

Wildlife Enterprises

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Is a Wildlife Enterprise for You?

Given current economic conditions, many landowners seek sustainable ways to generate income from their land (Figure 1). According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in 2016 19 percent of the population ages 16 and older hunted or fished and 9 percent participated in wildlife-watching activities away from home (2016 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation, <https://www.fws.gov/>).

In 2016, expenditures by United States residents for fishing (\$46.1 billion), hunting (\$26.2 billion) and wildlife-watching away from home (\$11.6 billion) were higher than moviegoer ticket sales in the United States and Canada combined (\$11.4 billion) (Theatrical Market Statistics 2016, <https://www.motionpictures.org/>).

Improved economic conditions of some rural communities in the southeastern United States have been attributed to income generated from wildlife enterprises. Land values typically increase due to wildlife habitat improvements and potential income from hunting leases. However, wildlife



Figure 1. Fowl Play Lodge in DeWitt offers lodging, meals, and duck guide services. In the off-season, they host small gatherings such as workshops and retreats. Photo by Becky McPeake, University of Arkansas.

enterprises are not for everyone. Many aspects of the endeavor should be considered before venturing into a wildlife enterprise.

Consider These Questions

- Does the current use of your land's natural resources for farming, forest management or livestock grazing lend itself to being used for other purposes?
- Are these uses compatible with recreational use by paying clients, or do they compromise the integrity of your major income-producing operation?
- If you farm row crops, can you tolerate a hunting operation during your planting or harvest season without having a conflict in time and resource management?

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- If you own livestock, will visitors be at risk for accidents, compromise animal health, or introduce diseases?
- For small produce operations, will visitors compromise safe food handling practices?
- Is your labor force (e.g., family or existing employees) sufficient to handle additional work?
- Will the new enterprise complement normal down times in the workload?
- Is your wildlife enterprise sustainable, such that it protects the natural resource base and optimizes resource use while minimizing adverse impacts on health, safety, wildlife, water quality, and the environment?
- Will the enterprise result in adequate compensation for your time and effort?
- Are you a “people-person” or would you rather someone else manage that part of your enterprise? Do you enjoy entertaining clients, particularly as an outfitter or guide service?

Getting Started

Your wildlife enterprise can become a big business or a big failure. Planning is everything. New entrepreneurs should start small and pilot their enterprise with a few clients. Pay to be a client at a business you wish to emulate to experience a client’s perspective, and ask the business owner for advice about getting started. After the first year or two, review your learning experiences and adjust your business plan to target the projected size of business you want to achieve.

Typically those who operate a wildlife enterprise enjoy meeting and working with people, making new friends, and are comfortable with allowing strangers on their property. They enjoy the challenges associated with a different and new business. They “sell an experience” by getting to know their clients and providing lodging, catering, and other amenities. Others prefer only to lease land and not deal with clients. If dealing with people is not how you wish to spend your time, consider hiring a third party to find clients, and partner with a family member or hire a manager to perform client services, management, and/or marketing your wildlife enterprise.

Developing Your Enterprise Plan

Whether it’s a new venture or an added activity to your on-going business, the prudent entrepreneur develops a business plan before starting a venture. A business plan addresses important questions and issues before starting rather than after-the-fact, and

risk losing money or your business altogether.

Basically a business plan is a road map for your business. The business plan has two purposes: (1) to assist in making business decisions to achieve goals and objectives, and (2) discuss feasibility and viability to lenders, potential investors, and business partners. To get started, this fact sheet provides an overview of five topics which are incorporated into a business plan:

- type of enterprise;
- resource availability;
- liability issues;
- financial feasibility; and
- marketing strategy.

There are numerous formats for a business plan, but most contain an executive summary, business description and objective, market situational analysis, business proposition, action plan, financial analysis, legal and liability issues and evaluation. Contact your county Extension office or the U.S. Small Business Administration (www.sba.gov) for assistance. Individualized assistance is also available from the Arkansas Small Business and Technology Development Center (<http://asbtdc.org/>).

Types of Enterprises

Wildlife enterprises can be designed to accommodate many types of client interests and services, with various levels of owner engagement (Figure 2). Table 1 lists an array of possibilities for wildlife enterprises. Which best matches your ideas, interests, and resource availability? Provide specific details in your business plan about the type of enterprise you are offering.



