

**United States Department of Agriculture  
Farm Service Agency**

**FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT**

**Washington State Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program**

**June 2011**

The United States Department of Agriculture Farm Service Agency (FSA) on behalf of the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) has prepared a Programmatic Environmental Assessment (PEA) to evaluate the environmental consequences associated with providing the State of Washington Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP) grant funds. The VPA-HIP is a new program authorized by the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (2008 Farm Bill) that provides grants to States and tribal governments to encourage owners and operators of privately held farm, ranch, and forest land to voluntarily open land for public access for outdoor recreation activities such as hunting, fishing, hiking, wildlife watching, and other outdoor activities. Projects receiving VPA-HIP funds are administered by the State or tribal government that receives the grant.

The State of Washington, through the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), proposes to use VPA-HIP funds to expand upon its long history of working with landowners to provide public hunting access on private lands through various voluntary access programs. Under these programs, WDFW works with over 600 private landowners and over one million acres of private land under cooperative agreement in eastern and western Washington.

**Proposed Action**

WDFW proposes to use VPA-HIP funds to expand upon the 1.3 million acres of private land currently enrolled in the “Feel Free to Hunt,” Register to Hunt,” and “Hunt by Written Permission” hunting access programs and expand existing public access opportunities for hunting and watchable wildlife. VPA-HIP funds will be used through a combination of landowner incentive payments and physical improvements to facilitate and encourage access opportunities through five individual initiatives:

**Access Near Urban Centers (\$437,240):** Increase acreage enrolled in the Snow Goose Hunting Program from 1,000 acres to 1,500 acres annually; increase the number of waterfowl hunting blinds made available through the “Feel Free to Hunt” Program from 10 blinds to 25 blinds; establish public big game hunting access on at least 5,000 acres of private forest lands; and establish at least 5 new watchable wildlife opportunities on private farmlands.

**Snake River Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) Enhancement and Access (\$387,300):** Establish public hunting access on at least an additional 12,500 acres of private farm land and establish public access for hunting on an additional 15 farms also enrolled in our Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP).

**Corn Stubble Retention (\$60,000):** Double the amount of acres enrolled in the Corn Stubble Retention Program from an average of 1,000 acres annually to 2,000 acres annually.

**Southwest Washington Private Forest Land Access (\$499,680):** Establish public hunting access on at least 50,000 additional acres of private forest lands.

**Improving Access to Private Lands Hunting Opportunities (\$155,000):** Develop a new GoHunt interactive mapping program that utilizes new technology and results in improved usability; increase GoHunt webpage “hits” by 25% over 2009 use; and develop an automated system where hunters can reserve hunting days on private lands enrolled in WDFW access programs.

### **Reasons for Finding of No Significant Impact**

In consideration of the analysis documented in the PEA and the reasons outlined in this Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI), the Proposed Action would not constitute a major Federal action that would significantly affect the human environment. The state of Washington notes that there will be no additional SEPA process for this action. Therefore, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared, and WDFW will not have a separate SEPA comment period. The determination is based on the following:

1. The Proposed Action as outlined in the PEA would provide beneficial impacts to both recreation and economic resources as a result of the increased amount of land available for public use and monies from these activities injected into local economies. Moreover, expanding lands available for wildlife-associated recreation would benefit vegetation and wildlife by maintaining suitable habitat rather than converting the land to another incompatible use.
2. Potential beneficial and adverse impacts of implementing the Proposed Action have been fully considered within the PEA. No significant adverse direct or indirect effects were identified, based on the resource analyses provided in the PEA.
3. The Proposed Action would not involve effects to the quality of the human environment that are likely to be highly controversial.
4. The Proposed Action would not establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects and does not represent a decision in principle about a future consideration.
5. The Proposed Action does not result in cumulative significant impacts when considered with other actions that also individually have insignificant impacts. Cumulative impacts of implementing the Proposed Action were determined to be not significant.
6. The Proposed Action would not have adverse effects on threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat. In accordance with Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act, the effects of implementing the Proposed Action on threatened and endangered species and designated critical habitat were addressed in the PEA.
7. The Proposed Action does not threaten a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

**Determination**

In accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act and FSA's environmental regulations at 7 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) part 799 implementing the regulations of the Council on Environmental Quality, 40 CFR parts 1500-1508, I find the Proposed Action is not a major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment. Barring any new data identified during public and agency review of the PEA that would dramatically change the analysis presented in the PEA or identification of a significant controversial issue, the PEA and FONSI are considered final 30 days after the date of initial publication of the Notice of Availability.

Approved:   
Signature

**June 14, 2011**  
Date

# ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Expanding Hunting and Wildlife Viewing Access to Private Land in  
Washington

Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program

*Prepared for:*

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Background

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) proposes to implement a new Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP) in the State of Washington. The VPA-HIP is a new program authorized by the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (2008 Farm Bill) that provides grants to States and tribal governments to either expand existing or create new public access programs. Funds may also be requested to provide incentives for eligible private landowners to improve habitat on enrolled lands. Incentives encourage owners and operators of privately held farm, ranch, and forest land to voluntarily open land for public access for outdoor recreation activities such as hunting, fishing, hiking, wildlife watching, and other outdoor activities. The VPA-HIP grant award process is administered by the USDA Farm Service Agency on behalf of the CCC. The VPA-HIP programs are administered by the State or tribal government that receives the grant.

The State of Washington, through the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), proposes to use VPA-HIP funds to expand upon its long history of working with landowners to provide public hunting access on private lands through various voluntary access programs. Under these programs, WDFW works with over 600 private landowners and over one million acres of private land under cooperative agreement in eastern and western Washington.

## Proposed Action

WDFW proposes to use VPA-HIP funds to expand upon the 1.3 million acres of private land currently enrolled in the “Feel Free to Hunt,” Register to Hunt,” and “Hunt by Written Permission” hunting access programs and expand existing public access opportunities for hunting and watchable wildlife. VPA-HIP funds will be used through a combination of landowner incentive payments and physical improvements to facilitate and encourage access opportunities through five individual initiatives:

- Access Near Urban Centers (\$437,240)
  - Increase acreage enrolled in the Snow Goose Hunting Program from 1,000 acres to 1,500 acres annually.
  - Increase the number of waterfowl hunting blinds made available through the “Feel Free to Hunt” Program from 10 blinds to 25 blinds.
  - Establish public big game hunting access on at least 5,000 acres of private forest lands.
  - Establish at least 5 new watchable wildlife opportunities on private farmlands.
- Snake River Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) Enhancement and Access (\$387,300)
  - Establish public hunting access on at least an additional 12,500 acres of private farm land.

