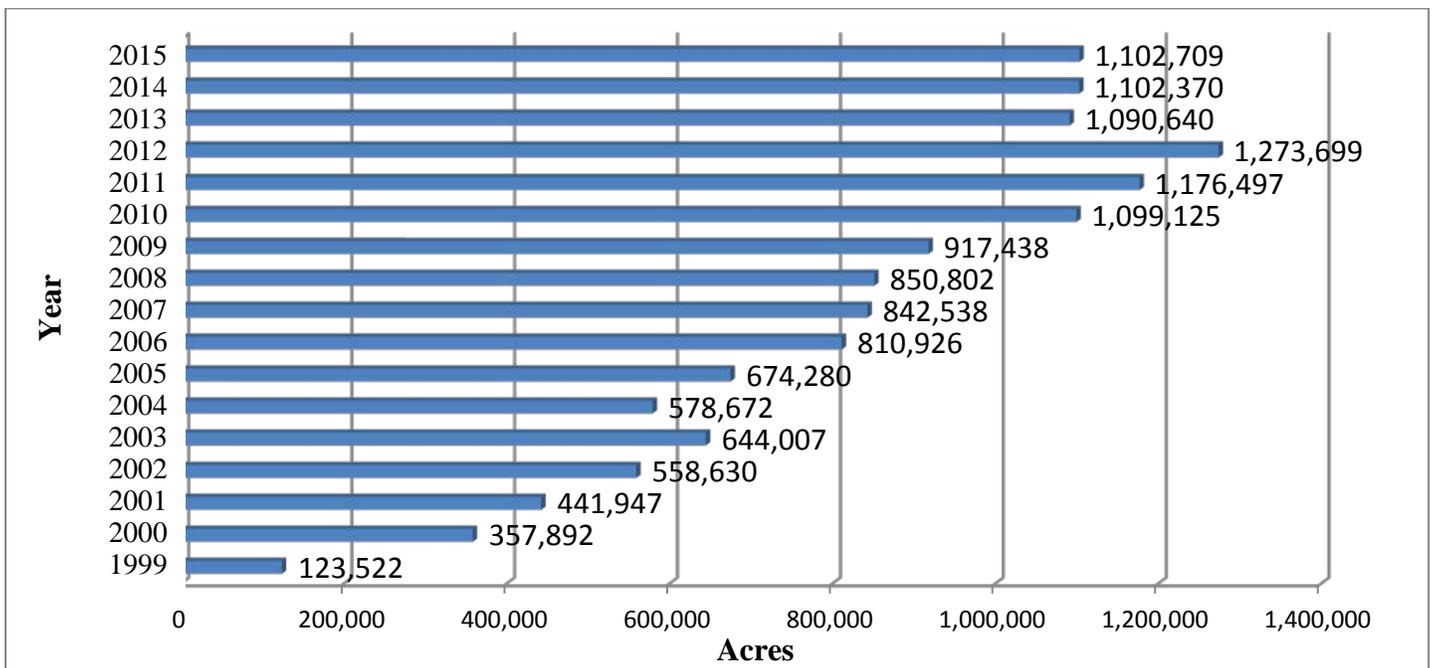
## *Hunter Management Areas*



Hunter Management Areas are access areas where each hunter must first obtain a permission slip from the Department prior to hunting. These areas are generally larger than WIAs, and usually have some level of vehicle access. Permission slips are issued through the Department’s website, and this method has proven to be a fair and popular way to distribute hunter access. On HMAs with limited access and high demand, random draws are used to assure a fair distribution of permission slips. Website distribution of permission slips is popular with nonresident hunters as they can obtain permission for HMAs prior to coming to the state to hunt. Regional office personnel and game wardens/biologists provide extra assistance to hunters needing help obtaining a permission slip. HMAs can provide unlimited, limited first-come first-served, or limited random draw hunter

access permission slips. The type of HMA depends upon several factors such as: desired harvest levels, hunter participation, wildlife population numbers, landowner preference and agricultural damage. For 2015, there were 55 HMAs with 167 participating landowners encompassing 1,102,709 enrolled acres for hunting primarily big game species, but also included small game and upland game birds (Figure 1). This is an increase of 339 acres from 2014 resulting from the addition of one HMA (Knight Ridge West), the withdrawal of four HMAs (Cow Creek, Harris Park, Ridge, and Sherman), and some additional properties enrolled to existing HMAs.

