

January 2010



Issues Related to Hunting Access in the United States

National Results and State Reports Released

RESEARCH INDICATES THAT difficulty gaining access to lands for hunting has become a constraint to recruiting and retaining sportsmen. Adequate access to land is one of the fundamental issues that affect the future of hunting, but it is also an issue over which agencies and organizations have some influence. To gain a better understanding of the specific problems that affect hunter access to both public and private lands, the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF) and Responsive Management recently completed a nationwide scientific survey and project on issues related to hunting access in which more than 14,000 hunters nationwide were asked their opinions on a variety of access-related topics.

The study, which was conducted under a Multi-State Conservation Grant awarded through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and administered by the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, included (1) analyzing qualitative data obtained from focus groups conducted in 2008 (which were also used in developing the survey instrument), (2) conducting a nationwide telephone survey with an oversampling in 17 states where a variety of access programs are currently under way, (3) producing 17 state reports for those oversampled states, (4) developing a cumulative national report of the results, and (5) producing a final report with recommendations for implementing effective access programs. The national results are discussed in this article.

The extensive telephone questionnaire was developed cooperatively by Responsive Management, the NSSF, and the participating state agencies and was reviewed by numerous university professors, staff, and fish and wildlife agency personnel with knowledge regarding survey methods and hunting access issues. Respondents consisted of individuals ages 18 and older who had hunted at least once in the five years that preceded the study. The sample was carefully constructed to reflect the proportion of hunters in each state. Responsive Management worked with each state fish and wildlife agency over a 12-month period to achieve a meticulously constructed and randomly selected sample of hunters. The sample was obtained from each state's agency; for the states where this was not possible, the sample was obtained from a research firm that had valid samples of hunters for those states.

Because access problems differ depending on the species hunted, the survey asked respondents to answer select questions about *the species they primarily hunt*. As a result, many questions, such as ratings of access, are specific to a particular species rather than to hunting overall.

Interviews were conducted Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m., Saturday from noon to 5:00 p.m., and Sunday from 5:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m., local time, from April through November 2009. Responsive Management obtained a total of 14,317 completed interviews throughout the United States.

Species Hunted, Avidity, and Participation Trends

Hunters were asked about the single species that they primarily hunted in the past 12 months. This does not mean that these hunters *only* hunted the species that they indicated, but that the species they indicated was the species they *primarily* hunted. The majority of licensed hunters nationwide primarily hunted white-tailed deer (57%) in

When making decisions about where to hunt their primary species, one factor stands out as markedly more important to hunters than the rest: that the land is not crowded with other sportsmen (82% say this is very important).



MIKE CLINE

the 12 months that preceded the survey, distantly followed in popularity by waterfowl (9%), upland game birds (8%), wild turkey (5%), elk (5%), and mule deer (3%). The remainder hunted for other species or had not hunted in the past 12 months.

The median number of days that hunters hunt annually in their state is 20. Hunters in the survey have participated in hunting for a mean of 36.2 years. Hunters most commonly say that their hunting participation has stayed the same in the past 5 years (45%); otherwise, those who say it has decreased (31%) exceed those who say it has increased (23%).

Hunting Locations

Hunters nationwide more often hunt their primary species on private land (54% hunt on private land mostly) than public land (23% hunt on public land mostly); 23% of hunters hunt their primary species on public land and private land about equally. Those who hunt their primary species at least half the time on private land (77% of hunters overall) indicate that they hunt *mostly* on land owned by a friend or family member (35%) or hunt on their own land (19%); the rest hunt on different combinations of private land at varying rates. Hunters typically travel a median distance of 30 miles from home to hunt their primary species.

Those who hunt their primary species mostly on private land tend to travel shorter distances to hunt than those who hunt their primary species mostly on public land. The majority of hunters (62%) who hunt their primary species mostly on private land travel 30 miles or less from home to do so; only 16% of those who hunt their primary species mostly on public land travel the same distance. These differences are statistically significant.

