



Voluntary Public Access (VPA) Program Guide

About The Voluntary Public Access Program

The Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Improvement Program is a new program led by the Franklin Land Trust (FLT), in partnership with the MA Department of Conservation and Recreation, Berkshire Natural Resources Council (BNRC), and the MA Forest Alliance (MFA). This program is funded by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. Through this program, FLT and BNRC will purchase either temporary or permanent public access easements for hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, and hiking from willing landowners in a 28 town region in northwestern Massachusetts.

Participating landowners must provide access for hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, or hiking. Landowners can choose between temporary or permanent public access easements, designating public access for either a linear foot trail or for full access to the entire property. Full access easements will allow public access on all or part of the land, minus a privacy exclusion. Full access easements are not required to include hunting. A trail easement will only allow public access within a designated trail easement area. Trail easements will only be considered on existing trails contained within one ownership, or for trails that make important connections to trails on permanently protected lands that are open to the public. Funding rates will vary depending on how much land is enrolled, the duration of the easement, and if hunting is included.

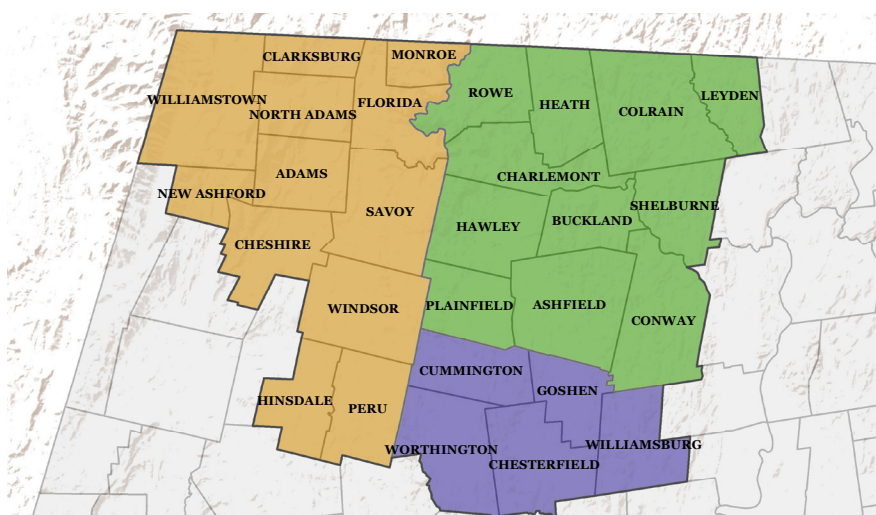
Participating landowners that post a sign on VPA lands are eligible to receive full compensation. Participating landowners that choose not to post a sign on VPA lands will be compensated at half the rates listed below. A map of all VPA lands will be posted on the FLT website and the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation website. Easements will be duly recorded at the MA Registry of Deeds.

Determining Eligibility

- ✓ Must be in the 28 town region (visit www.franklinlandtrust.org for towns in region)
- ✓ Must verify ownership of property
- ✓ Must be willing to publicize public access land on the Franklin Land Trust and the MA DCR websites
- ✓ Must provide public access for hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing and hiking on your property.
- ✓ Trail easements will only be considered for existing trails contained within one ownership, or for trails that make important connections to trails on permanently protected lands that are open to the public.

Voluntary Public Access Program Eligible Towns

- | | |
|--------------|--------------|
| Adams | Hinsdale |
| Ashfield | Leyden |
| Buckland | Monroe |
| Charlemont | New Ashford |
| Cheshire | North Adams |
| Chesterfield | Peru |
| Clarksburg | Plainfield |
| Colrain | Rowe |
| Conway | Savoy |
| Cummington | Shelburne |
| Florida | Williamstown |
| Goshen | Williamsburg |
| Hawley | Windsor |
| Heath | Worthington |



Voluntary Public Access Compensation Rates *(Rates determined by regional market value appraisal.)*

Full Access Easement

All full access easements must allow wildlife viewing, fishing (if applicable), and hiking. Landowners can choose to exclude hunting from a full access easement, but will be compensated at a reduced rate per acre.

