
CHAPTER 1

PLPW Shows Initial Success, But Due to WG&F's Funding Shortfall, Its Future May Be Uncertain

PLPW increases recreational opportunities while helping WG&F manage wildlife.

The Game and Fish Commission developed the Private Lands Public Wildlife Access Program (PLPW) to enhance public access to wildlife, and to maintain and enhance wildlife habitat on private lands. PLPW's four programs reward landowners who allow public access to their lands for hunting and fishing; the different programs offer incentives such as modest financial support, small habitat improvement projects, and hunter management (law enforcement) assistance. By addressing private land issues in conjunction with access, PLPW actively engages three of the Wyoming Game and Fish Department's (WG&F) primary constituents: hunters, anglers, and landowners.

PLPW Is the Umbrella for Four Programs

PLPW consists of four programs: the Walk-in Area Program with hunting, fishing, or hunting and fishing areas; the Hunter Management Program; the AccessYes Program; and the pilot Habitat Enhancement Program. The four programs were phased in between 1999 and 2002.

WG&F manages hunters on certain privately-owned lands enrolled in PLPW.

Hunter Management Program. The Hunter Management Program applies to large tracts of private land, or a combination of private and public land accessible through private land, on which WG&F leases access and manages hunters in exchange for public access to hunt. Access is restricted to hunters who have obtained written permission from WG&F. Hunters are expected to abide by ranch rules while on private land; landowners retain the right to impose certain conditions on the use of their land, such as forbidding campfires or requiring vehicles to stay on designated roads.

Landowners or associations of landowners qualify to participate if they provide approximately 1,000 hunter days of recreation¹, or if they are in associations in which one ranch owns at least 10,000 acres. Landowners are not paid for public land within Hunter Management Area borders, only for deeded land. (*See Appendix B for compensation rates for all programs.*)

Walk-in areas open private lands to all licensed hunters and anglers.

Walk-in Area Program. Walk-in areas are tracts of private land on which the Game and Fish Commission (Commission) leases access for hunting, fishing, or both. Access is open to all sportsmen with valid licenses; they can drive to the borders of the property, but not within the boundaries unless PLPW signs designate roads for use.

Landowners qualify to participate if they own: at least 80 contiguous acres of land; 40 acres where waterfowl hunting is available; fishable ponds; or ¼ mile or more of running water. Participants receive compensation according to the number of acres enrolled in the program, with a maximum of \$1,200 per year per contiguous parcel. However, a landowner may enroll in both hunting and fishing walk-in programs and receive double compensation, and may enroll multiple non-contiguous parcels.

Donations from sportsmen, plus ¼ of Conservation Stamp proceeds, fund access purchases.

AccessYes. AccessYes refers only to the voluntary funding component of the PLPW program. In 1999, the Legislature authorized, in W.S. 23-1-501(e), creation of a fund to collect donations, the proceeds of which can be used only to purchase access to private and public lands. Sportsmen have three ways of indicating they wish to donate a whole-dollar amount to the program: by marking a check-off box on license applications or when they receive their licenses, or by donating through license agents. In 2000, the Legislature directed that \$2.50 of the mandatory \$10 Conservation Stamp fee be deposited in the AccessYes Fund; these funds can be used to purchase access. (*See Appendix A for statutes.*)

¹ Calculation of recreation days is based on a combination of factors including the length of the season, the average length of the hunting or fishing trip in the area in question, and the number of permits available for area use.

Small grants fund habitat projects on private land.

Habitat Enhancement Program. The Habitat Enhancement Program was introduced as a pilot in July 2002, with the Commission allocating \$25,000 from the Wildlife Trust Account for the program’s first year of operation. Future allocations will be determined through Commission action each year. Under this program, WG&F can allocate up to \$1,500 per project for a variety of small projects designed to enhance wildlife habitat. These projects require minimal paper work and are intended to provide landowners and WG&F with maximum flexibility.

PLPW Is Active Throughout the State

As of November 2002, PLPW had enrolled nearly one million acres of land for hunting, plus hundreds of lake acres and stream miles for fishing, as illustrated in Table 1. Enrolled lands are located throughout the state and are managed in three PLPW regions. *(See Appendix C for county-level detail, and Appendix D for statewide map.)*

Table 1.