Choosing Lands on Which to Hunt

The survey asked 11 questions about the importance of various factors in hunters' decisions regarding where to hunt their primary species. For each factor, they were asked if it is *very* important, *somewhat* important, or *not at all* important. One factor stands out as markedly more important than the rest: that the land is *not* crowded with other sportsmen (82% say this is *very* important). This is followed by a middle tier: that they are familiar with the land (58%), that the land is easy to access by foot (51%), and that the land is owned by somebody they personally know (47%). Of interest in these findings is that the land being private (43%) ranks above the land being public (29%) (see graph on page 3).

Constraints to Hunting Participation

A direct question asked hunters whether lack of hunting access had caused them to not hunt a particular species as much as they would have liked in the previous 5 years. Almost half of them (46%) agreed that it had done so. Among that 46%, the top-named access problems were private land being posted (40%) and no land to hunt on (30%). These two reasons were more distantly followed by the land being leased to others (13%), public land being closed (10%), development closing lands (8%), and the cost of access (8%).

The most common reason for giving a fair or poor rating to private land access is land being posted—the top reason by far.



KEN THOMAS

The survey asked a series of 25 questions about possible hunting access constraints. For each possible constraint, the survey asked hunters if it had been, over the previous 5 years, a *major* problem, a *moderate* problem, a *minor* problem, or *not at all* a problem. The top potential constraints that were a *major*, *moderate*, or *minor* problem were constraints related to land use changes, development, or changes in ownership (each of these constraints was cited by 43–51% of hunters); the cost of gas (47%); being denied permission to hunt on somebody else’s land (41%); and finding previously open private land closed because a club has now leased it (41%) (see graph on page 4).