- Establish public access for hunting on an additional 15 farms also enrolled in our Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP).
- Corn Stubble Retention (\$60,000)
  - Double the amount of acres enrolled in the Corn Stubble Retention Program from an average of 1,000 acres annually to 2,000 acres annually.
- Southwest Washington Private Forest Land Access (\$499,680)
  - Establish public hunting access on at least 50,000 additional acres of private forest lands.
- Improving Access to Private Lands Hunting Opportunities (\$155,000)
  - Develop a new GoHunt interactive mapping program that utilizes new technology and results in improved usability.
  - Increase GoHunt webpage “hits” by 25% over 2009 use.
  - Develop an automated system where hunters can reserve hunting days on private lands enrolled in WDFW access programs.

Details of how VPA-HIP funds will be used in each of these initiatives are provided in Section 2.0 of this Programmatic Environmental Assessment (PEA).

### **Purpose and Need**

The purpose of the proposed action is to use VPA-HIP funds to expand existing public access opportunities for hunting and watchable wildlife in Washington State.

### **Environmental Consequences**

This Programmatic Environmental Assessment (PEA) identifies the possible environmental consequences resulting from the proposed implementation of these initiatives. The PEA process is designed to inform decision-makers and the public about the potential environmental effects of the Proposed Action and to ensure adequate public involvement in the process.

The environmental consequences of the Proposed Action and No Action Alternative are addressed in this PEA and summarized in Table ES-1.

This PEA has been prepared by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Farm Service Agency, in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act.

**Table ES-1 Summary of Environmental Consequences**

<b>Resource</b>	<b>Proposed Action (Preferred Alternative)</b>	<b>No Action Alternative</b>
Biological Resources (Wildlife and Protected Species)	<p>Expanding hunting opportunities could potentially result in increased pressure on game populations. However, these impacts would be minimized through current WDFW hunting regulations. No adverse impacts to protected species are anticipated.</p> <p>Increasing land available for wildlife-related recreation, corn stubble retention, and expanding the wildlife values of the Conservation Reserve Program would result in additional land being managed for wildlife values resulting in improved a wildlife habitat over time.</p>	The current public access program would continue; however, the additional benefits associated with expanding acreage in the program would not occur.
Cultural Resources	<p>The Snake River Conservation Reserve Enhancement and the Corn Stubble Retention initiatives are unlikely to have additional impact on cultural resources beyond what is already disturbed from agricultural plowing.</p> <p>Initiatives to provide increased access could increase the frequency and enlarge the area where hunters and wildlife-watchers encounter cultural resources, but increased access alone is not anticipated to result in impacts to cultural resources.</p>	The current public access program would continue, with no change to the current program's minimal impact on cultural resources.
Socioeconomics and Environmental Justice	Potential for slight direct economic benefits for those landowners with eligible lands that voluntarily enroll. Slight indirect economic benefits to the local economies from traveling sportsmen and any purchase of necessary goods and/or services near enrolled lands. No environmental justice impacts would occur.	No socioeconomic or environmental justice impacts would occur. However, the slight beneficial impacts from the Proposed Action would not be realized.
Recreation	Potential for increased private land enrollment would lead to increased recreational opportunities for hunting and wildlife watching. Only positive, beneficial impacts would occur to recreational resources.	No impacts to recreational resources would occur. However, beneficial impacts from expanded recreational opportunities from the Proposed Action would not occur.

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**Acronyms and Abbreviations**

CEQ Council on Environmental Quality

VPA-HIP Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program

WDFW Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife

## **Chapter 1.0 Introduction**

### **1.1 Background**

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) has a long history of working with landowners to provide public hunting access on private lands. In 1948, the then-Department of Game launched its first private lands access program known as the “Farmer-Sportsman Program.” In the 1960s, three programs were developed that still today form the core of private lands access opportunities in Washington State—the “Hunting Only By Written Permission” program in 1960, and the “Feel Free to Hunt” and “Register to Hunt” programs in 1963.

Currently, the WDFW has over 600 private landowners and over one million acres of private land under cooperative agreement in eastern and western Washington (see Appendices 1 and 2). WDFW provides public access to private lands through a negotiated agreement between WDFW and landowners statewide under four basic access agreement types:

- **Feel Free to Hunt:** All private lands where WDFW has a management agreement with the owner to provide public access for hunting in exchange for services and materials (signs) for the posting and enforcement of regulations on these lands on an open and less restrictive basis.
- **Register to Hunt:** All private lands in which WDFW has a management agreement with the owner or organization where hunting is regulated by registration. Typical work includes: the annual sign-up of farmers, posting and changing signs as crops are harvested, continual monitoring of hunter use, and pick up and analysis of registration forms. Extensive use occurs on large circle-irrigation corporate farms.
- **Written Permission Program:** This includes all private lands where WDFW provides information signs to those property owners who voluntarily open their land to public hunting on a contact-for-permission basis. Typical signs provided to cooperating farmers are: Hunting by Permission, Watch for Livestock, Close the Gate, and Don’t Litter. Typical work in this sub-program is continual personal communication with farmers and farm groups explaining the availability and variety of signs offered. A written permission sign is provided, and permission slips for access are made available to our landowners.
- **Landowner Hunting Permit Program:** This program includes private lands where WDFW negotiates public hunting access to unique and/or high quality hunting opportunities. Landowners are allowed to work with the Department to set special hunting season dates on their property and have hunting opportunities on their lands be customized.

### **1.2 Proposed Action**

The proposed action will expand upon the 1.1 million acres of private land currently enrolled in the “Feel Free to Hunt,” “Register to Hunt,” and “Hunt by Written Permission” hunting access programs, and expand existing public access opportunities for hunting and watchable wildlife.

VPA-HIP funds will be used through a combination of landowner incentive payments and physical improvements to facilitate and encourage access opportunities through five individual initiatives:

- Access Near Urban Centers
- Snake River Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) Enhancement and Access
- Corn Stubble Retention
- Southwest Washington Private Forest Land Access
- Improving Access to Private Lands Hunting Opportunities
- 

Details of how VPA-HIP funds will be used in each of these initiatives are provided in Section 2.0.