Figure 2. Budgeting for supplies is part of a business plan. Photo by Becky McPeake, University of Arkansas.

Leases (Annual/ Seasonal/Daily)	Services	Amenities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Hunting seasons <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deer • Waterfowl • Dove • Wild turkey • Small game ■ Camping ■ Hiking ■ Birding ■ Trail riding with horses ■ ATV trail riding ■ Fishing ■ Shooting range 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Meals <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On your own • Self-use kitchen/grill • On-site chef/cook ■ Guides <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • full-service: actively participates with the client • semi-guide: monitoring and oversight for a group of clients • self-guide: provide clients with information and directions to explore on their own ■ Cleaning game ■ Transportation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Airport • Entertainment/shopping 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Lodging <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bunk/camp house • Motel/hotel style • Rustic or upscale cabins • Tent/RV camp sites ■ Structures <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Duck blind • Safe deer stand (for liability reasons, most allow clients to set up their own portable stands) • Skeet throwing machine/shooting range ■ Fishing pond ■ In-house massage/spa treatment ■ Sports bar/pool table/darts ■ Fire ring ■ Optional tours and entertainment ■ Business meeting facilities (internet connection, conference room, workshops & trainings)

Table 1. Types of wildlife enterprise leases, services, and amenities targeting different client interests and price points.

Resource Availability

A necessary planning tool for developing a wildlife enterprise is an inventory of existing and available resources. A resource inventory helps determine whether you can make the property an economically-feasible business and what type of wildlife enterprise to pursue. Resources can be classified as natural, physical, labor and financial. Evaluate your resources to determine if anything is lacking which would prevent development of the planned enterprise.

An inventory will also help identify which resources are under-used, such as an old farm pond which could be renovated to provide fishing opportunities for guests. Once completed, the resource inventory becomes part of the overall business plan. Guidance for conducting a resource assessment is available in a fact sheet titled *Assessing Your Resources* (FSCED300, located at www.uaex.uada.edu).

Unlike conventional business plans, a habitat assessment is part of inventorying natural attributes for a wildlife enterprise. Conservation and habitat management practices can improve the attractiveness of your property for wildlife and your clients, and increase revenue for your business. Practices which benefit a wildlife enterprise include:

- Protection of mast-producing trees
- Protection and reforestation of riparian corridors and wetlands
- Rotational strip disking
- Timber thinnings and harvests
- Prescribed burning
- Field borders and edge feathering
- Strategically-placed brushpiles
- Buffer strips
- Native grass establishment
- Pollinator habitat
- Food plots
- Maintained trails
- Access to ponds, creeks, or streams

Federal and state assistance programs may provide technical and financial support for some habitat practices which improve your wildlife enterprise. Contact your local Arkansas Conservation District office (<https://www.agriculture.arkansas.gov>) about eligibility for USDA Farm Bill programs such as the Conservation Reserve Program and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program. Private Lands Biologists with the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission (www.agfc.com)

are available to write a wildlife plan for your farm and can advise about opportunities for federal assistance.

Liability Issues

In today's world, leasing land based on a handshake agreement is asking for trouble. Oral agreements for leasing are not advisable. Miscommunication between the visitor/client and the landowner, or an accident on the property, could result in a lawsuit. Being prepared for the unexpected is the best safeguard against potential liability and risk. The effort taken to set up a sound lease agreement from the start will avert potential problems later. State laws and regulations change quickly and can vary by local governments. The only sure way to obtain the best possible hunting lease agreement and the most specific information concerning legal interpretations is to consult an experienced local attorney.

- A basic understanding of the legal framework of wildlife law and federal/state regulations is important when planning your wildlife enterprise. Before contacting an attorney, do a little homework and become familiar with the law:
- Details about the components of lease agree-

ments are available in a fact sheet titled Wildlife Leases and Liability Issues on Private Lands (FSA9089, www.uada.edu), and the Legal Liability Issues website at Mississippi State University's Natural Resource Enterprise Program, <https://www.naturalresources.msstate.edu/>.