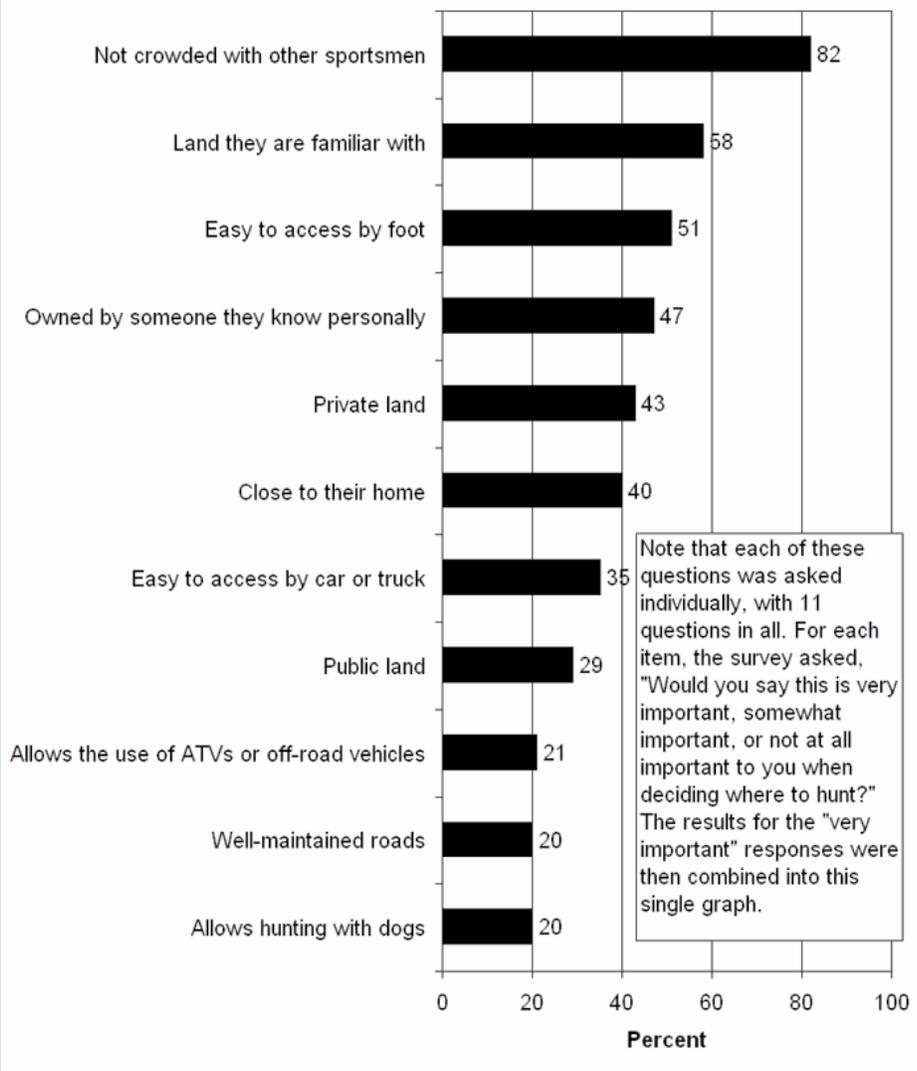
Rating Access to Hunting Lands

A basic question asked hunters to rate access to hunting land in their state overall. They are more positive than negative: 56% give a rating of excellent or good, while 42% give a rating of fair or poor.

Top reasons for rating *public land access* as fair or poor are a simple lack of land on which to hunt, road closures, land being too crowded with other hunters, public land being blocked by private land, lack of quality land or land with plenty of game, and access problems in general to public land.

The most common reason for giving a fair or poor rating to *private land access* is land being posted—the top reason by far. This is followed by land being leased to others, the cost of access, and/or a simple lack of land on which to hunt.

Percent who indicated that the following are very important when deciding where to hunt their primary species in their state.



Factors That May Positively Affect Access

The survey asked 15 questions about things that would potentially make hunting access easier. For each item, the survey asked hunters if it would be *very* effective, *somewhat* effective, or *not at all* effective at making it easier to access land on which to hunt. In looking at the ranking by the percentage saying that the items would be *very* effective at making access easier, 6 of the 15 items stand out—each with a majority saying it would be *very* effective: having signs that clearly mark boundaries of huntable land (71%), having a list of landowners with telephone numbers where the respondent could call to ask to hunt on their land (62%), having up-to-date information on a website showing lands where hunting is allowed (58%), having paper maps of hunting lands for their primary species (55%), having their state agency acquire more land for hunting (55%), and having maps of hunting lands for their primary species on a website (54%) (see graph on page 5).

Landowners and Access Issues

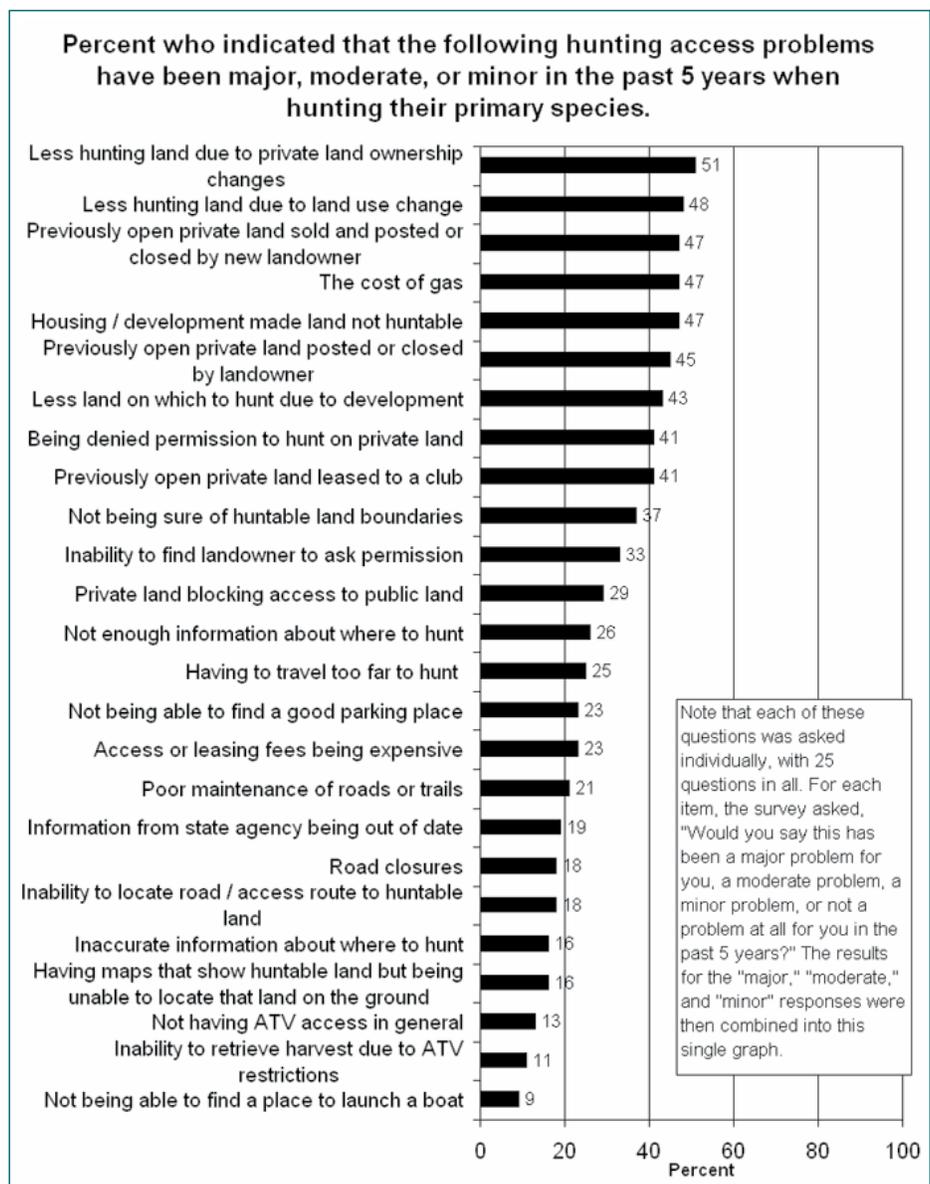
The survey asked eight questions about possible reasons that landowners may close their land to public hunting. For each possible reason, the survey asked hunters if they think it is a *very* important reason, a *somewhat* important reason, or a *not at all* important reason that landowners close their land to the public for hunting. Five items stand out above the rest in the ranking by the percentage saying the reasons are *very* important, the top three of which relate to misuse of the land: irresponsible shooting, alcohol use, or other bad behavior by hunters (72% say this is a *very* important reason that landowners close their land); property damage caused by hunters (excluding litter) (67%); litter (64%); the landowner wanting to allow only personal/family use of the land (64%); and liability concerns (58%).