### **1.3 Purpose and Need for the Proposed Action**

The purpose of the proposed action is to expand existing public access opportunities for hunting and watchable wildlife in Washington State.

### **1.4 Objectives of the Proposed Action**

The objectives of the proposed action are discussed below according to the five individual initiatives that comprise the proposed action:

- Access Near Urban Centers
  - Increase acreage enrolled in the Snow Goose Hunting Program from 1,000 acres to 1,500 acres annually.
  - Increase the number of waterfowl hunting blinds made available through the “Feel Free to Hunt” Program from 10 blinds to 25 blinds.
  - Establish public big game hunting access on at least 5,000 acres of private forest lands.
  - Establish at least 5 new watchable wildlife opportunities on private farmlands.
- Snake River Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) Enhancement and Access
  - Establish public hunting access on at least an additional 12,500 acres of private farm land.
  - Establish public access for hunting on an additional 15 farms also enrolled in our Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP).
- Corn Stubble Retention
  - Double the amount of acres enrolled in the Corn Stubble Retention Program from an average of 1,000 acres annually to 2,000 acres annually.
- Southwest Washington Private Forest Land Access
  - Establish public hunting access on at least 50,000 additional acres of private forest lands.

- Improving Access to Private Lands Hunting Opportunities
  - Develop a new GoHunt interactive mapping program that utilizes new technology and results in improved usability.
  - Increase GoHunt webpage “hits” by 25% over 2009 use.
  - Develop an automated system where hunters can reserve hunting days on private lands enrolled in WDFW access programs.

## **1.5 Organization of the EA**

The PEA is organized into seven chapters:

**Chapter 1: Introduction** is an introductory chapter that discusses the current program and a summary of how the proposed action will increase access opportunities.

**Chapter 2: Description of Proposed Action and Alternatives** describes the proposed action, alternatives that were considered, and environmental resources that were excluded from analysis in the PEA due to the nature of the proposed action.

**Chapter 3: Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences** provides a description of specific resources that may be affected by the proposed action and a discussion of the environmental consequences of the proposed action, including the level of impact and the effects of each alternative

**Chapter 4: Cumulative Effects** describes the cumulative effects of the proposed action. Following a brief introduction of cumulative effects, past, present, and reasonably foreseeable actions are presented.

**Chapter 5: List of Preparers and Agencies Contacted** lists individuals who assisted in the preparation of this PEA and all agencies, agency personnel, and other experts who participated in supplying data for the PEA.

**Chapter 6: References**

## **Chapter 2.0 Description of Proposed Action and Alternatives**

### **2.1 Proposed Action**

The proposed action is discussed below according to the five individual initiatives that comprise the proposed action:

#### **2.1.1 Access Near Urban Centers**

Over half of Washington's 6.6 million people reside in the five counties immediately bordering the eastern shore of Puget Sound. This area forms the population center of Washington State. The Access Near Urban Centers Project was developed to provide hunting access in rural areas adjacent to Washington's greatest urban population. Watchable wildlife opportunities are also being incorporated into this Project to address the growing demand and need for wildlife viewing opportunities by citizens residing in this urban area.

Benefits provided to the state's population center and other residents and tourists are detailed in the following specific objectives of this initiative:

- Increase acreage enrolled in the Snow Goose Hunting Program from 1,000 acres to 1,500 acres annually.
- Increase the number of waterfowl hunting blinds made available through the "Feel Free to Hunt" Program from 10 blinds to 25 blinds.
- Establish public big game hunting access on at least 5,000 acres of private forest lands.
- Establish at least 5 new watchable wildlife opportunities on private farmlands.

Since snow geese have habitual use areas, biologists can target those landowners best suited for providing good snow goose hunting opportunities. Landowners will be paid up to \$30/ac/year to allow "Feel Free to Hunt" public access on agricultural lands with crops suitable for snow geese that are very limited in the Project area.

In this project area, waterfowl use permanent wetlands or areas where cropland is seasonally flooded. These areas are consistently present year to year and are identifiable by WDFW biologists. In the past, landowners willing to allow "Feel Free to Hunt" access for waterfowl hunting from blinds have been paid \$1,000 per blind per hunting season.

The project area is rich with wildlife viewing opportunities in demand by the public in nearby urban areas. The area holds Washington's largest concentration of snow geese and trumpeter swans and has other viewing opportunities like heron rookeries and winter concentrations of eagles and shore birds. Use areas in agricultural fields are consistent from year to year and biologists will contact landowners where these concentrations occur. Landowners willing to allow wildlife viewing on their property will receive an annual incentive payment. In addition, temporary parking areas and viewing blinds will be developed.

### 2.1.2 Snake River CRP Enhancement and Access

This Project Area in southeast Washington is comprised of nearly all privately owned lands that are important for a variety of game and at-risk species, including anadromous salmon and steelhead. Washington State's only Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) focuses on establishing riparian buffers along salmonid-bearing streams including those located in the Project area. Riparian habitats important for salmonids are the same habitats important for southeastern Washington wildlife.

Riparian habitat is also important in our state Pheasant Focus Area that is located within the Project area. Unlike the Midwest, most precipitation in Washington comes in the winter with little occurring during the pheasant brood rearing season. Therefore lush green vegetation associated with moist soils in riparian areas is of particular importance for pheasant brood rearing success. Further, lands enrolled in CREP as well as other CRP practices (e.g., CP 2, 22, and 4D) target diverse habitats that are important for pheasant production.

State funding will be used to improve forb habitat and VPA-HIP funding will be used to pay landowner incentives for allowing public access to these valuable habitat areas. Landowners will be provided incentives to:

- Allow "Feel Free to Hunt" public access on land with either existing or improved herbaceous habitat with a good forb component.
- Establish new quality herbaceous habitat with forbs immediately adjacent to Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) enrolled lands or on other non-CREP-eligible moist soil sites without salmonid streams.
- Improve CREP habitat benefits by buffering CREP-enrolled lands with grass and forb cover.

To be eligible, lands must be within our Snake River CRP Enhancement and Access project area (Appendix 1) and be enrolled in CRP, CREP, or similar riparian forest buffer practice, or under a *Partnerships for Pheasants* riparian habitat enhancement contract. Potential producers are contacted directly by our Private Lands Biologists and made aware of the Program through outreach materials at local USDA county offices.

