We wrap up the 2009 Conservation Congress issues with a recap of the discussion about how to increase access to private lands.

Public Access/ Hunting and Fishing

The Conservation Congress Public Access Committee heard recommendations for restoring liability protection for private landowners who open their land for recreation.

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With more than 360,000 acres of lands for public recreation opportunities, it sounds like there should be plenty of space available to pursue whichever outdoor activities interest us. However, if each of the 13 million people in Illinois were to venture out one day to hike, bike, snowmobile or horseback ride on state-owned land, we'd each have a 5-foot by 400-foot trail. Depending on when a city was platted, the length of a city block can range from 264 to 500 feet. Not a great distance when you're read for a day on the trail.

One of the three committees established for the 2009 Conservation Congress the Public Access/Hunting and Fishing Committee, co-chaired by Natural Resource Advisory Board members Larry Lucas and Pat Kernan, was charged with exploring opportunities to provide every outdoor recreationist an the chance to pursue the outdoor activity of their choice.

Restoring liability protection for private landowners who open their land for recreation was one issue consistently voiced during the statewide meetings, on the Internet survey and during the assembly of Conservation Congress attendees.

"For more than 40 years, Illinois landowners who allowed recreational users on their property were protected

A high priority topic from the 2009 Conservation Congress was providing incentives to landowners allowing recreational access on private lands.

from tort liability under the Recreational Use of Land and Water Areas Act," explained Openlands Policy Director Lenore Beyer-Clow. Enacted in 1965, the law was designed to encourage land owners to make land and water areas available to any individual or members of the public for recreational or conservation purposes by limiting their liability toward persons entering the property for those purposes.

In 2005, a significant change was made to the law that narrowed the allowable activities to hunting or recreational shooting. The unfortunate outcome of this change was the reduction or elimination of public access to many natural and recreational areas, such as trails traversing private property that are used by hikers, bikers, snowmobilers and equestrians, and the loss of public access to water trails.

"Openlands is working with a variety of coalitions and partners to reinstate protection for landowners who open their land to the public for recreation and conservation purposes, and we are pleased that the Conservation Congress attendees overwhelmingly supported this as one of their top two issues," Beyer-Clow said.

A second topic considered high priority by the attendees was the need to expand access on private lands by providing incentives for private landowners, and identifying public lands that are suitable for outdoor recreation.

"A considerable body of literature exists on the effectiveness of landowner incentives as they relate to providing hunters and trappers access to private lands; however, little information is available on the recreational demands of nonconsumptive recreationalists (hik-

With 95 percent of Illinois' 36 million acres in private ownership, expanding access to these lands will greatly enhance recreational opportunities.

The issue of public access on private lands is shared by landowners, sportsmen and Conservation Police officers.

ers, canoeists, anglers, bikers, birders, etc.) and how their demands can be met through an access program involving private landowners," explained John Buhnerkempe, head of the DNR Division of Wildlife Resources and staff coordinator for the Outdoor Recreational Access to Public and Private Lands committee. "Past attempts in Illinois to provide hunters with access to private land have had mixed results. Implementation of a broad-based access program will require additional research to identify and provide solutions that will reduce conflicts between different users and users and landowners."

Development of such a program will require establishing a long-term funding mechanism. Funding ideas generated through the congress process included development of an access stamp and securing federal match funds. Suggestions for allocation of the revenue included providing landowners with cash payments, technical assistance and cost share incentives. Purchasing property from willing sellers to expand the amount of public land for outdoor recreation continues to be a popular approach.

On Sunday, Oct. 25, 2009, breakout groups discussing the funding issue presented the full Conservation Congress assembly ten issues for vote. Two issues received the support of the majority of the assembly.

- Through the legislative process, restore liability protection for all recreational uses when allowed by private landowners.
- Develop a new program within DNR through establishment of a dedicated funding source, such as a stamp or other special fee, to advocate and research new methods to expand access on private and public lands including incentives for private landowners.

Conservation Congress Convenes

In his closing remarks, Miller reaffirmed his commitment to an open and transparent style of operating DNR: "This Conservation Congress was just the beginning of a very long conservation with the people of Illinois who value our natural resources. We are listening. We need to hear from you when you have suggestions.

"You have my solemn promise," Miller pledged to the crowd, "that this is not the end of this forum for discussion. The Conservation Congress process allows us to remain focused on the future, and to be cognizant of both the threats that could undermine us, and of exciting new opportunities."

Additional research will be required to identify the recreational demands of nonconsumptive recreationists, such as horseback riders.