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Illinois DNR Receives USDA Award to Continue Land Access Program

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SPRINGFIELD, Ill. – The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced it is awarding more than $2 million to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) to encourage private landowners to allow public access to their land for hunting, fishing and other wildlife-dependent recreation. Illinois was 1 of 27 states that will receive awards through the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP).

"I'm happy to see the continued commitment to this effort. What an innovative way to protect wildlife habitat, open new outdoor opportunities for the public, and generate revenue for private landowners," said Ivan Dozier, Illinois State Conservationist.

IDNR's Illinois Recreational Access Program (IRAP) was developed in 2011 from its first VPA-HIP grant and has continued to expand as demand and popularity of the program increases with private landowners and outdoor enthusiasts.

"We are very excited to receive these grant funds to continue and expand the IRAP program," said IDNR Director Collen Callahan. "IRAP is a wonderful program that increases public access in Illinois for hunters, anglers and other outdoor recreationalists while at the same time assisting private landowners with habitat improvements on their land."

IRAP will use grant funds to lease additional properties near urban areas in Illinois and those enrolled in NRCS' Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, which offers Wetland Reserve Easement options. New and expanded activities such as youth shotgun deer hunting and archery deer hunter days also will be added.

"This really is fantastic news for Illinois' outdoor enthusiasts," said Tammy Miller, manager, IRAP. "We already have more than 25 landowners waiting to sign up with this new grant, so I'm looking forward to expanding in new areas."

IRAP currently leases approximately 22,000 acres in 49 counties for turkey, deer, waterfowl, squirrel, rabbit, pheasant and quail hunting, and fishing. More than 12,500 acres have been enhanced through various habitat improvement projects on leased these acres.

“In Illinois, 97 percent of land is privately owned, with 85 percent of that land owned by farmers, which greatly restricts land access,” Callahan said. “With our state sites temporarily closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the IRAP program – and IDNR’s relationship with NRCS and the VPA-HIP program – is needed now more than ever.”

More information on the IRAP program can be found at https://www2.illinois.gov/dnr/conservation/IRAP or contact staff at DNR.IRAP@illinos.gov.