**Figure 1. Hunter Management Area Acres by Year**

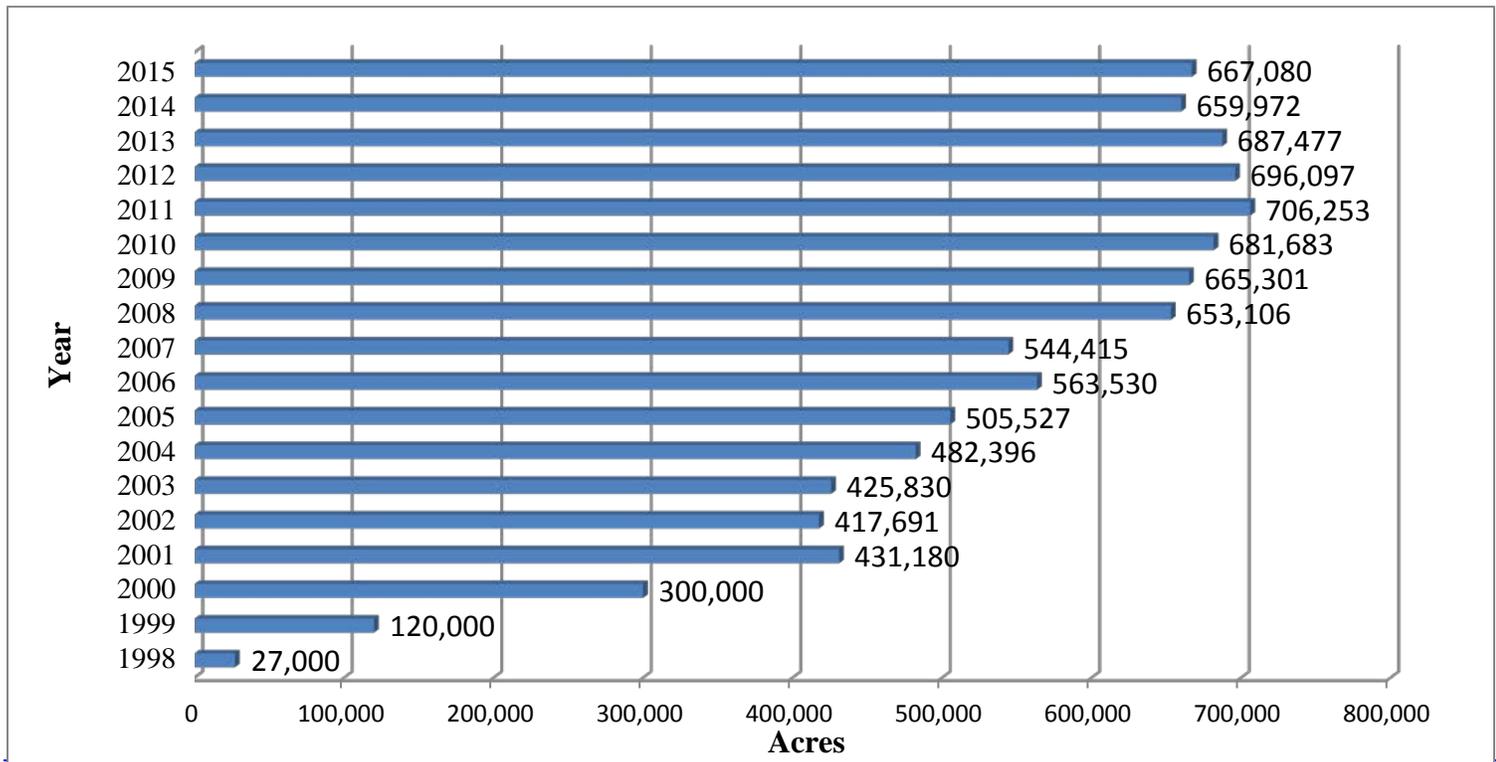


## Walk-in Hunting Areas

Walk-in Hunting Areas are parcels of land open to anyone who has a valid hunting license; no permission slip is required. These access areas are usually smaller than HMAs and, as the name implies, typically require hunters to walk in to hunt. WIHAs are similar to HMAs in that landowners can determine which species can be hunted and when access will be granted. For 2015, the PLPW Access Program enrolled 667,080 private and state acres involving 462 landowners (Figure 2). This is an increase of 7,108 acres from 2014 due to additional properties being enrolled throughout the state. Walk-in Hunting Areas provide incredible opportunities throughout the entire state for a wide variety of game species, making it possible to enjoy hunting access close to your home.



