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Lease And Fee Hunting

Supplemental Income From Wildlife On Your Land

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Demands for hunting opportunities are growing rapidly, and this trend is expected to continue in the future. This is particularly true in a state like Alabama where there are large populations of deer and turkey. The leasing of private lands for hunting is becoming an alternative that can supplement other income and land uses.

Many hunters will travel long distances to hunt game animals wherever they are plentiful. Urban and suburban sprawl are wiping out historic wildlife habitats, and rural areas surrounding cities are typically posted against hunting or trespassing.

Land leasing and fee hunting are not new to most parts of the southern United States. Private land has been leased for deer hunting in Texas since the 1930s. Many hunters are willing to pay for the privilege to hunt.

A 1988 study showed that hunting in Alabama has accounted for more than \$600 million in expenditures each year. Hunting lease payments to Alabama landowners totaled almost \$30 million in the year of the survey.

You may want to consider the income-generating potential of wildlife on your land. Your decision will involve an assessment of the wildlife potential of your land; an evaluation of the attitudes and abilities of yourself, your family, and your employees to manage wildlife and to manage the people who will use your land; and a consideration of your expected income and expenses.

Land Potential

The size of your land is an important factor to consider. For example, although a field as small as 15 acres can be profitable for dove hunting, the property should be at least several hundred acres if deer or turkey hunters are to enjoy their experience.

Most hunting land in Alabama is leased for deer and turkey hunting. As a rule, allow about 100 acres per deer hunter and 300 acres for each turkey hunter. To overcome the size problem, adjoining landowners can combine their properties to manage wildlife and to attract paying hunters.

A large variety of plants and land uses contribute to wildlife abundance. A mixture of croplands, grasslands, brushy hedgerows or windbreaks, wetlands, and woodlands is ideal. Landowners who want to increase the price of hunting on their land must increase and improve the

quantity and quality of game animals that live on their property. Positive wildlife management practices will help achieve this.

Hunting As A Business

Entertaining the public will require changes in operation to prevent conflicts with other uses or management of your land. Time and money are required to run this new business, including machinery time and the expense of establishing and maintaining a wildlife habitat. Furnishing hunters with room and board may add to your income, but it will demand more time and expense.

Charging for hunting access may mean changing the way you, your neighbors, and your friends hunt on your land. The prime times of the hunting season may be reserved for your paying guests. The choice will be yours, however, because you coordinate how and when paying guests use your property.

Regardless of how hunters are permitted access, ethical and law-abiding conduct should be expected. You determine the parts of your land that hunters can use. You also determine how they are to use facilities such as roads, gates, and fences. When presented tactfully, your guidelines should be followed with minimum supervision.

Accepting money for access privileges may change your liability status. Generally, landowners who lease land to others for hunting incur some liability for the safety of the hunters. You must also eliminate hazardous conditions or warn your visitors so they can avoid problems.

Clauses that limit landowner liability and transfer liability to the guests are standard parts of hunting and other lease/rent agreements. You may want to require that lessees buy additional liability insurance and name you as an additional insured. Legal advice is recommended before entering this business.

Hunting Management Options

There are many ways to manage a fee hunting operation. Your decision will depend on the size and diversity of your land, the wildlife resources there, hunting seasons, your distance from population centers, and the amount of time and other resources you and your family want to invest. The following methods are used for fee hunting operations.

Day-use permits. The hunter reports to your home or office and buys a permit to hunt for the day. In addition to the usual information about the identity of the person, your signature, and the date, the permit can carry rules about the hunt, including a liability clause.

Day-use permits take time to administer and are typically used for dove and waterfowl hunting. It is important to maintain high-quality hunting. This may require limiting the numbers of hunters per day and even scheduling two or three rest days per week when no hunting is permitted.

Guiding fees can be worked into the day-use system. For big-game hunting, some landowners issue permits that extend for several days.

Day-use with room and board. The hunter arranges dates in advance and submits a deposit. This option may involve the use of an extra room, bathroom facilities, and a place at the table. In some cases, a bunk house or separate house or lodge is provided.

Season leases. The landowner leases hunting rights to an individual, several people, or to a hunting club for the season. The owner can lease hunting rights for one or more types of game. Leases contain specific agreements on where the hunting boundaries are, how the property is to be used, responsibility for maintaining facilities, safety areas where hunting is not allowed, the length of the agreement, and the amount to be paid.

The landowner can limit the number of hunters in the leasing group. Season leases take less time to handle than day-use permit hunting. The leasing group may want to pay for or assist in wildlife habitat management operations. And, they may even post and patrol the property.

Estimating Income Potential

Rates for hunting access and services vary greatly across the state and will depend on your location; the quality, quantity, and diversity of game; and the accommodations you provide. Talking with your neighbors, the agencies listed at the end of this publication, and professional consultants will help you estimate your potential income and expenses.

Marketing Your Product

Word-of-mouth from satisfied hunters and repeat business will keep most landowners supplied with paying customers. To begin your business, seek out those who have been on your land. Talk to your agribusiness contacts at the co-op, sale barn, grain elevator, gas station, and bank.

Be sure your doctor, dentist, lawyer, and their friends know about the hunting opportunities on your land. Gun shops and trap and skeet clubs may give you free publicity. You also need to advertise in newspapers and magazines that are likely to be read by hunters who may come to your area.

Advantages And Disadvantages

There are several advantages and disadvantages to fee hunting. Consider all sides of the issue before making decisions that will involve large investments of time and money.

Advantages

- The main advantage is that the landowner may gain annual, supplemental income with a minimal investment of time and money. The *annual* nature of this income provides certain *cash-flow* advantages not offered by many other enterprises on forestland.

- Hunting leases restrict access to the land by the general public. This is considered by some landowners to be an advantage. By restricting access to only a few, the landowner benefits by knowing who is on the property. Also, these hunters frequently develop a vested interest in caring for and protecting the land.

- If the landowner-lessee arrangement exists for several years, a sense of trust often develops between the two groups. Oftentimes, hunting clubs are willing and able to contribute both time and money to improve facilities and/or enhance wildlife populations.

Disadvantages

- The establishment and maintenance of hunting leases requires some time and effort, as do most money-making endeavors. Keep careful records of income and expenses and run the enterprise like a business.

- The wildlife resources on the property do not necessarily improve with lease hunting—over-exploitation of game species may occur. Also, it is rare for landowners to significantly alter land use or improve habitat conditions for wildlife, so hunting leases may not necessarily be in the best interest of the wildlife resources.

- The hunting lease system may be too expensive for many users, forcing them onto the already overcrowded public lands.

Sources Of Assistance

Several state and federal government agencies will help you improve your property for wildlife. Assistance ranges from advice to financial aid.

The local office of the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) is a good place to start. The SCS will help develop a conservation plan for your land that includes wildlife considerations. Also, the SCS works with the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service in administering USDA farm programs.

Additional information on wildlife management is available from your state wildlife management agency and through your local county Extension office.

For detailed wildlife management planning and operational assistance, wildlife management consultants are available. The Alabama Department of Conservation, Division of Game and Fish, or the Alabama Cooperative Extension Service wildlife specialist may recommend consultants.

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