The overwhelming majority of hunters (90%) are *not* aware of any laws in their state that reduce the liability of landowners who open their lands to the public for hunting; meanwhile, 9% are aware of such laws (the remainder say they do not know).

The overwhelming majority of hunters (82%) support laws to reduce landowner liability for landowners who open their lands to the public for hunting; only 7% oppose (the remainder give neutral answers).

Use of Programs and Resources

The survey asked about six national programs/resources that pertain to hunting access: the Open Fields program; the Conservation Reserve Program; the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Waterfowl Production Areas, or WPAs; the wheretohunt.org website; the huntinfo.org website; and the huntandshoot.org website. In addition,



16 of the oversampled states had additional programs about which the survey asked. Specific state programs were asked about only in the applicable state.

A basic line of questioning asked hunters about their awareness of the six national programs/resources, and two of the six had awareness levels near the halfway mark: the Conservation Reserve Program (45% are *very* or *somewhat* aware of it) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Waterfowl Production Areas or WPAs (45%). The other national programs/resources have awareness levels of 10% or lower.

Another series of questions asked hunters about their use of or participation in the six access programs/resources. Those programs/resources with the highest rates of use/participation are the Conservation Reserve Program (18%) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Waterfowl Production Areas, or WPAs (13%).

Sources of Information

In the broadest question about sources of information, hunters were asked in an open-ended question where they received information on places to hunt and hunting access in their state. The most popular source is friends/family/word of mouth (53%), by far the top answer. Other notable answers include a state agency other than its website (9%), a specific site on the Internet (8%), the Internet in general/a search engine (6%), magazines (6%), and pamphlets/brochures (5%).

The survey asked hunters if they had visited the websites of four agencies (their state's fish and wildlife agency, the U.S. Forest Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Bureau of Land Management). The survey questions were tailored to individual states to identify each state agency by name. About a third of hunters had visited their state agency site (35%). Lower amounts (from 11% to 17%) had visited the other sites.

The national report; the focus group report, which assisted in the development of the survey instrument; and reports for each of the oversampled states are available at <http://www.responsivemanagement.com/huntingreports.php>. A final report will be released later this month.