Figure 2. Walk-in Hunting Area Acres by Year

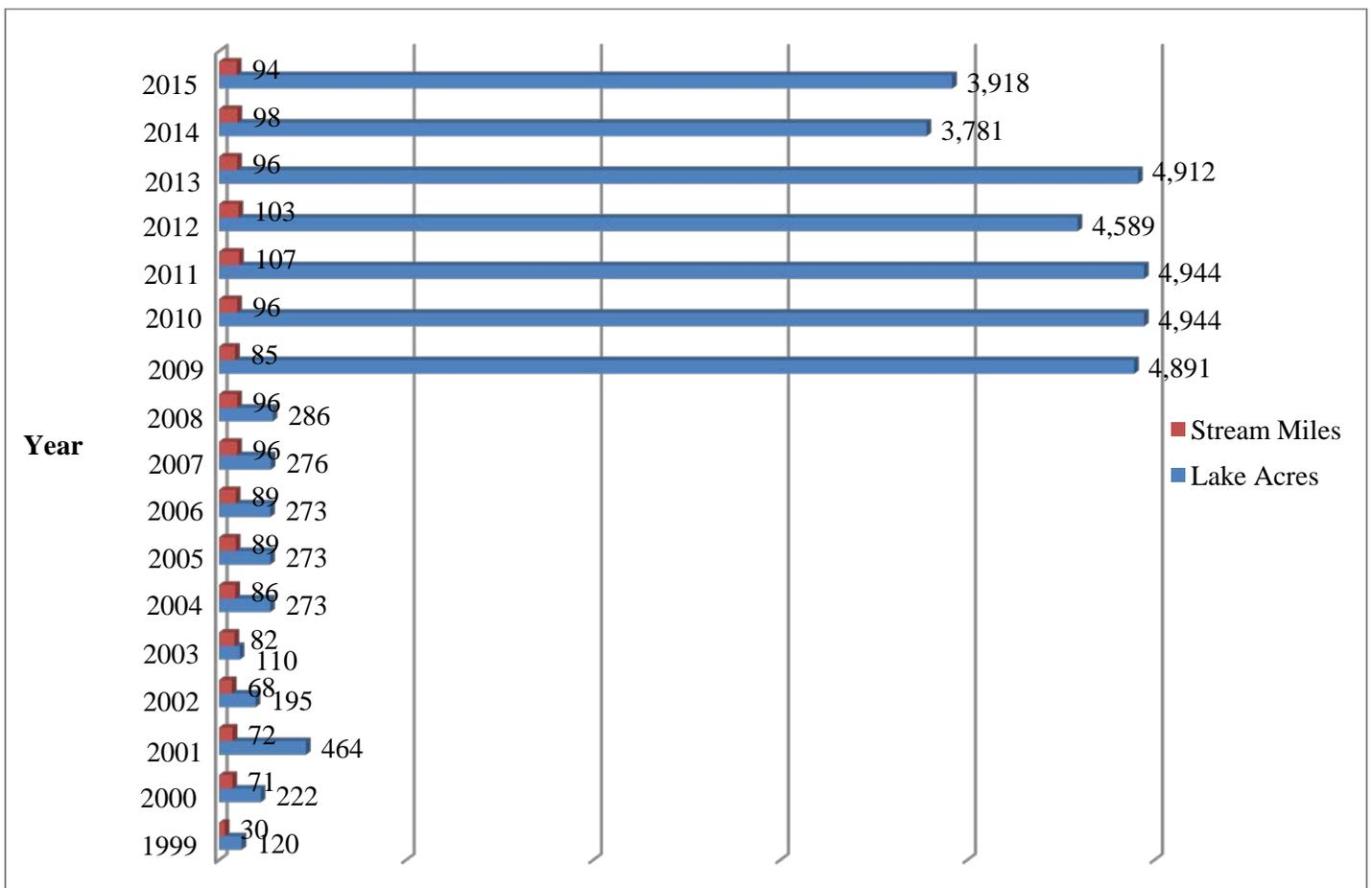




## Walk-in Fishing Areas

Walk-in Fishing Areas are similar to WIHAs in that anyone with a valid fishing license may enter the property to fish. Unless otherwise specified within Department publications, WIFAs are open year-round. Fishing areas in Wyoming are not as prevalent as hunting areas simply because fewer water sources exist compared to hunting areas. Nevertheless, WIFAs provide valuable fishing access, particularly during the summer months. For 2015, 3,919 lake acres and 94 stream miles were available for anglers, thanks to the 68 landowners enrolled in the WIFA program (Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Walk-in Fishing Lake Acres and Stream Miles by Year**