**PLPW Areas and Acreage by Region
FY '02**

Nearly one million acres of private lands have been enrolled in three PLPW regions covering the state.

PLPW Region	Areas	Acres	Lake acres	Stream miles
Casper				
Hunter Management	3	148,834	0.0	0.0
Hunter Walk-in	58	111,745	0.0	5.1
Fishing Walk-in	20	0	76.5	20.1
Total	81	260,579	76.5	25.16
Cody				
Hunter Management	6	223,394	0.0	0.0
Hunter Walk-in	87	107,856	0.0	18.3
Fishing Walk-in	34	0	118.9	35.3
Total	127	331,250	118.9	53.61
Laramie				
Hunter Management	7	186,402	0.0	0.0
Hunter Walk-in	152	200,090	80.0	6.8
Fishing Walk-in	4	0	0.0	11.8
Total	163	386,492	80	18.5
All Regions				
Hunter Management	16	558,630	0.0	0.0
Hunter Walk-in	297	419,691	80.0	30.2
Fishing Walk-in	58	0	195.4	67.2
Total	371	978,321	275.4	97.4

Source: LSO analysis of WG&F data

PLPW Differs From Other WG&F Habitat Programs

PLPW is only one of several WG&F programs addressing access and habitat issues.

PLPW, with its four components, is only one of many programs developed by WG&F to address access and habitat issues. It is designed to appeal to willing landowners who are predisposed to allow access for hunting and fishing. With its modest compensation rates and small habitat projects, it aims to develop further support among landowners for more comprehensive WG&F habitat programs.

Other WG&F programs such as the Habitat Grants Program, Habitat Trust Fund Projects, and the Aquatic Habitat Program encompass a wider range of habitat issues. They also require a larger commitment on the part of landowners, who often provide matching funds, whereas conservation easement or fee simple purchases require greater financial commitment on the part of the agency.

PLPW Contributes to the WG&F Mission

WG&F manages Wyoming's wildlife for the benefit of all the state's citizens.

As the steward of the state's wildlife resources, WG&F is responsible for managing all the state's wildlife and conserving its habitat; controlling hunting and fishing and enforcing applicable laws; serving as an advocate for wildlife, wildlife habitat, and all wildlife users; and expanding opportunities for the public to enjoy wildlife. Its mission is to manage wildlife for public benefits, and in cooperation with private landowners and land management agencies, to advocate habitat conservation that provides a wildlife legacy for the future. The primary tool for carrying out and funding this mission is the sale of hunting and fishing licenses.

PLPW helps WG&F manage game animals and educate constituents.

PLPW contributes to the agency's mission in several ways. Increasing access helps WG&F meet management objectives and harvest levels for big game. Small habitat programs provide WG&F with an opportunity to support landowner efforts to maintain wildlife habitat that is compatible with other agricultural uses. These small programs demonstrate to landowners the value of having wildlife on their lands. They also educate sportsmen about the contributions private landowners make to wildlife, including the extent to which landowner goodwill is essential to maintaining hunting and angling opportunities.

The WG&F Commission sets policies for the Department.

WG&F Structure

The Commission is the policy-making body of the Game and Fish Department. Commissioners are appointed by the Governor, subject to Senate approval, and serve for six-year terms. The Commission is a bipartisan body whose members are required by statute to have a general knowledge of wildlife, wildlife propagation, management, and control. The Department Director is also appointed by the Governor and is responsible to the Commission. Major operational changes or decisions are subject to approval by the Director and the Commission.

PLPW staff work with employees throughout the Department's regions and divisions.

The Department's 355 employees are organized in an Office of the Director and four divisions: Wildlife, Fish, Fiscal Services, and Services. WG&F headquarters are in Cheyenne, with eight regional offices located in seven regions around the state.