Administration of this Program was modeled after the Conservation Reserve Program. Through 5-year minimum contracts, producers establish and maintain habitat to WDFW specifications and allow public access for hunting or for allowing public hunting access to already established diverse habitat stands.

### **2.1.3 Corn Stubble Retention**

The Columbia Basin traditionally supported large numbers of wintering ducks and geese. However, wintering waterfowl populations have been in decline partially due to a decrease in the availability of winter food. Corn stubble remaining un-tilled through winter months has been decreasing in the Columbia Basin over the last several decades as crops on high value irrigated lands have shifted from more traditional corn and alfalfa rotations to specialty crops such as potatoes and onions. This decline has resulted in both less food being available for wintering waterfowl and less opportunity for field hunting of ducks and geese.

Therefore, our current Corn Stubble Retention Program provides the following habitat and access benefits by paying producers to:

- Leave corn stubble untilled through the winter.
- Allow “Feel Free to Hunt” public access on corn stubble fields.

Contracts are established annually depending on crop rotations.

To be eligible lands must be within the Columbia Basin Project Area (Appendix 1). Producers with lands in prime locations (near refuges or large water bodies used for roosting areas, etc.) are directly contacted by WDFW Private Lands Biologists.

### **2.1.4 Southwest Washington Private Forest Land Access**

According to the Washington Farm Forestry Association, there are approximately 8 million acres of private forest land in Washington State, and these private forest lands provide key habitat for deer, elk, bear, grouse, and many other species. In the Southwest Washington Private Forest Land Access project area, there are over 1 million acres of private forest land. Over the past 15 years, many landowners have increasingly closed public access in response to increased vandalism, trash dumping, road maintenance costs, and concerns for wildfire.

Through a variety of public meetings, internet surveys, and random telephone surveys, the hunting public has identified private forest land access as one of their top concerns. In response, WDFW has made it one of the top priorities for WDFW’s private lands access program. The Southwest Washington Private Forest Land Access project is an extension of current WDFW efforts to address the concerns of forest landowners and improve public access. One recent success was a 2008 agreement that opened approximately 250,000 acres of private forest land to elk hunting. This agreement increased public access while reducing browse damage to tree seedlings and increasing safety for hunters and loggers.

This initiative would increase public access in the focus area by at least 50,000 acres. While access would be primarily for big game hunting, other activities like grouse hunting and fishing are also possibilities.

To be eligible, forest lands must be in southwest Washington in the Private Forest Land Access Project Area (Appendix 1). Our staff will contact key landowners within the Project Area to discuss opportunities the new VPA-HIP funding will provide. Since funding has been limited, we have not advertised our program; however, since our current cooperator project began, we have received inquiries from other key landowners interested in participating in a similar program.

Implementation of the Southwest Washington Private Forest Land Access project would increase public recreational access to at least 50,000 acres by partnering with landowners to manage public access. The greatest concerns of these landowners are road maintenance, vandalism, trash dumping, and wildfire. The Department has developed a list of management tools that we offer to private timberland owners interested in improving public recreational access. These tools include:

- Gate management – opening and closing gates to facilitate access.
- Hunter education by on-site staff and volunteers.
- Road management – designating open roads and road closures based on population management, safety issues, road maintenance issues, and fire prevention.
- Increased security – patrols by staff and volunteers.
- Trash pickup after hunting seasons.
- Cooperative access signage.

### **2.1.5 Improving Access to Private Lands Hunting Opportunities**

One key for providing public access to private lands is to give hunters good information on the location of private lands available along with other information like topography, aerial photos, wildlife available for hunting, and harvest statistics. The WDFW online interactive mapping program GoHunt was created in 2004, and was one of the first online hunting map products in the nation. This application was created to provide the public with the locations of private lands enrolled in WDFW access programs, and in 2009, GoHunt received over 433,000 web “hits.” While GoHunt holds vast amounts of information, the number one comment we receive from users is to make the program more user friendly. Technological advances since 2004 make this possible. Making these changes will greatly increase our ability to meet user demand for hunting-related maps.

By working on private lands access issues for over 60 years, we have learned that it is common for landowners to want three main things: 1) know who is on their property, 2) know when they

will be there, and 3) to retain the right to not allow someone on their property if they are unsafe, disrespectful, or otherwise endanger their property. In addition, surveys of hunters nationwide show that one of the top reasons hunters are spending less time in the field is because they do not have the time to scout and contact landowners to gain access. By developing an automated system where hunters can reserve a date to hunt on private lands, we can address both landowner and hunter needs.

This initiative will increase the availability of private lands hunting opportunities by providing better maps, decreasing the time hunters must spend in searching for sites, and providing additional options for landowner participation in WDFW access programs.

To update GoHunt and create the automated reservation system, the Department will work with computer programmers experienced with developing these applications and will seek guidance from citizen advisory groups who advise the Department on hunting related issues. The programmers will work closely with WDFW staff responsible for developing, managing, and implementing private lands access programs. Landowners in WDFW project areas described earlier in this document will be targeted for participation in the hunting reservation program through individual contact with our biologists and other staff.

## **2.2 Alternatives**

The alternatives examined in this PEA are limited to the Proposed Action described above and the No Action Alternative noted below.

### **2.3 No Action Alternative**

Under the No Action Alternative, the Department will not implement the VPA-HIP in Washington. The No Action Alternative does not meet the purpose and need of the Proposed Action, but is being carried forward in accordance with CEQ regulations to serve as the baseline against which potential impacts of the Proposed Action are measured.

### **2.4 Resources Eliminated from Analysis**

CEQ regulations (40 CFR §1501.7) state that the lead agency shall identify and eliminate from detailed study the issues which are not important or which have been covered by prior environmental review, narrowing the discussion of these issues in the document to a brief presentation of why they would not have a dramatic effect on the human or natural environment. As described above, the Proposed Action consists of expanding access to private forest and farmland, retaining corn stubble, and improving habitat in riparian areas, by offering incentive payments. The overall impacts to the human and natural environment would be from increased human presence on private lands for hunting and wildlife-related recreation and from improving habitat. The Proposed Action would have little to no impact on the following resource areas:

*Air Quality.* Pollutant emissions from vehicle exhaust and dust from nearby roads associated with increased access may cause a temporary increase in particulate matter; however, this is

already occurring along these roads from other rural, farming or local traffic. The Proposed Action would have no significant potential for impacts to regional or local air quality.