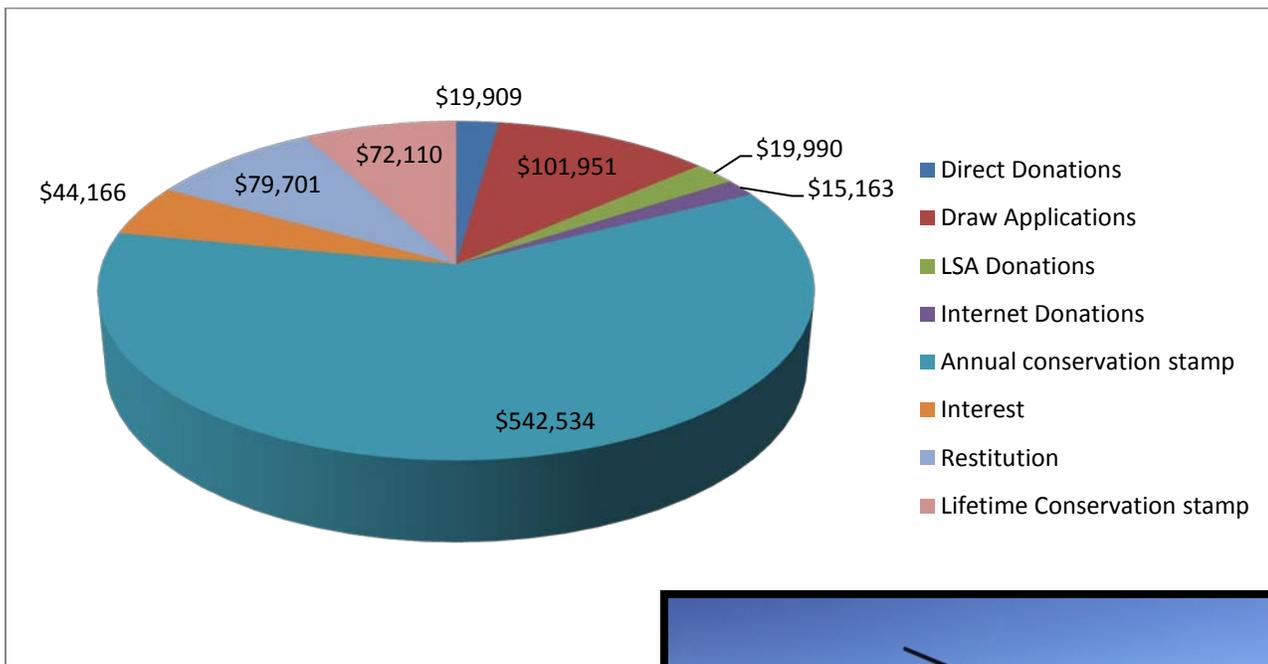


# Program Funding

The PLPW Access Program is funded by Department funds and the Access Yes Program. Department funds, primarily from license sales, fund the daily operations including personnel. Revenue for the Access Yes Program is generated from the sale of lifetime and annual conservation stamps, donations from organizations, individual hunters and anglers, state restitution fees from court-imposed fines from wildlife violations, and interest (Figure 4). Except for a few exemptions, every hunter and angler must purchase an annual conservation stamp, unless a lifetime conservation stamp has been purchased previously. A portion of the sale of these stamps is deposited into the Access Yes account (\$2.50 per annual stamp and half of each lifetime stamp). These two sources generate the majority of the funds each year, and in Fiscal Year 2015, they generated \$614,644.

Easement payments made to landowners are funded through the Access Yes Program. Authorized by state statute, funds collected through the Access Yes Program may only be utilized for acquiring easements with landowners. In 2015, every dollar spent provided approximately 3.5 acres of access.

**Figure 4. Access Yes Funds Received in Fiscal Year 2015**



Donations to Access Yes provide another valuable source of funds. During Fiscal Year 2015, direct donations from conservation groups and organizations totaled \$18,214 indicating the importance these groups place on access. These organizations include: Gateway Chapter of Safari Club International, Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, Fremont Beverages, National Wild Turkey Federation, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Pheasants Forever Inc, Bowhunters of Wyoming, Wyoming Ducks Unlimited, Wyoming Back Country Hunters and Anglers, Wyoming Outdoorsmen, and Cheyenne Field Archers. Additional donations totaling \$1,320 were made in memory of Rich Hoffman, and individual hunters donated \$375 at local Regional Offices. Direct donations decreased from Fiscal Year 2014 by \$56,661. These direct donations vary year-to-year based on changes in large donations from individual conservation groups. Hunters and anglers can also make donations to Access Yes when applying for or purchasing licenses; either in person at a license selling agent, or when purchasing a license through the internet. These sportsmen contributed a total of \$137,104 in Fiscal Year 2015, a 3% increase from 2014 donations. Additionally, several private individuals made personal contributions. Overall, during Fiscal Year 2015, the Access Yes Program received \$895,524, a decrease of \$64,790 (-6.7%) from 2014 (Figure 5).