PLPW has five dedicated positions: a statewide coordinator who reports to the assistant chief of the Wildlife Division, three regional coordinators, and an administrative assistant. PLPW employees work with regional personnel and the four divisions at headquarters to carry out program objectives. (*See Appendix D for statewide map.*)

WG&F is facing a budget deficit.

As WG&F Seeks to Resolve Its Fiscal Shortfall, Future Funding for PLPW Is Uncertain

WG&F is facing a financial crisis: Its deficit for FY '02 alone was \$4.6 million dollars. At a time when hunting licenses are declining and causing license fee income (the agency's primary revenue source) to drop, federal regulations have expanded WG&F management responsibilities and their costs. Drought conditions have further contributed not only to loss of income but also to increased costs due to loss and degradation of habitat.

WG&F receives no General Fund appropriation and relies on license revenues for an average of 70 percent of its income. The Commission cannot independently increase license prices; it must have statutory authorization to adjust fees. WG&F administrators say they have an immediate need for a funding increase and furthermore, adjustments in license fees are needed every three to five years in order to maintain present services. The Legislature's Joint Interim Travel, Recreation, and Wildlife

Committee is sponsoring several bills in the 2003 Session that would increase funding for WG&F.

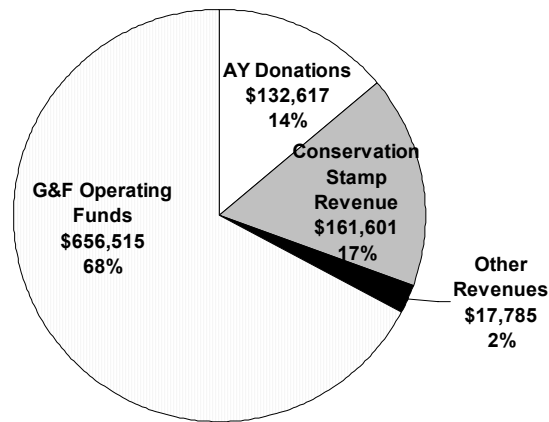
PLPW Donations and Earmarked Funds Cover a Small Portion of Program Expenses

The majority of PLPW expenditures are covered by WG&F operating funds.

Donations and earmarked funds covered only 32 percent of PLPW's FY '02 expenditures. As illustrated in Figure 1, AccessYes donations raised \$132,617 for the program, Conservation Stamp sales provided \$161,601, and additional direct donations and interest on funds added another \$17,785. These sources added up to \$312,003. An additional \$656,515 came from WG&F operating funds, for a total expenditure of \$968,518.

Figure 1.

PLPW Expenditures by Revenue Source
FY '02



Source: LSO analysis of WG&F data

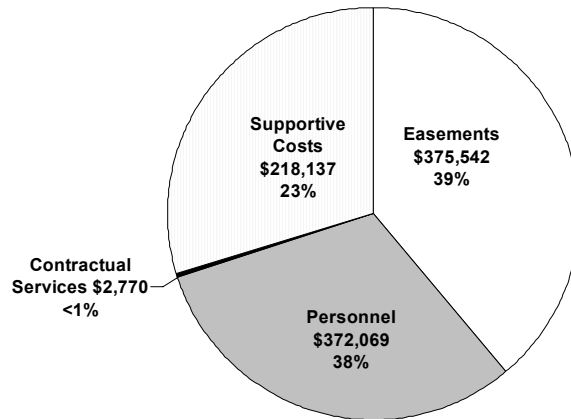
Donations cover only a portion of access costs.

PLPW expenditures for FY '02 were for easements, personnel, and support and contractual services. AccessYes donations and the Conservation Stamp earmark would have been sufficient to fund only 78 percent of easement purchases. WG&F operating funds cover the remaining 22 percent of easement costs plus all other program costs. Figure 2 illustrates program expenditures for FY '02.

Figure 2.

**PLPW Expenditures By Category
FY '02**

Most expenditures are for administrative costs and other services.



Source: LSO analysis of WG&F data

WG&F funding problems could limit program expansion.

Because PLPW funding relies so heavily on the WG&F general operating fund to cover administrative costs, its future is uncertain. When made a permanent program in December 2001, PLPW became subject to the same budget considerations as other WG&F programs. Department officials state that PLPW has high priority but its chances for expansion are slim, given the agency’s current financial status.

