

## **FOREST ACCESS**

Access to and within the state forest holdings is critical for a variety of uses. Access is critical for the dispersed recreation activities promoted on the state forests. Management activities require ready access. Users find the properties friendlier places when there is adequate and well-identified access. Access to state forests consists of two parts - roads and parking areas.

Forest access roads fall into two broad categories - roads managed by other government agencies, and roads managed by the properties.

Parking areas for property users help make properties more inviting. Users feel they are welcome in the area. Major facilities attract large numbers of users and require significant parking space. The smaller, dispersed parking areas are a primary tool to serve dispersed recreational users, which is a major state forest user group.

### **State and Federal Highways**

State and federal highways are a primary access to the state forests and forest recreation areas for people from outside the vicinity. About half the properties have a state or federal highway that serves the property main entrance. These highways are generally high quality with an asphalt surface. They generally have few limits with regards to the type of vehicles and loads they can support.

Local INDOT district or subdistrict heads are the primary contacts for the properties. The properties should maintain regular contact with local INDOT officials. Good directional signs and road condition should be primary topics of conversation. All properties will encourage local INDOT units to place directional signs to the properties, particularly the primary recreation areas. INDOT approval must be obtained before developing any new access to a state or federal highway.

### **County Roads**

County roads provide the primary access to the main entrance for about half the properties. More importantly, they are the primary access system to the various blocks and holdings of the properties. There are more miles of county roads on state forests than state and federal highways.

County roads are generally not built to the same standard as state or federal highways. Many, if not most, county roads are gravel surface. There are often load limits on county road bridge structures, and seasonal limits on the roads. County roads are often not as well defined as state or federal highways. Old "public" or "township" roads may or may not be considered

county roads. Some county roads may literally end in private driveways.

It is imperative that properties maintain regular contact with county commissioners and/or county road superintendents. Properties will work with county officials to ensure that county roads that provide access to state forest holdings remain open as county roads unless the state is able to obtain an easement or other access arrangement to the holding. Properties will contact county officials for prior approval to develop access to forest land from county roads.

There may arise situations where it would be beneficial to a property for a county road or an old "public/township" road to be vacated. Such roads may serve no other landowner than the state, and may therefore receive limited maintenance. The Director of the Department has authority to vacate such roads. The Property Specialist should be contacted to initiate this process.

Likewise there may be situations where old public roads that may not be maintained any further by the county are the only logical access to state forests lands. Use of old county highway maps and other historical county maps may be needed to prove the past public use nature of that road. Properties should collect and maintain copies of these whenever possible. Public roads, even when officially vacated, can still be used as access by property owners who were serviced by the road when it was a public road.

State forests and forest recreation areas cannot spend state resources to improve or maintain county roads when the county receives funding from INDOT to maintain that stretch of road.. If such roads need additional maintenance or improvement, they should be vacated first. However, there may be situations where county roads create a detriment to adjacent state forest holdings. In these cases, it may be possible to perform work along the road right-of-way. For example, it is acceptable to put in a ditch to drain a user-parking unit that floods from water backing up from a county road. The key consideration is that the work is done to improve state forest property, not the road. Any work in the county road right-of-way should have prior clearance from county officials. Contact the Property Specialist regarding specific circumstances.

### **Property Public Roads**

These are roads on properties that are regularly open to public vehicle traffic. Most commonly these are roads that provide access to the main recreation and service areas of the properties. Many of these are former county (public) roads, or CCC-developed roads. Some were created with subsequent facility development. These roads are often asphalt-surfaced, or occasionally gravel. These roads are not part of a county or INDOT state highway system. However, they are subject to all laws and regulations that apply to state highways. They are maintained with the assistance of local INDOT units, and through INDOT projects. The properties will regularly contact the head of the local INDOT units to coordinate needed state forest road maintenance.

Where these roads provide the only access to private landowners, they will be maintained to a reasonable standard with the assistance of INDOT. Access will not be restricted except when there are safety concerns.

Each road will receive a unique identifier by the property. The property will maintain a record of major activities performed on these roads.

### **Property Non-Public Roads**

These are roads that are used by vehicles primarily for management purposes, and access for private vehicles is generally restricted. They have several names such as firelanes and firetrails, but will generally be called fire/access roads. The oldest of these are old roads that provided access to and around the old farmsteads. Some may have been "public" roads at one time. Many others were developed for fire management or use by CCC crews when the state forests were created. Access to these is generally restricted by gates. The primary locks on gates for these roads will always be DNR locks using the Fire Trail (FT) series of key cores, unless otherwise specified.

Today these serve a multiple purpose role. Passively they serve as a firebreak. They also provide access for fire control situations. They provide access for other emergencies such as search and rescue, and human injury. They provide regular access for management activities. Countless users use them for walk-in recreational access. They may provide occasional vehicle recreation access for people with disabilities. They may provide limited access for neighboring landowners to reach their property. The general public may occasionally open them for access use.

There are three levels of fire/access roads based on how large an area they serve, how often they are used, and who uses them. They should be constructed and maintained to match the use. All fire/access roads should be identified where they intersect a road open to the public. This identification can be a simple Carsonite post with a "State Forest" decal. A road designation (number or name) can also be attached.

Primary fire/access roads serve as primary access to large blocks of property with many tracts. They generally feed into a network of secondary roads. Many year-round management activities require use of these roads, so they receive regular use even during poor ground conditions. The need for all-season access requires that these roads be built to a hard surface condition (gravel) and drainage structures for their entire length. They may occasionally be open for public use for seasonal activities, such as hunting, because of the hardened surface. These roads are often used to provide recreational access to persons with disabilities because of the hardened surface.