**Figure 5. Access Yes Funds Received Each Fiscal Year**

<b>ACCESS- SUMMARY OF FUNDS RECEIVED</b>									
<b>Fiscal Year</b>	<b>Total Access fund Receipts</b>	<b>Direct Donations F06 6246 4R20</b>	<b>LSA collections F06 6245 4R20</b>	<b>License Draw Donations F06 6245 4R20</b>	<b>Internet Sale donations F06 6245 4R20</b>	<b>State Restitution F06 3301 4R20</b>	<b>Lifetime C-stamp F06 2633 4R20</b>	<b>Annual c-stamp** F06 2607 4R20</b>	<b>Interest* F06 4601 4R20</b>
FY 2015	895,524	19,909	19,990	101,951	15,163	79,701	72,110	542,534	44,166
FY 2014	960,314	76,570	25,705	92,402	15,280	109,955	71,207	534,508	34,687
FY 2013	908,837	37,827	23,347	88,058	14,426	58,135	82,308	530,694	74,042
FY 2012	924,801	16,675	22,232	97,032	12,244	82,578	53,789	589,691	50,560
FY 2011	897,862	13,744	18,100	85,332	10,305	96,226	52,887	513,977	107,291
FY 2010	909,072	31,215	20,697	85,962	11,541	122,591	51,051	528,037	57,978
FY 2009	882,935	32,032	27,545	90,255		87,859	57,098	539,559	48,587
FY 2008	879,512	45,261	27,350	104,025		104,962	95,674	444,805	57,435
FY 2007	761,297	20,078	25,952	97,362		74,916	63,662	442,699	36,628
FY 2006	710,736	7,466	26,213	92,281		71,340	48,385	432,820	32,231
FY 2005	645,468	4,862	24,894	89,118		50,295	36,965	409,151	30,183
FY 2004	654,354	7,697	25,922	91,481		62,721	12,975	429,776	23,782
FY 2003	607,282	11,648	26,250	105,393				443,172	20,819
FY 2002	632,814	12,690	31,831	106,000				460,009	22,284
FY 2001	312,003	6,862	35,296	97,361				161,601	10,883

\* Interest includes prior period adjustments for gains on investment income.

\*\* This amount represents the funds deposited for annual conservation stamp sales in each respective fiscal year. The revenue is recognized when received, not when the sale actually occurs.

## Additional PLPW Programs and Services

The PLPW Access Program continues to modify its programs to benefit landowners, hunters, anglers and the Department. For example, one ongoing service is the Hunter/Landowner Assistance Program that matches landowners who desire additional harvest with hunters looking for a place to hunt. This program was developed as an avenue to assist landowners who wanted increased harvest of big game animals on their private property without having to enroll in one of the existing access programs.

The program operates by posting landowner contact information on the Department's website where hunters can contact them directly to secure their own access. Landowners do not receive any compensation from the Department, and all details pertaining to access to their property is arranged between the landowner and the hunter. Once a landowner obtains the desired harvest, their information is removed from the website. Landowners are added and removed throughout the hunting seasons. For 2015, there were 40 landowners participating to allow access for antelope hunting, 38 participating to allow access for deer hunting, three allowing access for elk hunting, and three allowing access for turkey hunting. This program has been very successful in providing assistance to landowners while increasing hunting access.



Some landowners choose not to have their information on the website during subsequent years because the number of game animals has returned to acceptable levels or they have returning hunters who will provide future harvest.