*Noise.* The Proposed Action would not create any new permanent sources of noise. Expanding hunter access to new areas may introduce gunfire noise on lands where public hunting may not currently occur. This noise would be intermittent and occur during daylight hours during specified hunting seasons. In addition, the requisite size of land needed for safe hunting would reduce the potential for gunfire noise to be heard outside the property.

*Human Health and Safety.* No components of the Proposed Action would directly impact human health or safety. The goal of the Proposed Action is to increase public access to privately-held land that supports an abundance of wildlife, thereby allowing hunting and wildlife watching. While hunting does pose a slight safety risk, Washington hunting regulations require hunters to receive the appropriate education and meet minimum age requirements before a permit can be issued.

*Land Use.* The Proposed Action would not result in any changes to land use designations. The Proposed Action would occur on private lands on a voluntary basis and would not require the alteration of land use.

*Transportation.* No aspect of the Proposed Action entails any alteration of the current transportation system in the State of Washington.

*Soils.* The Proposed Action will not have any significant impact on soils. The Corn Stubble Retention and CRP Enhancement components of the Proposed Action may reduce soil disturbance, but these benefits will be minimal and have not been analyzed. Increasing access to private lands could increase foot traffic through new areas, but this impact to soils would be extremely minimal. Vehicular travel would occur only on existing roads and trails. Therefore, no direct adverse impacts to soils would occur.

*Water Resources (Surface Water Quality, Wetlands, Groundwater, and Floodplains).* The Proposed Action would have no direct impacts to water resources. The CRP Enhancement component of the Proposed Action would target lands already participating in CRP and CREP. Both of these programs seek to improve native habitat and water quality and reduce soil erosion. Increasing public access to private lands for hunting, fishing and wildlife-related recreational purposes would not have any direct, adverse impacts on water resources.

*Tribal Resources:* The Proposed Action can only be implemented on privately owned lands. The Proposed Action would not impact tribal lands.

*Environmental Justice:* The Proposed Action would not have a disproportionate effect on minorities or low-income people. Eligibility for landowners' participation in the program is based on the characteristics of the land, not the income or race of the owner. Areas under this program are available for use by all people regardless of economic status or ethnicity. Implementing the VPA-HIP program would not change hunting license fees in Washington.

*Coastal Zones.* Increased access under the Proposed Action could occur in the following counties that are part of Washington's Coastal Zone Management Area: Skagit, Snohomish, Whatcom, and Wahkiakum. However, allowing increased access to existing private forest and farmlands in these counties would not cause additional impacts to coastal zones.

## **Chapter 3.0 Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences**

### **3.1 Biological Resources**

#### **3.1.1 Affected Environment**

##### **Forests**

Forests cover about 21 million acres, or about half of the state's land area. On the Olympic Peninsula there is a temperate rain forest consisting of spruce, cedar, and hemlock with an understory of ferns and mosses. Forests surrounding the Puget Sound and the western slopes of the Cascade Range consist mostly of cedar, hemlock, and Douglas fir with an understory of shrubs. On the eastern slopes of the Cascades and the Blue Mountains of southeastern Washington, ponderosa pine, Douglas fir, Grand fir, Western hemlock, and sub-alpine fir are the major species. The forests in eastern Washington are more open, with an understory of grasses and shrubs especially at the lower elevations. Across the northeast region of the state, the forest is primarily made up of Douglas fir, Western red cedar, Western hemlock, and sub-alpine fir. The forests of the state have been intensively logged and contain second and third growth forest plantations of mostly Douglas fir (Access Washington 2002).

##### **Farms**

With the introduction of agriculture and livestock grazing in the mid-1800s, the native vegetative cover changed from forest in western Washington and shrub-steppe in eastern Washington. Lands were cleared for intensive farming, both dry land and irrigated. Overgrazing by sheep, cattle, and horses was evident by 1885. On the prairies of the Palouse, the conversion of all arable land was nearly complete by 1910. Other lands are continuing to be converted to the growing of agricultural crops or converted to urban uses (Access Washington 2002). The introduction of non-native weed species by imported livestock, contaminated commercial seeds, and other sources have resulted in a dramatic change in the landscape and the productivity of the land for commercial use, as well as intrinsic values. In Washington, invading weeds have adversely impacted native wildlife habitat and domestic livestock rangelands (Access Washington 2002).

Farms in western Washington are small, and dairy products, poultry, and berries are the primary commodities produced. The eastern side of the Cascade Range has larger farms; potatoes, fruit, vegetables, and small grains such as wheat and barley are the primary crops. Farmlands are highly valued wildlife habitats for which the landowner is not often recognized. Game species such as pheasants, quail, deer, and waterfowl are attracted to private farmlands for their abundance of food and water.

## **Species**

The species likely to be most affected by increased access for hunters are those that are hunted. Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife manages the hunting of the following wildlife species. (Washington's Big Game Hunting Seasons and Regulations Pamphlet, 2010; Washington State Migratory Waterfowl and Upland Game Seasons, 2010-2011 Pamphlet Edition)

### Big Game

Elk  
Deer  
Black Bear  
Cougar  
Mountain Goat  
Bighorn Sheep  
Moose

### Small Game

Bobcat  
Coyote  
Fox  
Raccoon  
Cottontail Rabbit  
Snowshoe Hare

### Upland Birds

Forest Grouse (Blue, Spruce, Ruffed)  
Crow  
Wild Turkey  
Pheasant  
Quail (California, Mountain)  
Northern Bobwhite  
Partridge (Chukar, Gray)

### Migratory Game Birds

Surf Scoter  
White-winged Scoter  
Black Scoter  
Long-tailed Duck  
Harlequin Duck  
Common Goldeneye  
Barrow's Goldeneye  
Bufflehead  
Common Merganser  
Red-breasted Merganser  
Hooded Merganser

Northern Shoveler  
Mallard  
Gadwall  
Wood Duck  
Scaup  
Redheaded Duck  
Green-winged Teal  
Blue-winged Teal  
American Widgeon  
Canvasback  
Northern Pintail

Coot  
Snipe  
Canada Geese  
Snow Geese  
Ross Geese  
Blue Geese  
Brant  
Band-tailed Pigeon  
Mourning Dove

In addition to active management of hunting, the WDFW publishes a Priority Habitats and Species (PHS) list. “Priority species” are fish and wildlife species requiring protective measures and/or management actions to ensure their survival. A species identified as priority species fit one or more of the following criteria (WDFW 2008):

Criterion 1. State-Listed and Candidate Species:

State-listed species are native fish and wildlife species legally designated as endangered, threatened, or sensitive. State Candidate species are fish and wildlife species that will be reviewed by the department for possible listing.