- Review these considerations and be prepared before meeting with your attorney.
- Contact your insurance provider about updating your liability coverage.
- Arkansas state law provides limited protection under the Recreational Use Statute and for agritourism businesses when certain practices are followed. For more information, visit www.uada.edu and search for Recreational Use Statute or agritourism.

Risk associated with landowner liability can be diminished by a written contract which explicitly delineates property boundaries and known hazards, insurance responsibilities, and release agreements by clients. Additionally, landowners should post property with signs or paint to limit trespass and delineate boundaries for clients. Not only do clients need to be notified of dangers and hazards, but also signs need to be visible and explanatory, such as not entering a field with a mean bull or a warning about an open well.

The Arkansas Game and Fish Commission requires written permission from a landowner before hunting with the exception of family members. Providing written permission to clients will alleviate questions if stopped by a wildlife officer.

Financial Feasibility

Now we've arrived at the BIG question: will the enterprise be financially feasible? Assess the feasibility of your enterprise by developing an estimate of start-up costs and operating expenses. Start-up costs are the initial upfront costs to get the business up and running. They include costs for acquiring buildings, equipment, or other resources that you need, license/permit fees, price of promotional signs, etc. Operating costs are on-going and vary throughout the operation of the business. Operating costs include labor, shipping, advertising, insurance, and other continuing expenses. Examples of enterprise budgets are available from agricultural economics or farm management departments at universities. Contact your local county extension office (www.uada.edu) or the Arkansas branch of the U.S. Small Business Administration (www.sba.gov) for assistance.

The price charged to clients is based on a number of factors including:

- location of property relative to potential clients (ease of accessibility to airport, interstate, etc.)
- wildlife abundance
- wildlife quality (trophy or once-in-a-lifetime experience)
- service & amenities provided

Determining a price for your product can be complicated. Some misconceptions about pricing can greatly affect the performance of a small business. Many think the lower the price, the better it is for business. This is not always true. Effective pricing is extremely important for an enterprise to be successful. Price can be calculated based on actual cost for supplies and services, plus some added margin to cover unexpected expenses or down cycles in the economy. Your price depends a great deal on the type of wildlife enterprise and services provided. What are its attributes? Does your enterprise have any unique characteristics which enable you to charge a premium? Evaluate your competitors' pricing, if competitors exist, and if they offer products or services similar to your enterprise. Understanding your product and its position in the larger marketplace is crucial for effective pricing.

Price and the quantity demanded determine revenue. The quantity demanded may vary with the price. However, price is only one factor which impacts demand for your product. Understanding the demand for your enterprise will help determine the price you can charge, which will cover your costs and return the highest profit. This requires a good understanding of what potential clients are willing to pay for the experience you are offering. Your price is a signal to clients about your product's value. The price that you charge is one factor which positions your product among its competitors. Do you want to compete for the low-end, moderate, or high-end market? Avoid under-valuing your product! It is much easier to reduce prices later than increase them. You can even promote these reductions as discounts.

Marketing Strategy

Efficient marketing is of vital importance to a wildlife enterprise. You may have the best hunting grounds in the mid-south at a very reasonable price, but it will mean nothing if clients are unaware your business exists. A carefully-planned marketing strategy will help maximize your profit by identifying a client base and preventing wasteful use of your financial investment. A fact sheet about Marketing Your Wildlife Enterprise (FSA9097) is available at www.uada.edu.

Keep in mind your wildlife enterprise is selling

“an experience” rather than a tangible product. Your “product” is access to nature and the outdoors. It is illegal to sell wild game, as wildlife are owned by citizens. Your product should fit readily-available resources which are:

- currently present on your property or in your community,
- can be developed after reasonable and feasible modification, or
- can be employed as part of a wildlife enterprise cooperative. (The next section describes cooperatives.)

If doves are not visiting your property currently, don’t offer dove hunts. On the other hand, should you base your choice of product solely on its current availability? With a few modifications, your property may become ideal for dove hunting (Figure 3). An important component of this decision is your client base.

Product decisions are made much easier by asking two important questions—what do clients really want and how much are they willing to pay for the experience? In economics, these questions refer to the demand for your product. If potential clients want a remote rustic cabin, offering an elegant duck hunting lodge complete with meals and hot tubs may cost more than your duck hunters are willing to pay. How clients perceive and value the experience is important for retaining their business and to encourage word-of-mouth marketing. For details, see the fact sheet Hospitality and Customer Service (FSCED302, www.uada.edu).