Historical Development of PLPW

Access to the state’s wildlife has been a growing concern.

In 1993, WG&F began a process of gathering public input on what the Department should be doing in 2010. One of the most prevalent concerns expressed was that access to both public and private land for wildlife recreational purposes, which already had decreased dramatically, seemed likely to continue to decline. Access to private land is important because half of the state’s land is privately owned. About 40 percent of winter habitat and yearlong habitat for elk, and more than 50 percent of winter and yearlong habitat for deer and antelope, is on private land. To carry out its mission, WG&F needs the support and cooperation of private landowners whose land either includes critical wildlife habitat or harbors game populations during the hunting season.

***PLPW was created
after previous
attempts to address
access issues failed.***

Also in 1993, the Governor requested that the Commission work with all interested parties to evaluate the allocation of non-resident hunting licenses. Over the course of the next five years, because of the contentious nature of underlying issues such as access, this work was taken on first by a task force, and then by WG&F staff. Finally, when no consensus could be reached, the Commission hired a consultant. These efforts culminated in Commission approval in 1998 of a pilot program, the Private Lands Public Wildlife Conservation Initiative.

In 2001, the consultant evaluated the pilot program and, stressing the importance of linking habitat and access, recommended that WG&F develop mechanisms to track the use of the Hunter Management and Walk-in Areas. He also stressed that WG&F needed to account for PLPW's contributions to meeting wildlife management objectives. This accounting would ensure the program's development as an integrated habitat and access approach, and thus would meet the needs and interests of landowners and sportsmen alike.

Altering the thrust of the recommendation, the Commission shifted program focus from an integrated approach to conservation, to one that would concentrate primarily on sportsmen access. At this point, the Commission changed the program's name to the Private Lands Public Wildlife Access Program.

PLPW Program Performance

Acreage

Hunter Management Program. Figure 3 shows that almost five times more acreage was enrolled in the Hunter Management Program in 2002 than in its initial year of enrollment.

Enrollment grew from 123,522 to 558,630 acres,¹ and the

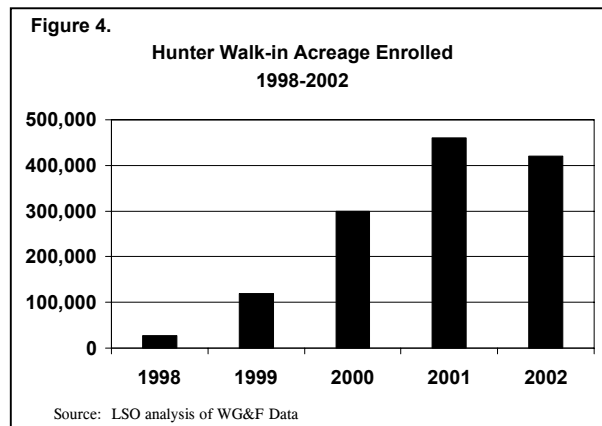
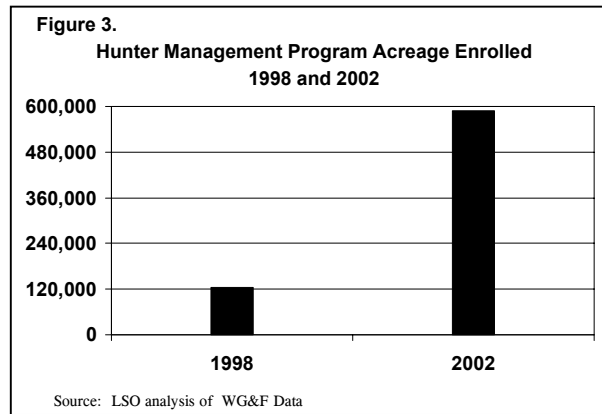
¹ The graph does not show information for intervening years because acreage for those years was recorded in an incompatible format, and we were unable to ascertain the number of private acres enrolled during that time.

number of hunter management areas increased from 2 to 16. In 2002, the average parcel size is 8,096 acres, with a range of 80 to 70,000 acres. Of participants, 59 percent received the maximum payment for lands enrolled.