Criterion 2. Vulnerable Aggregations:

Vulnerable aggregations include species or groups of animals susceptible to significant population declines, within a specific area or statewide, by virtue of their inclination to aggregate. Examples include heron rookeries, seabird concentrations, marine mammal haulouts, shellfish beds, and fish spawning and rearing areas.

Criterion 3. Species of Recreational, Commercial, and/or Tribal Importance:

Native and non-native fish and wildlife species of recreational or commercial importance, and recognized species used for tribal ceremonial and subsistence purposes, whose biological or ecological characteristics make them vulnerable to decline in Washington or that are dependent on habitats that are highly vulnerable or are in limited availability.

### **3.1.2 Environmental Consequences**

#### **3.1.2.1 Proposed Action (Preferred Alternative)**

All five initiatives include improving access for hunting. In addition, the two initiatives that affect farmland will also improve habitat for game species.

The two initiatives that will affect farmland are:

- Snake River Conservation Reserve Enhancement (CREP) and Access
- Corn Stubble Retention

One of the initiatives will affect forest land:

- Southwest Washington Private Forest Land Access

Two of the initiatives will affect both farm and forest land:

- Access Near Urban Centers
- Improving Access to Private Lands Hunting Opportunities

Overall, biological impacts as a result of the initiatives that would increase access for hunting and wildlife viewing are expected to be neutral or somewhat positive. Allowing hunters access to private farm or forest land is not likely to change existing habitat provided by forests or farms. Some improvements to habitat for fish and wildlife species may occur, because many of the private landowners who are part of the private lands access program also get technical assistance from WDFW staff to help improve fish and wildlife habitat on their lands. ([http://wdfw.wa.gov/hunting/hunting\\_access/private\\_land/landowners.html](http://wdfw.wa.gov/hunting/hunting_access/private_land/landowners.html), accessed March 1, 2011.) When specific parcels are identified for inclusion in one of these initiatives, when appropriate, they will go through their own SEPA process.

The Snake River Conservation Reserve Enhancement (CREP) and Access initiative and the Corn Stubble Retention initiative are expected to have positive impacts on wildlife habitat. The CREP initiative will provide additional cover for wildlife, and for fish. The corn stubble initiative will increase food for waterfowl.

Improved access to hunting is likely to affect individual animals, either indirectly through disturbance or directly when they are killed. However, improved access to hunting is not expected to have negative effects at the population level. WDFW manages game “to protect, sustain, and manage hunted wildlife, provide stable, regulated recreational hunting opportunity to all citizens, protect and enhance wildlife habitat, and minimize adverse impacts to residents, other wildlife, and the environment” (WDFW 2009-2015 Game Management Plan, September 2008.) To achieve these management goals, WDFW actively sets hunting seasons, bag limits, and restrictions on areas where hunting can occur. Use of these management tools would minimize the effects of increased access on species and habitats.

Impacts from increased access may occur to species that are not actively hunted, such as those on the Priority Habitat And Species list (WDFW 2008). These species may benefit from the habitat improvements that would result from these initiatives. They may also be disturbed as a result of increased access. The presence of vulnerable species is one factor that could be considered to determine if a particular site is appropriate to include in an access initiative. Potential for disturbance of vulnerable species could be minimized by not including specific areas in the access program, or by seasonal restrictions on access.

Increased watchable wildlife opportunities on private farmlands under the Access Near Urban Centers initiative is expected to have no impact on biological resources.

### **3.1.2.2 No Action Alternative**

The current public access program would continue; however, the additional benefits associated with expanding acreage in the program would not occur.

## 3.2 Cultural Resources

### 3.2.1 Affected Environment

The Washington State Inventory of Cultural Resources (DAHP 2010) documents cultural resources in the following categories: buildings, structures, sites, districts, and objects.

Washington has a cultural history going back at least 9,000 years. Because of this long history, it is possible that hunters, wildlife-watchers, or farmers may encounter cultural resource sites (such as campsites) or objects (such as arrowheads) while engaging hunting, wildlife-watching, or farming or habitat-improvement activities.

### 3.2.2 Environmental Consequences

#### 3.2.2.1 Proposed Action (Preferred Alternative)

The Snake River Conservation Reserve Enhancement and the Corn Stubble Retention initiatives are unlikely to have additional impact on cultural resources beyond what is already disturbed from agricultural plowing.

Initiatives to provide increased access could increase the frequency and enlarge the area where hunters and wildlife-watchers encounter cultural resources, but increased access alone is not anticipated to result in impacts to cultural resources.

#### 3.2.2.2 No Action Alternative

The current public access program would continue, with no change. Any current impacts to cultural resources would continue as such.

## 3.3 Socioeconomics

### 3.3.1 Affected Environment

#### Land Use and Ownership

Major forest landowners include industrial timber companies with approximately 4.61 million acres, and private forest landowners (also referred to as small forest land owners and small tree farmers) with approximately 2.96 million acres. (Municipal Research and Services Center of Washington, <http://www.mrsc.org/Subjects/Environment/forest/timber.aspx>, updated November 2010.) According to the USDA National Agricultural Statistic Service's Annual Statistical Bulletin, as of 2008, there are about 39,000 farms in Washington, with a total area of about 14,800,000 acres.

The following table gives total acreage of agricultural ownership in each county where an initiative is proposed. The data are from the 2007 census of agriculture data found at the National Agricultural Statistics Service (<http://quickstats.nass.usda.gov/>) except where noted.

