

Voluntary Public Access–Habitat Incentive Program

by Marilyn Black

Linda and Bob Steiner have allowed the public to fish from their private land along Sugar Creek, Venango County, ever since they acquired the land about 20 years ago.

Sugar Creek flows through a scenic valley that stretches from central Crawford County to its confluence with French Creek at the village of Sugarcreek. A stocked trout stream, anglers pursue Brown Trout, Rainbow Trout and Smallmouth Bass from its waters.

When the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission (PFBC) in 2021 initiated the Voluntary Public Access-Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP), the Steiners decided to ensure anglers can forever use their land along both sides of Sugar Creek for fishing. “We have always been anglers and enjoy the sport. We know that access has become a problem, because much fishing occurs on private land. We can perpetuate the sport for generations, knowing this permanent easement will always be available to anglers wading this creek or casting from its shore,” said Linda Steiner. “Linda and I are happy to give this legacy to the sport,” added Bob Steiner.

Mackenzie Hogan, PFBC’s Chief of Real Estate, describes this program, which results in a permanent Public Fishing Access and Conservation Easement, as being executed and attached to the land deed, so even when ownership of the land parcel changes over time, anglers and boaters may still legally be on the property for fishing and boating purposes. This model is currently subsidized in the Commonwealth as a result of a grant from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) that provides a one-time monetary payment to the landowner in exchange for permanent public access to the easement corridor, typically extending about 35 feet from the shoreline of a stream or river, depending on the land contours and property lines.

For instance, the VPA-HIP easement on the Steiner property reaches from the Route 427 bridge (just south of the borough of Cooperstown) for approximately 1,000 linear feet on both the east and west banks, with a width of 35 feet from each shoreline. It also includes a primitive parking area on the east side of the bridge as an extra



photo-Darl Black



photo-Marilyn Black

This fishing spot in the shadow of the Route 427 bridge will soon become a permanent Public Fishing Access corridor in the Voluntary Public Access-Habitat Incentive Program.



Al Bell, Franklin, concentrates on watching his line while he fishes on Sugar Creek.

benefit for anglers. “Kayakers are welcome, too, although water levels are generally suitable for that sport about 2 weeks per year,” said Bob Steiner.

This pair of outdoor writers and photographers in turn shared information about VPA-HIP with creekside neighbors, Cindy and Michael Bennett, who applied in 2022 to enroll their slightly shorter section, which reaches beneath the roadway bridge and continues downstream on the west side of Sugar Creek. They, too, have since 1993 allowed anglers to walk into this corridor. “We figured if money was available and since we were already letting people fish, then we wanted to make the access a more permanent solution beyond our lifetimes,” said Cindy Bennett.

Hogan indicated that the application and due diligence process can take up to 2 years from the time a person initiates an inquiry until the permanent easement is fully executed. Once closed, the PFBC surveyor affixes small boundary markers labeled “Conservation Easement” on the corridor perimeter. She anticipates both Sugar Creek easements will be finalized in the spring 2024.

The current USDA grant as well as matching funds from the PFBC enabled the start of this program in the Commission’s repertoire of cooperative agreements to provide anglers and boaters with access to Pennsylvania waters. The USDA funds will be fully consumed when the 12 already active program applications are brought to fruition, thereby protecting approximately 45,000 linear feet of additional public access to high priority waterways.

“We will continue to seek partnerships to increase and improve long-term public access opportunities,” said Hogan. To learn more about the VPA-HIP and other programs, visit fishandboat.com. ☐



photo-Darl Black



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During the 2022 opening day of trout season, anglers of all ages fished from the Steiner property along Sugar Creek, Venango County.