Enrollment in the Hunter Management and Walk-in Area Programs has increased.

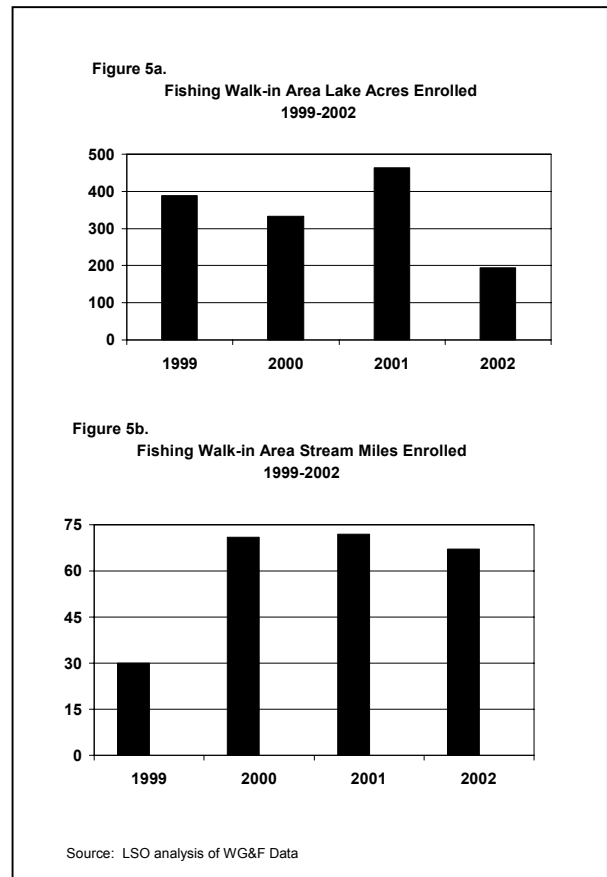
Hunter Walk-in Program. Figure 3 shows that 16 times more acreage was enrolled in the Hunter Walk-in Program in 2002 than in its initial year of enrollment. Acreage grew from 27,000 to 419,691 acres; the slight decrease in acreage in 2002 reflects PLPW’s change in focus that year from quantity to quality of lands enrolled. The number of parcels enrolled

increased from 114 to 410. In 2002, the average parcel size is 1,418 acres; parcels range in size from 80 to 20,800 acres. Of participating landowners, 55 percent received the maximum payment for lands enrolled.



Drought conditions complicate the enrollment of Fishing Walk-in areas.

Fishing Walk-in Program. Participants in the Fishing Walk-in Program can enroll either lake acres or stream miles. Figure 5a shows a decrease of 49 percent in the number of lake acres enrolled since the initial year of enrollment. Figure 5b shows that over two times more stream miles were enrolled in 2002 than in the initial year of enrollment. The Fishing Walk-in Program is a much smaller scale program with enrollment depending on environmental factors such as drought. Such factors account for fluctuation in the number of lake acres enrolled from year to year. However, the stream miles increased after the first year and have remained fairly constant since that time. The number of parcels enrolled increased from 38 to 58. In 2002, ten participants enrolled lake acreage. The average size of lakes is 19.5 acres ranging from 2 to 50.5 acres. Fifty participants enrolled stream miles. The average number of stream miles enrolled is 1.3, with a range from 0.25 to 2.46 miles.

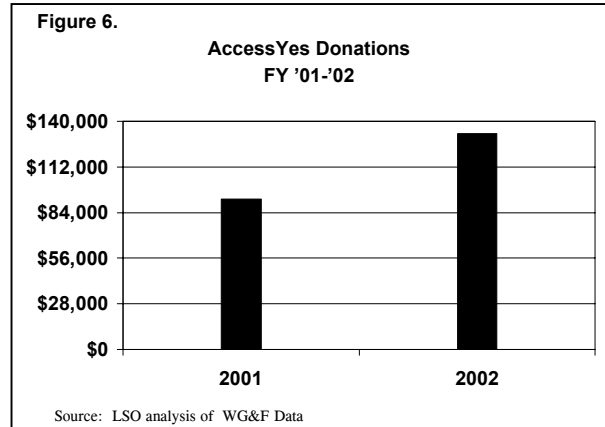


Donations from sportsmen have increased.

