
Wildlife and Recreation as a Farm and Ranch Business

Quick Notes...

Wildlife and Recreation can be integrated into the agricultural business. Farm and ranch landowners should consider managing wildlife and recreation as a part of the normal agricultural operation.

Impacts of integrating wildlife and recreation include:

- Increased profitability and cashflow potential
- Challenge of a new and different business
- Meet new people and make new friends
- Increased involvement with the public
- Strangers on your land
- Potential property damage
- May require additional capital, time, planning, thought and management.

Wildlife and Recreation should be considered as part of the normal agricultural operation. Much wildlife, born and raised on private lands, is enjoyed by landowners and recreationists. However, the association between farmers, ranchers, recreationists, and wildlife has not been as positive as it could be. Some landowners treat wildlife and recreationists as assets, while others consider them a liability.

Wildlife

Wildlife are part of the ranching business, no matter how one looks at it. Landowners can manage private lands by tolerating wildlife, by making claims for damage payments or by planning for wildlife as a part of normal operations.

Wildlife provide recreational opportunities and a cash flow potential without additional investments or out-of-pocket cash expenditures. However, wildlife have a cost to landowners either directly through forage used by wildlife or indirectly through time and efforts associated with managing hunters.

Landowners manage hunters indirectly, regardless of the system, either by allowing access, closing and patrolling land or charging an access fee. The combination of wildlife presence and good hunting possibilities can mean good business for landowners.

A lot can be learned about rancher/hunter relations and livestock/wildlife management from the way things are done in Texas. Texans are proud of their cattle and hunting. They coexist nicely because ranchers profit from wildlife. Some ranchers have decreased cattle numbers to encourage more wildlife and greater profits. Ninety-eight percent of the land is private. Texas' private land supports 10 percent of the cattle and 20 percent of the deer in the 48 continental states.

Colorado is the best overall big game state. One-third of Colorado's land is publicly owned, but private lands support significant quantities of wildlife and can provide higher quality experiences for hunters than on public lands. Thirty percent of big game populations in Colorado are on private lands and many hunters prefer experiences on private property.

Speculation about the value of private lands for hunting in Colorado led Colorado State University to conduct several studies the last 20 years. One study indicated that resident big game hunters thought private land access needed to be improved. That same study showed that 25 percent of nonresident hunters paid access fees, and 50 percent of the nonresidents desired private/-public land combinations for hunting.

A 1979 survey reported that 78 percent of the nonresident and 48 percent of the resident hunters would consider paying fees.

Hunters want good experiences for their money. A 1975 University of Colorado study and a 1979 Colorado State University study identified respectively that hunters desired larger game populations and greater chances of getting a deer. One study also indicated that hunters prefer few or other hunters in the same area where they are hunting. About one-third of hunters and anglers in a 1992 study from Colorado State University were concerned with on-site crowding.

For most hunters, the combination of good wildlife populations, higher chances of success and few other hunters can be found only on private lands.

Leasing Systems

There are two main ways to grant access for a fee: season-long leases and daily leases. Season-long leases generally are most popular. A specified number of hunters are given access rights for the entire season.

Formal agreements, not necessarily complicated, between landowners and clients are made. They can include payments, procedures and acceptable behaviors. Lodging can be provided or a place to set up camp determined. Guide services and horses can be part of the agreement.

More profits and higher landowner satisfaction generally are received when recreational services are provided. An advantage to the season-long system is that hunters take pride of possession on the property and help patrol it. Landowners also benefit since they know who is around.

Daily leases are simple to operate. Usually only land and water resources, with no recreational services, are offered. The biggest disadvantage is having to process wildlife as a farm and ranch business and direct more people each day. Profits could be higher than for season-long leases.

When one of the two systems or a combination is selected, landowners should provide quality experiences for and expect quality behaviors from hunters. Eliminate any surprises by developing a lease contract that outlines responsibilities of the seller and the buyer.

Cooperatives and Partnerships

Some ranches or farms are large enough and have sufficient number of game to be independent. When land areas are small and when game populations roam unpredictably over several properties, cooperatives or partnerships among landowners are best.

Write contracts among or between landowners to ensure thorough understanding of how the operation will function and the responsibilities of each party. Usually one or more people within the cooperative run the operation.

Cooperatives are useful when animals feed on one property then leave by the hunting season.

Profits from access to some partners' lands are shared with partners' whose land helps feed and maintain the game animal supply.

Recreation

Granting access to private land to fish, hunt, camp, or any kind of recreation is an unselfish act by the owner that provides welcomed experiences for recreationists.

Guidelines

Access to private lands is a privilege respected by most visitors, but when some abuse the privilege access is often denied to all. **NO TRESPASSING** or **NO HUNTING** signs promote negative feelings by landowners and recreationists.

Access to private land can be dealt with in a positive way. If you choose to have recreationists on the property, know who you have and communicate the rules.

Start by getting their address, car license number and signature. Explain where they may go and the allotted period of time (a morning, a hunting season, etc.).

If you have special rules relating to wood cutting, collecting artifacts, use of roads, etc., be sure to communicate those rules. An arrowhead could be picked up with great excitement and pride knowing the landowner approves. Cutting up a dead tree and tossing it into a pickup may not seem inappropriate to a visitor who sees acres of forest, but as the landowner you may object. To allow the pocketing of a few pieces of flint or taking firewood home could enrich the recreational experience and appreciation of your land. Landowners should think about and request what behaviors they expect enough in advance to avoid surprises for either party. You are in control, communicate your rules.

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