Temporary Full Access Easement (10 yrs) with hunting	\$50/acre
Temporary Full Access Easement (10 yrs) without hunting	\$35/acre
Permanent Full Access Easement with hunting	\$75/acre
Permanent Full Access Easement without hunting	\$52/acre

Trail Easement

All trail easements must allow wildlife viewing, and hiking.

Temporary Trail Easement (10 years) without hunting	\$5.00/linear foot
Permanent Trail Easement without hunting	\$10.00/linear foot

All payments will be capped at \$35,000. Low income landowners who meet US Department of Housing and Urban Development income requirements will qualify for a matching funds bonus up to \$5000. To learn more visit <https://affordablehousingonline.com/housing-search/Massachusetts/Franklin-County#census>.

Evaluating VPA Applications

All VPA applications will be evaluated using criteria below to assess suitability for the VPA program,

Full Access Easement Criteria

- ✓ Property has a forest management plan that designates wildlife habitat management as a goal.
- ✓ Property has recently (within the last 5-7 years) been managed for wildlife habitat, and/or provides access to early successional habitat.
- ✓ Property has parking or safe pull off.
- ✓ Property is already being used for fishing, wildlife viewing, hiking and/or hunting.
- ✓ Property has existing roads or trails.
- ✓ Property abuts or makes connections to conserved land that is open to the public.
- ✓ Property has scenic views and/or points of interest.
- ✓ Property boundaries are marked.
- ✓ Hunting will be included in the full access easement.
- ✓ Property provides fishing access.

Trail Access Easement Criteria

- ✓ Property has forest management plan that designates wildlife habitat management as a goal, or is enrolled in Ch 61B.
- ✓ Property has recently (within the last 5-7 years) been managed for wildlife habitat, and/or provides access to early successional habitat.
- ✓ Property has safe pull out or parking.
- ✓ Trail is well established with ongoing maintenance and a third party Stakeholder (volunteer or friends group, trail organization, etc.).
- ✓ Trail has existing kiosk or maps.
- ✓ Trail provides fishing access.
- ✓ Landowners or stakeholders have invested into the trail in the form of volunteer labor, trail structures, signs or maps.
- ✓ Property has scenic views or points of interest.
- ✓ Property boundaries are marked.
- ✓ Trail connects to existing trails on public land.

Voluntary Public Access Program Annual Monitoring

Your VPA lands will be monitored annually to ensure the following:

- All VPA terms and conditions are being met
- VPA signage is present
- The public is using Massachusetts VPA lands according to all rules and regulations



Voluntary Public Access Program Application Process

Step 1 - Application

Visit www.franklinlandtrust.org/vpa to download the VPA Landowner Application. You can also request an application from FLT, BNRC, or MFA. Instructions for submission can be found on the application.

Step 2 - Application Review

FLT staff will contact you once your application has been received and your eligibility has been verified. Proof of ownership will be requested and in some cases, a title search may be necessary to confirm ownership. If eligible, you will be asked to sign and return a non-binding letter of intent to proceed.

Step 3 - Process for Approval

FLT, MFA or BNRC will conduct a site visit to evaluate the property for public access suitability.

Step 4 - Approval

If approved for a temporary or permanent easement, you will receive a VPA approval letter, a VPA temporary or permanent easement to be signed and returned, a map of agreed upon VPA lands, a sample sign to be posted on VPA lands, and sample language to be posted on FLT and MA DCR websites.

Step 5 - Recording and Payments

Your signed easement will be recorded at the Registry of Deeds. Once your easement is recorded, you will receive compensation for enrolled VPA land from the Franklin Land Trust.

Payments will be considered taxable income. We recommend that all landowners speak with a tax advisor to fully understand any/all tax implications before enrolling in the VPA program.

VPA Program Partners

The VPA program is managed by a team of conservation professionals that will help you through the application and approval process. Franklin Land Trust and Berkshire Natural Resources Council will be your primary contacts for applying to the program and for scheduling a site visit on your property. Franklin Land Trust will be reviewing and approving all applications, and processing landowner payments. The Massachusetts Forest Alliance is will assist and advise landowners interested in applying to the VPA program. The MA Department of Conservation and Recreation provides funding and program oversight.



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