County	Farm Acreage	Initiative
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Whitman	231,872	Snake River CRP Enhancement
Garfield	78,892	Snake River CRP Enhancement
Columbia	75,096	Snake River CRP Enhancement
Walla Walla	123,774	Snake River CRP Enhancement
Grant	224,247	Corn Stubble Retention
Franklin	184,246	Corn Stubble Retention
Whatcom (2002 data)	34,961	Access Near Urban Center
Skagit	23,025	Access Near Urban Center
Snohomish	9,824	Access Near Urban Center
Lewis	20,555	SW WA Private Forest Land
Cowlitz (2002 data)	4,761	SW WA Private Forest Land
Wahkiakum (2002 data)	3,091	SW WA Private Forest Land

### Hunting expenditures/expenses

The US Fish and Wildlife Service's "2006 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation – Washington" (USFWS 2006) found that people spent \$313 million on hunting in Washington in 2006.

Total trip related expenses	\$74 million
Food and lodging	\$33 million
Transportation	\$37 million
Other trip related	\$4 million
 Total Equipment expenditures	 \$189 million
Hunting-specific equipment (e.g., guns, ammunition)	\$67 million
Auxiliary and special equipment (e.g., tents, clothing, boats)	\$122 million
 Other items (e.g., licenses, land, magazines)	 \$50 million
	<hr/> \$313 million

### **Wildlife viewing expenditures/expenses**

The US Fish and Wildlife Service’s “2006 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation – Washington”(USFWS 2006) found that people spent \$1.5 billion on wildlife-watching activities in Washington in 2006.

Total trip related expenses	\$442 million
Food and lodging	\$228 million
Transportation	\$157 million
Other trip related	\$57 million
Total Equipment expenditures	\$595 million
Wildlife-watching-specific equipment (e.g., binoculars)	\$262 million
Auxiliary and special equipment (e.g., tents, packs, campers)	\$332 million
Other items (e.g., contributions, land, plantings)	\$466 million
	<hr/>
	\$1,503 million

## **3.3.2 Environmental Consequences**

### **3.3.2.1 Proposed Action (Preferred Alternative)**

Increased access and habitat improvements associated with these initiatives may result in more participation in hunting and wildlife-watching. If participation increases, spending on trip related expenses such as food, lodging, and transportation may increase. In addition, equipment purchases for items related to hunting and wildlife-watching may increase, with related benefits to local economies.

Incentive payments to forest and farmland owners will benefit the landowners.

### **3.3.2.2 No Action Alternative**

No socioeconomic or environmental justice impacts would occur. However, the slight beneficial impacts from the Proposed Action would not be realized.

## **3.4 Recreation**

### **3.4.1 Affected Environment**

The US Fish and Wildlife Service’s “2006 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation – Washington” (USFWS 2006) found that 2.7 million people sixteen

years or older hunted, fished, watched wildlife, or did some combination of the three. (There is some overlap among the hunting, wildlife watching, and fishing categories, as some individuals participated in more than one activity.) Totals include both residents and non-residents.

### **Hunting**

The 2006 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation (USFWS 2006) found that 182,000 residents and non-residents over age 16 hunted in Washington. These residents and non-residents spent a total of 2,126,000 days hunting, an average of 12 days per hunter.

### **Wildlife Watching**

The 2006 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation (USFWS 2006) found that 2,331,000 residents and non-residents watched wildlife in Washington. This total is further subdivided into 959,000 people who participated in wildlife watching a mile or more away from home (“away-from-home participants”), and 1,927,000 who did their wildlife-watching within one mile of home. Away-from-home participants spent a total of 9,104,000 days watching wildlife away from home, an average of 9 days per participant.

## **3.4.2 Environmental Consequences**

### **3.4.2.1 Proposed Action (Preferred Alternative)**

The proposed action has the potential to provide benefits to wildlife-based recreation in Washington, by increasing the areas on private property that are accessible to the general public for hunting and wildlife-watching. Specifically,

- The Access Near Urban Centers initiative will increase acreage enrolled in the Snow Goose Hunting Program from 1,000 acres to 1,500 acres annually; increase the number of waterfowl hunting blinds made available through the “Feel Free to Hunt” Program from 10 blinds to 25 blinds; establish public big game hunting access on at least 5,000 acres of private forest lands; and establish at least 5 new watchable wildlife opportunities on private farmlands. This increased access will be available in Whatcom, Skagit, and Snohomish counties, near Washington’s main population center.
- The Snake River Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) Enhancement and Access initiative will establish public hunting access on at least an additional 12,500 acres of private farm land, and establish public access for hunting on an additional 15 farms also enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP).
- The Corn Stubble Retention initiative will double the amount of acres enrolled in the Corn Stubble Retention Program from an average of 1,000 acres annually to 2,000 acres annually.

- The Southwest Washington Private Forest Land Access initiative will establish public hunting access on at least 50,000 additional acres of private forest lands.
- The Improving Access to Private Lands Hunting Opportunities initiative will develop a new GoHunt interactive mapping program to provide improved usability and an automated system where hunters can reserve hunting days on private lands enrolled in WDFW access programs.

#### **3.4.2.2 No Action Alternative**

No impacts to recreational resources would occur. However, beneficial impacts from expanded recreational opportunities from the Proposed Action would not occur.

## **Chapter 4.0 Cumulative Effects**

### **4.1 Cumulative Impacts**

CEQ regulations stipulate that the cumulative impacts analysis within an EA should consider the potential environmental impacts resulting from “the incremental impacts of the action when added to past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions regardless of what agency or person undertakes such other actions” (40 CFR 1508.7). Recent CEQ guidance in considering cumulative impacts involves defining the scope of the other actions and their interrelationship with the Proposed Action. The scope must consider geographical and temporal overlaps among the Proposed Action and other actions. It must also evaluate the nature of interactions among these actions.

Cumulative impacts are most likely to arise when a relationship or synergism exists between the Proposed Action and other actions expected to occur in a similar location or during a similar time period. Actions overlapping with or in proximity to the Proposed Action would be expected to have more potential for a relationship than those more geographically separated.

In this PEA, the affected environment for cumulative impacts includes each of the four geographic areas covered by one of the initiatives: the Southwest Washington Private Forest Land Access Project Area in southwest Washington, the Access Near Urban Center Project Area in northwest Washington, the Corn Stubble Retention Area in south central Washington, and the Snake River CRP Enhancement and Access Project Area in southeast Washington. In combination with other federal, state and private initiatives that focus on conservation, the potential for long-term habitat improvements under the VPA-HIP program, the increased public awareness of important wildlife and game species, and landowners’ awareness of activities that they can do to improve habitat are expected to be beneficial to the natural environment.

