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CARSON — Conservationists and local officials held a post-pounding ceremony Tuesday to celebrate the opening of 155 acres of private land for public hunting as part of the Southwest Iowa Communities for Pheasants and Farming Initiative.

The event was held at a farm near Carson owned by Stuart Buckingham of the Kansas City area.

The land is next to the Wheeler Grove Conservation Area, which includes about 200 acres of public access land, said Jeremy Biggs, Pheasants Forever precision agriculture and conservation specialist.

“This was a great way to add on to something that’s already existing here,” he said.

“What’s really great about this is we have a ‘no hunting’ sign we get to take down,” said Jamie Cook, state coordinator for Pheasants Forever.

The initiative focuses on the development of wildlife habitat and public hunting on private lands to enhance outdoor recreation opportunities and attract visitors to rural communities while helping farmers identify and take out of production unprofitable cropland and improve yields in other fields.

In exchange for enrolling at least 80 acres in the Iowa Habitat Access Program for five years, farmers receive a free one-year subscription to Profit Zone Manager software, a precision agriculture analysis system from EFC Systems; unlimited technical assistance from a Pheasants Forever precision agriculture and conservation specialist; and habitat improvements and maintenance. The Iowa Habitat Access Program allows public hunting on privately owned land during hunting seasons.

Pheasants Forever’s goal is to turn 1,500 acres of unprofitable farmland into public access areas, Cook said.

“So far, we’ve been able to enroll 960 acres in Pottawattamie, Harrison and Fremont counties since February,” he said. “We couldn’t do this project without willing landowners.”

It’s important to find ways to open up private land because Iowa ranks 49th out of the 50 states in public hunting ground available, said Brian Hickman, southwest Iowa director for the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. The DNR started discussing how to set up an access program in 2006 and in 2010 applied for a Voluntary Public Access grant through the federal farm bill. The DNR was awarded a VPA grant in 2012 and another in 2014 and was able to arrange voluntary public access on 22,000 acres of land. At that point, federal funding ran out.

It’s important to expand access to attract hunters, because there are fewer than there used to be, said Rachel Ladd of the DNR. In addition, young people don’t spend enough time on outdoor activities, she said.

Technical assistance is important to farmers who have concerns about erosion, water quality and habitat, said Dale Duval, district conservationist for the National Resource Conservation Service. Pheasants Forever works alongside government and county conservationists, which he appreciates.

Mark Eckman, executive director of the Council Bluffs Convention and Visitors Bureau, talked about the economic benefits of increasing the amount of land available for public hunting. Nationally, the average hunter spends \$900 on gear, travel and lodging, he said. In Iowa, the average is closer to \$1,600. Each year, hunters spend \$449 million in the state.

“We’re looking for opportunities to grow that travel economy,” he said. “This helps us create one more reason to come to Pottawattamie County.”

“When there are places around and people can come and hunt there, that brings tourism dollars in,” agreed Iowa First Gentleman Kevin Reynolds, on hand for the ceremony, who once worked in Pottawattamie County for the federal soil conservation service, which is now part of the NCRS. “Programs like this are super, super important to give people who do have an interest a place to go.”

“This is a really great program,” said Pottawattamie County Auditor Melvin Houser after the ceremony.

Houser thinks the added public hunting areas will bring in more hunters and more tourism dollars.

Major partners in the program include the Iowa West Foundation, the DNR, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Fremont County Tourism Commission, Golden Hills Resource Conservation and Development, Council Bluffs Convention and Visitors Bureau, Quail Forever and EFC Systems.

Farmers interested in learning more about the Southwest Iowa Communities for Pheasants and Farming Initiative can contact Jeremy Biggs at 402-943-8526 or jbiggs@pheasantsforever.org.