Donations

AccessYes donations have been collected since January 2000.

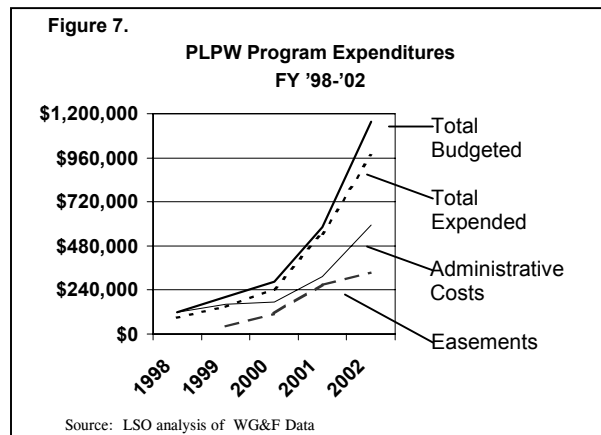
Figure 6 shows the amount raised through sportsmen donations in FY '01-'02. Donations increased 43 percent, from \$92,488 to \$132,617.



Program Expenditures

Figure 7 shows the changes in program expenditures from FY '98 to '02. The PLPW budget increased 880 percent, from \$117,781 in FY '98 to \$1,154,658 in FY '02. In FY '02, PLPW's administrative costs rose as it transitioned from a pilot to a permanent program and added full-time and contract staff.

Program costs have also increased.



As A New Program, PLPW Continues to Evolve

In each of its four years of operation, PLPW has undergone major changes in funding, location, or focus. As of this writing, it has been a permanent program for less than one full year, and the fourth of its components began as a pilot program less than six months ago.

PLPW directly engages two important stakeholders, landowners and sportsmen.

PLPW addresses problems of great importance to WG&F with respect to its stewardship and management of the state's wildlife resources. It does this by engaging the two groups that most directly affect WG&F's ability to do its job: private landowners, who determine the use of critical wildlife habitat and access to game populations; and sportsmen, who fund WG&F programs and whose sport provides the most efficient means of managing game populations.

Assessing this program's success will take many years.

As requested by the Management Audit Committee, this chapter has summarized PLPW's history, organization, operations, and current status. Our research suggests that as designed, PLPW has the potential to benefit the state far beyond its provision of recreational benefits to the 17 percent of the state's population who hunt or the 32 percent who fish. Progress towards these potential benefits depends in part on complex interactions of weather, ecological systems, and land development patterns. Thus, demonstrating program outcomes will require years of information and analysis, and consequently an in-depth assessment of progress is premature at this point.

PLPW is evolving within a context of contentious debate over the state's land-based resources.

In Chapter 2, we focus on improvements WG&F can make in identifying and tracking the information that will be necessary to make this judgment about PLPW at the appropriate time. Agency officials are well aware that in this phase of the program's development, they are establishing a track record that will enable them to enroll the support of more landowners in the future. However, the average age of ranchers and farmers in the state is 53, and most of the private land in the state is predicted to change hands within the next 20 years. Thus, the agency may not have time to establish a lengthy track record. Good performance information from the very outset can demonstrate the program's value to both supporters and critics.

In Chapter 3, we examine the larger context within which access problems have developed, and within which they must be resolved. WG&F is still in an enviable position compared to other states in that it is faced with maintaining the state's wildlife populations, not restoring them. But maintaining or enhancing wildlife requires the reconciliation of sharply conflicting

interests and philosophical differences regarding basic rights and values. In addition to landowners and sportsmen, many other groups have a stake in the outcome, including developers, the minerals and agriculture industries, conservationists, and the tourist industry. Without consensus on the value of Wyoming's wildlife resources, and a state-level effort to include all interests, WG&F can act only marginally as the steward of this resource.

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