### **4.2 Irreversible and Irretrievable Commitment Of Resources**

Irreversible and irretrievable commitments are related to the use of nonrenewable resources and the effect that the use of these resources has on future generations. Irreversible effects primarily result from the use or destruction of a specific resource that cannot be replaced within a reasonable time frame. Irretrievable resource commitments involve the loss in value of an affected resource that cannot be restored as a result of the action. Under the Proposed Action, beneficial impacts are expected to recreation and socioeconomic conditions, wildlife populations and their habitats. There would be no irreversible or irretrievable commitment of resources under either the Proposed Alternative or the No Action alternative.

## **Chapter 6.0 List of Preparers and Agencies Contacted**

### Preparers:

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Carol Piening, Environmental Planner, WDFW

### Agencies Contacted:

US Department of Agriculture, Farm Service Agency. Agency contact: Matthew Ponish.

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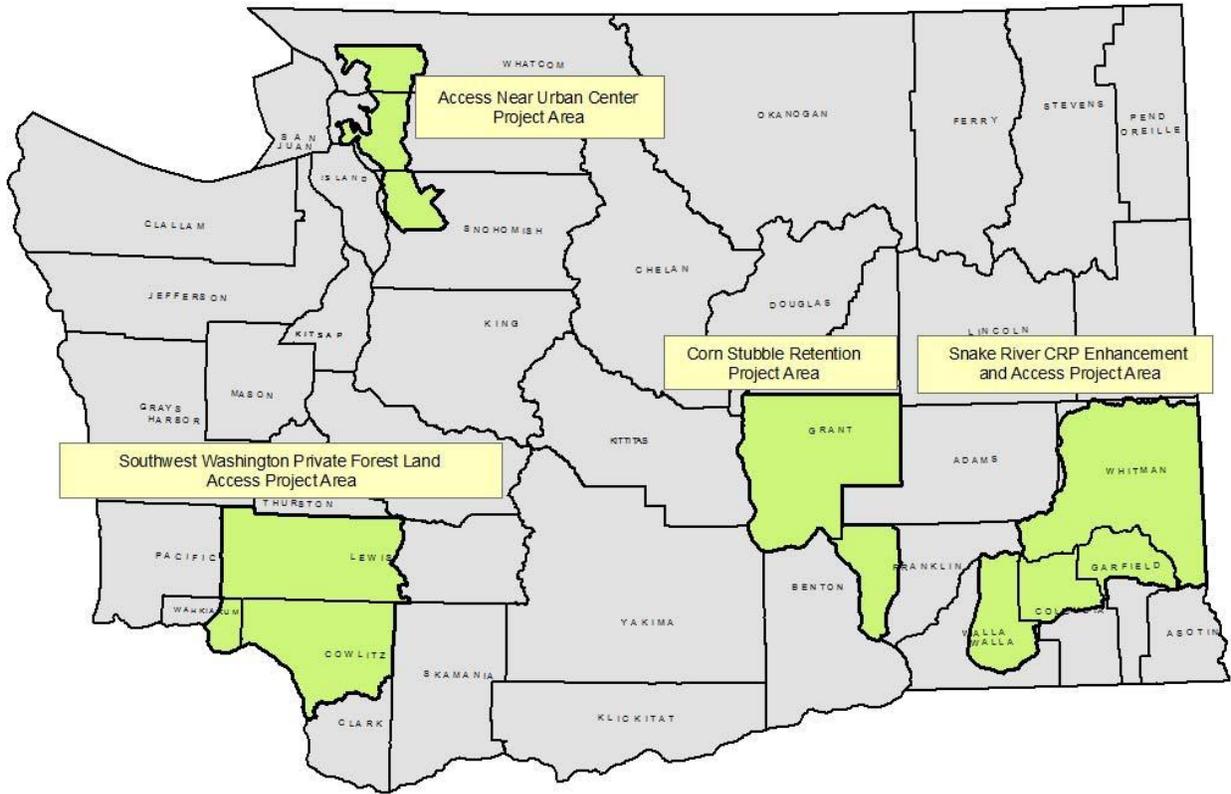
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# VPA-HIP Private Lands Project Areas



## Appendix 2

<b>2009-10 Private Lands Access Cooperators and Acres</b>								
<b>County</b>	FEEL FREE TO HUNT		HUNT BY WRITTEN PERMISSION		REGISTER TO HUNT		LANDOWNER HUNTING PERMIT	
	Cooperators	Acres	Cooperators	Acres	Cooperators	Acres	Cooperators	Acres
Adams	35	39,267	65	140,671	0	0	0	0
Asotin	3	3,202	18	29,066	1	1,617	0	0
Benton	18	80,726	2	20,425	2	8,320	1	33,493
Chelan	0	0	1	3,280	0	0	0	0
Columbia	6	8,973	12	21,396	0	0	0	0
Douglas	29	21,534	42	98,962	2	4,040	0	0
Franklin	36	60,139	10	19,310	0	0	0	0
Garfield	22	17,242	31	51,750	1	1,837	0	0
Grant	40	39,305	28	69,864	0	0	1	41,870
Grays Harbor	1	400	3	280	0	0	0	0
Island	3	438	0	0	0	0	0	0
Kitsap	1	200	0	0				0
Kittitas	0	0	2	9,120	0	0	0	0
Klickitat	7	106,180	7	6,378	0	0	0	0
Lincoln	6	7,515	33	55,295	0	0	0	0
Mason	1	205	0	0	0	0	0	0
Okanogan	1	175	1	560	0	0	0	0
Pend Oreille	1	7,757	0	0	0	0	0	0
Skagit	3	145	7	968	0	0	0	0
Snohomish	1	130	0	0	0	0	0	0

Spokane	0	0	0	0				0
Stevens	0	0	3	726	0	0	0	0
Thurston	0	0	0	0	1	310	0	0
Walla Walla	60	95,552	6	11,299	0	0	0	0
Whitman	14	9,713	28	27,437	1	75	0	0
Yakima	14	23,515	4	10,200	0	0	2	46,154
<b>TOTAL</b>	302	522,313	303	576,986	8	16,199	4	121,517
TOTAL COOPERATORS	<b>618</b>							
TOTAL ACRES	<b>1,237,016</b>							