

Supplemental Income from Wildlife on Your Land

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Introduction

More and more farmers and ranchers are considering hunting as a new source of income. Urban and suburban sprawl is wiping out historic wildlife habitats, and rural areas surrounding cities typically are posted against hunting or trespassing. Many sportsmen travel long distances to hunt gamebirds, waterfowl, and big game. Not only is demand increasing for quality hunting on private land, but also conservation programs of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) will help pay for changes in land management to encourage wildlife abundance.

A key USDA program is the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Aimed at taking up to 45 million acres out of crop production, CRP is resulting in millions of acres of potentially excellent wildlife habitat. Under CRP, these acres can be leased or rented for recreational use, such as hunting, fishing, trapping, and camping.

Regardless of whether your land qualifies for CRP, you can investigate the income-generating potential from wildlife on your land. Your decision will involve assessment of the wildlife potential of your land; evaluation of the attitudes and abilities of yourself, your family, and your employees to manage wildlife and the people who will use your land; and consideration of your expected income and expenses.

Will Your Land Support Abundant Wildlife?

Size is important. For example, although a field as small as 50 acres can be a profitable dove hunting field, the property should be at least several hundred

acres if many hunters are to enjoy their experience. To overcome the size problem, adjoining landowners can combine their properties for the purposes of managing wildlife and attracting hunters.

A great variety of plants and land uses contribute to wildlife abundance. A mixture of croplands, grasslands, brushy hedgerows or windbreaks, wetlands, and woodlands is ideal. The practices permitted under the Conservation Reserve Program will add to the wildlife value of any farm. When these practices are selected and utilized in relation to existing wildlife cover on your farm, the benefits to game can be multiplied.

Is a Hunting Business Right For You?

Entertaining the public will require changes in your operation to prevent conflicts with other uses or management of your land. Time and money are required to run this new business, including machinery time and the expenses of establishing and maintaining wildlife habitat. And, furnishing hunters with room and board may add to your income but will demand time and expenses.

Charging for hunting access may mean changing the way you, your neighbors, and your friends hunt on your farm. The prime times of the hunting season may be reserved for your paying guests. The choice will be yours, however, because you coordinate how and when paying guests use your property.

Regardless of how recreationists are permitted access, ethical and law-abiding conduct should be expected. You determine the parts of your land that hunters can

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use and how they are to use facilities such as roads, gates, and fences. When presented tactfully, your guidelines will be followed with minimum supervision.

Accepting money for access privileges may change your liability status. Generally, those who lease land for modest fees are liable for their own safety and equipment. Clauses that limit landowner liability and transfer liability to the guest are standard parts of hunting and other lease/rent agreements. Extended liability insurance can be added to most farm and ranch policies. You also must eliminate hazardous conditions or warn your visitors so they can avoid problems. Legal advice is recommended before entering this business.

Hunting Management Options

There are many ways to manage hunting. Your decisions will depend on the size and diversity of your land, the wildlife resources there, hunting seasons, your distance from population centers, and the amount of time and other resources you and your family want to invest.

Day-use Permits: The hunter reports to your home or office and purchases a permit to hunt for the day. In addition to the usual information about the identity of the person, your signature, and the date, the permit can carry rules about the hunt, including a liability clause. Day-use permits take time to administer and are used typically for dove and waterfowl hunting. It is important to maintain high quality hunting, and this may mean limiting the numbers of hunters per day and even scheduling two or three rest days per week when no hunting is permitted. Guiding fees can be worked into the day-use system. For big game hunting, some landowners issue permits that extend for several days.

Day-use with Room and Board: The hunter arranges dates in advance and submits a deposit. This option may involve use of an extra room, bathroom facilities, and a place at the table, making a positive attitude toward guests in the home essential. In some cases, a bunk house or separate house is provided.

Season Leases: The landowner leases hunting rights to an individual, several people, or to a hunting club for the season. The owner can lease hunting rights for one or more types of game. Leases contain specific agreements on how the property is to be used, responsibility for maintaining facilities, safety areas where hunting is not allowed, the length of the agreement, and the amount to be paid. The landowner can limit the num-

ber of hunters in the leasing group. Season leases take less time to handle than day-use permit hunting. The leasing group may wish to pay for or assist in wildlife habitat management operations, and may even post and patrol the property.

Brokerage: In some areas, independent businessmen secure hunting rights from many farms, advertise the hunting opportunities, and direct the hunters. Their services may include additional arrangements such as room and board. Landowners who do not own sufficiently large farms to sustain intense and frequent hunting can participate in a cooperative program managed by a broker.

Estimating Your Income Potential

Rates for recreational access and services vary greatly from place to place, and will depend on your location and the quality, quantity, and diversity of recreational opportunities you can offer. Consultation with your neighbors, the agencies listed at the end of this text, and professional consultants will help you estimate your potential income and expenses.

Marketing Your Product

Word of mouth and repeat business should be sufficient to keep recreationists coming to your land; provided, of course, that they have enjoyed themselves. To begin your business, seek out those who have been on your land. Talk to your agribusiness contacts at the co-op, sale barn, grain elevator, gas station, and bank. Be sure your doctor, dentist, lawyer, and their friends know about the recreational opportunities available on your land. Gun shops and trap and skeet clubs may give you free advertisement. You also may need to advertise in newspapers and magazines that are likely to be read by outdoor recreationists who come to your area.

Sources Of Assistance

Several state and federal government agencies will help landowners improve their properties for wildlife. Assistance ranges from advice to financial aid. The local office of the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) is a good place to start. The SCS will help develop a conservation plan for your farm that includes wildlife considerations. Also, the SCS works with the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service in administering USDA farm programs including the Conservation Reserve Program. Additional information on wildlife

management is available from your state wildlife management agency and through your local Cooperative Extension Service (CES) office. For detailed wildlife management planning and operational assistance, wildlife management consultants are available. Your state wildlife management agency or state CES wildlife specialist may recommend consultants if contacted.

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