Secondary fire/access roads serve as access to portions of large blocks of ownership, or as the main access in small ownership blocks. These often serve multiple tracts, or feed into a

network of less used roads that each serves one or a few tracts. Secondary fire/access roads do not handle as much all-season traffic as the primary access roads. These roads are only occasionally used during periods of poor ground conditions. The road surface is mostly dirt, with gravel and geotextile fabric to harden scattered soft areas.

Tertiary fire/access roads serve as access to only one or a very few tracts. Any tertiary road is seldom used in poor ground conditions. Traffic over long periods of time is minimal. Gravel and geotextile fabric is occasionally used to strengthen soft spots in the road surface, usually in support of a specific management operation.

These roads are not part of a county or INDOT state highway system. Each road will receive a unique identifier by the property. The property will maintain a record on these roads, including major activities and expenses. Roadwork performed for access for timber sale(s) will have the expenses documented on the appropriate SF 200(s). Expenses on a road serving more than one sale may be split among the sales if appropriate.

### **Access for Persons with Disabilities**

The properties provide excellent outdoor recreation opportunities to the general public. The nature of many outdoor activities found on the properties make participation by persons with disabilities difficult or impossible without some accommodation. Persons with a mobility-limiting disability are those most likely to seek accommodation. Hunting, for example, is an activity that many people with disabilities can participate in if an accommodation is made for access.

Properties will have a written plan that identifies the location and management of a set of fire/access roads for access by persons with disabilities. These roads will be constructed and maintained with a hardened (gravel) surface for the entire length open for this use. This makes primary fire/access roads ideal for this use. But there may be secondary or tertiary fire/access that are used for this, provided they are sufficiently hardened. While hunting is the best established and most common recreational activity accommodated in this way, there are other uses that can or would benefit. Edibles gathering, bird watching, and nature viewing are some of the other activities that may or could be accommodated with a hardened series of roads. Further information on disabled user access can be found in the Recreation Procedures Manual.

### **Dispersed User Parking Areas**

State forests and forest recreation areas encourage dispersed recreational use of the properties. In order to promote such use and to enhance user experience, the properties will install and maintain parking units for dispersed users. Areas of state forest holdings will be evaluated for dispersed recreation demand and existing parking availability. Parking will be matched to expected use. Many parking units will be associated with physical features that serve

as draws. Others may provide regular access into large holdings. A typical parking unit will be associated with a gated fire/access road that receives recreational use for hiking, wildlife viewing, hunting, and edibles gathering. High demand situations may exist at lake sites. Where practical, parking units will be sited to avoid possible conflicts with neighboring private residences and private property in general.

The size and construction of the parking units should be appropriate for the site. These will be located along public roads. If the public road is a federal, state (not state forest), or county road, permission must be obtained from the Department of Transportation or the county prior to installation. A minimum sized unit should easily accommodate two vehicles. These units will have a gravel surface at a minimum. Posts or log frames may be used to mark the unit edges. A sign must identify the parking unit. The simplest sign would be a Carsonite post with a "State Forest" decal affixed. All parking unit construction must conform to appropriate clearances and permits.

### **Key Security**

Properties are often approached by public individuals or contractors for access to neighboring property across state forest, or for access to locked property facilities. Access permission across state forest land is covered in the section **Land-Use Permits**. In situations where access is granted through barriers (door, gate) that are locked with DNR locks, the properties shall never provide, loan, or distribute keys to the DNR locks to private individuals or contractors. This includes persons requiring access for disability reasons. If the barrier must be locked during portions of the entry period (such as nightly), the individual/contractor can supply a hardware store lock to use in a double-locking method where either the DNR lock or the hardware lock opens the barrier. If double-locking is not possible, the properties will purchase hardware store locks for temporary use on the barrier during the entry period, with one key going to the individual/contractor, and the property retaining spare keys. The properties will obtain hardware store locks for all gates/barriers requiring access for disabled persons. The properties should always maintain a supply of hardware store locks on hand for these purposes.

### **Limits to Public Access for Safety Reasons**

The wide variety of activities and situations often include situations that create safety hazards on properties. These can include construction activities as well as chemical treatments.

The properties by nature, have many inherent hazards that any reasonable person should be expected to know – things such as cliffs, bluffs, caves, dangerous animals, and biting insects are among the hazards. Other hazards are from human activity and may be less apparent to users. Some are from current management activities, and others are from past activities, and users may be expected to be less knowledgeable about the dangers. When the hazards are considered to be significant, efforts will be made to post hazards and/or limit user access.

Examples include pesticide spraying for tree plantings, old wells, recreation facility construction, and timber harvests.

### **Section Bullet Summary**

- Properties will coordinate with county road officials and INDOT for roads under those agencies jurisdiction that serve the properties.
- County roads can be vacated through the Department Director - contact Property Specialist.
- Property public roads are maintained through coordination with INDOT.
- Fire/access provide safety and management access to blocks of property.
- Some fire/access roads will be identified and developed for use by persons with disabilities.
- Properties will develop Dispersed User Parking Units for use by dispersed users on the various blocks of state ownership.
- Properties will never provide, loan or distribute keys to DNR locks to the public and/or contractors.
- Properties will post and/or close areas for public access if there are significant hazards.