Recognition of landowners who provide access is an important aspect of maintaining sportsman/landowner relationships. The PLPW Access Program coordinators participate as facilitators in the Access Recognition Program. This program, a joint program of the Wyoming Board of Agriculture (Board), the Commission, and Wyoming Wildlife – The Foundation, recognizes landowners who provide access to or through their property to hunters and anglers. The state is divided into four quadrants, and the regional access coordinators facilitate this selection by working with the four quadrant committees to select a quadrant winner each year. The quadrant committees are comprised of Board and WGFC members. Each of the four winners is recognized at the annual Wyoming Stock Growers winter meeting. The recipients each receive a plaque and a check for \$2,000. Funding for the program is provided by Commissioner donated licenses. The four recipients of the 2015 Access Recognition Program were Joanne, Joni, and Tom Harlan of Kavcee; Michael Vigil Farms of Manderson; Morris and Jeanie Cronk of Fort Laramie; and Robert “Lynn” and Kathy Stoll of Green River.

Elk herds that exceed Commission population objectives are a major concern for landowners and the Department, and getting these populations towards objective are a high priority for the Department. The Department's main method to decrease an elk population is hunting, but elk hunting access on private lands remains limited in many areas of the state. To address over objective elk populations and private landowner access concerns, the Department, in 2010, initiated a new program called the Hunter Management Access Program (HMAP). The HMAP was designed to increase antlerless elk harvest at specific locations by coordinating with landowners to allow controlled and monitored hunting access. The Department hired a Hunt Management Coordinator (HMC) to facilitate hunting by directing, monitoring and assisting small groups of hunters as they elk hunt.

During the 2015-16 hunting season, the Laramie Peak HMAP continued for the third year in Elk Hunt Area 7. This HMAP was somewhat of a “hybrid” design, as there was no specific "Laramie Peak HMAP" or special permission slips. The HMC efforts focused on and around the existing Belle Otte, Pinto Creek and McFarlane HMAs, the new Menter Knob HMA, and Albany County WIHAs #3, 4, 5, and 12. The HMC was charged with locating and monitoring elk herds and communicating and coordinating with landowners in order to assist hunters in successfully harvesting elk. The overall goal was to enhance access to elk herds off of PLPW properties and increase cow elk harvest success. The HMC worked with landowners to allow some hunters access to private land, which also moved elk onto accessible public lands for additional harvest. The coordinator also assisted with documenting hunter harvest, collecting brucellosis and CWD samples for testing and ensuring compliance with PLPW program and other rules on state and participating private lands. During the 2014-2015 season, the HMAP directly or indirectly assisted in the harvest of 325 antlerless elk. A final report for the 2015-2016 season will be available in late March, 2016.

The Department utilized the HMAP Program in 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 within the Iron Mountain Herd Unit. The Department reinstated the program again in the fall of 2015. A final report will be available in late March, 2016.

## **Challenges Facing the PLPW Access Program**

Two challenges continually facing the PLPW Access Program are limited personnel and long-term funding. Maintaining or increasing access areas is difficult with limited personnel dedicated toward this effort. The addition of a fifth regional access coordinator in Sheridan in 2015 was a huge benefit to the program; however, the magnitude of managing approximately three million acres of access is daunting. Additionally, with the long hunting seasons and overlap of season dates between species, providing a Department presence on the enrolled PLPW properties with limited personnel is very difficult. Seasonal contract technicians hired during the summer provided much needed assistance to regional access coordinators with sign maintenance and landowner contacts. Additionally, game wardens and wildlife biologists provide assistance with on-the-ground landowner contacts, signing and patrolling. With ever-expanding workloads, regional access coordinators have difficulties in adequately maintaining signs and having a presence on enrolled properties.

A stabilized long-term funding source would benefit the PLPW Access Program. The Access Yes Program provides funds for access easements. During the last five years, however, easement payments to landowners have nearly reached the total Access Yes funds allocated. This means the Department has limited ability to add more access. Additionally, new and innovative ways to encourage landowner involvement beyond the monetary payment need to be explored.



Wyoming, like so many other western states, has experienced some transition from traditional landowners to those who purchase property for their own hunting pleasure or non-consumptive uses. This typically correlates to a decrease in the amount of access hunters and anglers enjoy. Additionally, many traditional landowners now charge a trespass fee or lease the hunting rights to their property as a means to supplement their income. The end result is fewer people hunting and fishing private lands, which impacts wildlife management, agricultural damage, hunter success and license sales. Additionally, increased and expanded development (i.e. natural resources and subdivisions) has affected hunter access and in turn created some wildlife management issues. This is a concern for the Department and something our access programs aim to mitigate. One change currently under way is a

review of the ACCESS YES/ PLPW program promotions and logo. After 15+ years, the promotions and logo has become “stale”, and a rebranding effort will occur for 2016. This will present a fresh look at the program for the public, and will hopefully increase access donations, which has a direct result in increased access for hunting and fishing.