Generally speaking, establishing your uniqueness as a wildlife enterprise is beneficial, provided that clients want what you offer (Figure 3). Sometimes it is easier to offer a slightly different experience than your competitors, rather than a radically different one. Find out what wildlife-based enterprises are already available in your area. Have a clear idea of the products that these enterprises offer. Then decide if you want to offer the same product or something different than your competitors.

The location of your wildlife enterprise has a significant effect on marketing strategies. Wildlife enterprises by definition are located in rural areas which may not offer easy access. Traveling to rural areas is an expectation for many hunters where limited access is part of the hunting experience. Even some hunters may consider remote locations as added value to the experience you are offering. Property located closer to urban centers offers professionals from the city a brief escape to “get away from it all” for a few days. More remote properties may provide longer stays for

those traveling farther distances, or pick-up services from airports.

Promoting and advertising your wildlife enterprise is a vehicle for reaching clients. Depending on the size of your wildlife enterprise, word-of-mouth or a sign along a highway may be sufficient. Larger ventures need

effective promotion to build a highly sought-after business with a large client base. With a well-prepared promotion campaign, it’s possible to reach clients who are willing to travel great distances to enjoy your enterprise. A promotion campaign will not only make your clients aware of your enterprise, it can establish your business’s uniqueness in the minds of potential clients.

Today’s wildlife enterprises have a variety of promotional tools and venues at their disposal. Advertisements or posts on social media, publications, radio, television, and websites are options. Direct marketing tools such as mailing advertisements or targeted ads in social media can be effective. Hunting and outdoor trade shows/conventions offer promotional venues for setting up booths and meeting potential clients face-to-face. Celebrity endorsements may be of value for high-end wildlife enterprises. Do not select a marketing tool which your wildlife enterprise cannot afford. On the other hand, you should not select an ineffective tool just because it is cheap. Find the best compromise between cost and effectiveness.

Wildlife Enterprises in Arkansas

The following are four wildlife enterprises in Arkansas that illustrate various types of business ventures — from quality white-tailed deer, bobwhites and waterfowl, to the number of customers they have, size of landholdings and services provided.

Hall’s Quail Preserve. Mark Hall is the owner and manager of Hall’s Quail Preserve, located near Damascus about 50 miles from Little Rock. He raises



Figure 3. An electric fence protects this dove hunting field from deer damage. *Photo by Becky McPeake, University of Arkansas.*

bobwhite quail, and offers bobwhite and pheasant hunts, charging a price per bird, and additional fees for “renting” their retrievers. Mark enjoys training bird dogs, which is why he started this business. His bird supplier for training bird dogs went out of business and sold his remaining birds to Mark. Hall’s Quail Preserve has grown steadily from providing 500 birds to hunters to more than 7,000 birds, with three to seven hunts per week for about seven months of the year. Because bobwhites have declined in recent years, his customers seek the nearly-wild quail hunting experience provided by Mark’s genetically-selected and weather-conditioned pen-raised birds. At his 350-acre farm, hunters can choose various field sizes and locations for their hunt. Mark and his family own and operate a full-time dairy and livestock operation, with Mark and his son being primarily responsible for managing the wildlife enterprise. Services include training and/or providing bird dogs and guided hunts for less experienced hunters. Mark’s marketing strategy is a sign placed along a secondary highway and word of mouth.

Wright’s Shur-A-Shot. Jay Wright was the owner and manager of Wright’s Shur-A-Shot near I-40 about 30 miles west of Memphis, Tennessee. A recent Internet search suggests Jay has retired from his business. Jay started his wildlife enterprise because commodity crop prices were dropping, and he and his family enjoyed hunting. His family-oriented and operated enterprise offered duck hunting during the 60-day waterfowl season to about 165 customers. Services included meals and lodging, guides, and retriever dogs. His rustic lodging accommodations were improved through the years based on customer suggestions, such as providing television and internet services. His enterprise was a short distance to nearby major attractions. He and his family attended outdoor shows and conventions to meet new clients with whom they formed personal friendships. They sent birthday cards and flowers for special occasions like notable anniversaries or new baby arrivals.

