

Illinois Recreational Access Program

One of the more challenging problems facing the Department of Natural Resources is providing public recreational access and opportunities to our constituents.

In order to carry on our outdoor traditions—and maintain funding support for conservation—we need to connect youth and families to lands and opportunities. When we no longer have a connection to a farmer or landowner willing to provide access, limited public options exist.

Utilizing resources recently obtained through a grant from the U. S. Department of Agriculture Farm Service Agency, Illinoisans soon will have more places to enjoy the great outdoors. Through a three-year Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program grant, nearly \$1.5 million is available as incentive payments to landowners making their land and water available for specific purposes:

- Providing more places for hunters, less than 16 years of age, to spring turkey hunt
- Allowing the public to access ponds, rivers and streams, creating more places for families to fish
- Creating additional access points along public rivers to enhance access by non-motorized water craft
- Offering new locations for the nature lover to explore, bird watch and photograph wildlife



In 2009, 89 percent of the 6,000 Illinois residents surveyed strongly agreed with the statement: “All residents of the State of Illinois benefit from conservation or open space, whether or not they personally utilize or recreated on those spaces.”

Results of that survey provided participants at the October 2009 Conser-

vation Congress insight into Illinois expectations and attitudes, and helped in the formulation of recommendations on three key conservation issues: public access, conservation funding and youth recruitment and retention.



Members of the public-access committee recognized that limited public land available for outdoor recreation, coupled with a large population, are creating an ever-increasing demand for a program that allows recreational access to private land. By the close of the two-day congress, a recommendation emerged, challenging DNR to make development of an access program a priority project.

The new Illinois Recreational Access Program provides land and water access to outdoor recreationists while reducing landowner liability. Land will be leased from private landowners in the 68 counties within the Illinois and

Kaskaskia River watershed basins, and made available to the public for specific activities. By participating, landowners will have the opportunity to receive assistance in management of their property as quality fish and wildlife habitat.

Although only just opened for enrollment, interest in IRAP has been extremely positive. Public meetings in July in Jacksonville, Kankakee and Vandalia provided the agency with extensive feedback on the proposed program, and inquiries are pouring in.

The people of Illinois have a long and rich connection to our natural resource heritage. And sharing access to private property with our neighbors has always been an important part of our sporting tradition. Yet continuing to provide opportunities where people can develop a sense of place and enjoy the wilds of Illinois has become increasingly difficult over the past 50 years.

Fortunately, the citizen-powered Conservation Congress, its partner organizations and other constituents have met this challenge to find a solution and get more people outdoors in Illinois. DNR is proud to be part of the Illinois Recreational Access Program. It's another bright example of how we can all work together with a shared responsibility to provide recreational opportunities for everyone in Illinois.

Marc Miller, Director

For additional information on the Illinois Recreational Access Program, see the article on page 20 and visit www.dnr.illinois.gov/conservation.