Baxter Land Company. Andrew Wargo manages the Baxter Land Company, which owns several thousand acres in the Mississippi Delta south of Memphis, Tennessee. The company leases land to agriculture producers who farm cotton, soybeans, rice and wheat on a share basis. At Baxter Land Company, an agriculture production lease does not necessarily include a hunting lease. The company prefers issuing hunting leases to groups, though some individual hunts for quality white-tailed deer are conducted. The company has participated in a number of Farm Bill conservation programs to improve wildlife habitat and the

quality of wildlife on company land. Although production agriculture is its primary focus, wildlife enterprises are considered a value-added component offering additional income to the company.

Gay Lacy Farms. Gay Lacy Farms has about 2,000 acres of farmland located near Newport in the Arkansas Delta. Mr. Lacy leases land to agriculture producers who farm soybeans, rice and corn on a share basis. He leases portions of his property to duck hunters during the migratory waterfowl hunting season, which generates substantial income for his farm. Ducks land on his property in farm fields and tree-lined sloughs off the White River and Village Creek. Mr. Lacy improved his wildlife enterprise by fixing up an old barn and offering rustic accommodations on site. Mr. Lacy also upgraded a primary water control structure to enable better adjustment of water levels in a slough. Mr. Lacy does not pump water. He relies on rainfall and changing levels in the White River, which the Army Corps of Engineers manages for an upstream recreational water body. Their decisions affect water quantity year-round for farmers downstream.

In addition to farming and waterfowl leases, Mr. Lacy receives income from a quality buck lease in wooded acreages adjacent to large open agriculture fields. Those managing the adjacent property follow quality deer management practices. Mr. Lacy enrolled his land in several Farm Bill programs for additional income and assistance which also improves wildlife habitat. Mr. Lacy’s farm is a Wildlife Discovery Farm in partnership with the University of Arkansas. In field demonstrations, he uses cover crops for the dual purpose of protecting soils while attracting deer and waterfowl for lease hunting. Wildlife biologists from the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission and Quail Forever have toured Mr. Lacy’s farm and provided a wildlife plan with suggestions for habitat practices. A local forester with the Arkansas Forestry Commission has also written a plan for managing forested areas of his property.

Resources

The University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture Cooperative Extension Service offers multiple resources free to view and download on our website (www.uada.edu). Enter “agritourism,” “wildlife enterprises” or another search term in the search box. Resources include:

- *Agritourism in Arkansas: A Resource Guide for Farmers and Landowners*, guidebook
- *Agriculture Diversification through Agritourism* (FSCED301), agritourism series fact sheet

- *Assessing Your Resources* (FSCED300), agritourism series
- *Hospitality and Customer Service* (FSCED302), agritourism series fact sheet
- *Marketing Your Wildlife Enterprise* (FSA9097), fact sheet
- *Wildlife Leases and Liability Issues on Private Lands* (FSA9089), fact sheet
- *Arkansas' Recreational Use Statute* (FSPPC119), fact sheet

The National Agricultural Law Center provides information about legal considerations for agritourism and wildlife enterprises including publications and

webinars. For a list of resources, select “Research by Topic” on the left side of the webpage at <https://nationalaglawcenter.org/>, and then select agritourism or forestry. Examples of resources include:

- *The Evolution of Agritourism: Current Legal Issues & Future Trends*, broadcast August 19, 2020
- *Ten Legal Issues for Farm Stay Operators*, publication
- *Recent Agritourism Litigation in the United States*, publication, April 22, 2020

Acknowledgments: This publication was funded in part by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Arkansas | USDA, in partial fulfillment of “Demonstrating Conservation Practices Benefiting Wildlife, Water Quality and Farm Economics on Working Lands,” NRCS 68-7103-17-137. NRCS is a conservation leader for all natural resources, ensuring private lands are conserved, restored, and more resilient to environmental challenges. Additionally, we greatly appreciate Dr. Daryl Jones, Natural Resource Enterprises Program, Mississippi State University, for his leadership contributions to wildlife enterprise education and his review of this fact sheet; and Dr. Wayne Miller, Professor – Extension Economist, for his professional contributions to the Wildlife Discovery Farm and this fact sheet.

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FSA9113-PD-01-21N

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