

# CAPITOL COMMENTS



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## In with the New?

Adequate conservation funding has always been the most important priority for our profession. Relying on current funding models, most devised in the distant past, to address future conservation challenges is problematic and ill-advised at best.

Successful organizations and professions routinely question the status quo to improve their performance. Science by its very nature is a well-designed series of challenges to assumptions and widely held beliefs. This process is how the resource management profession has learned and evolved. In light of these truths, I would like to challenge us to rethink one of the oldest and best-known conservation funding sources—the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF).

However, before I propose what a future LWCF model might entail, we must celebrate the history and tremendous contributions the program has provided conservation nationwide. The LWCF program was conceived through the work of the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission, which after three years of study, produced a report in 1961 that recommended: comprehensive state- and federal-level planning for outdoor recreation, establishing the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation within the Department of Interior, and establishing a funding program for grants to the states and funds for expanding the federal estate. In 1964, Congress passed a bill that was signed into law creating what we now know as the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

Congress originally authorized LWCF at a level of \$100 million. This authorization level was raised throughout the early years of LWCF as Congress recognized the need and incorporated a portion of Outer Continental Shelf leasing revenue into the LWCF funding source. Funding was ultimately authorized at \$900 million in 1977 and remains at that level to date. To my knowledge, only once in 1998 did appropriations ever reach that authorized level. In fact, since the authorization of LWCF, Congress has under-appropriated,

that is shortchanged, the program by more than \$17 billion.

Available LWCF dollars were appropriated to the Department of Interior (primarily for the Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, and the National Park Service) and Department of Agriculture (for the Forest Service). A portion of these funds was allocated to states, and other funds were made available for federal land planning and acquisition. Early allocations to states were instrumental in recreation planning and ultimately acquisition of recreational lands that would be held in perpetuity for the public. A companion program for LWCF was established in 1978,

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the Urban Park and Recreation Recovery Program, which provided funds to local governments to acquire and develop outdoor recreation facilities in urban areas.

LWCF has provided funds for tens of thousands of projects at local, state, and federal levels. Some of this nation's most treasured landscapes, national parks, and national wildlife refuges have benefited from LWCF appropriations. The acquisition of these lands have provided outdoor recreation sites and facilities to be developed in every state in the nation. An unqualified success—unless we recognize the missed opportunities, controversies, and improvements in the funding model.

The proportion of stateside LWCF has diminished significantly since the early 1980s, and in some recent years it has been essentially zeroed out. Criticisms of LWCF are varied in nature and source. The LWCF focus on land acquisition provides red meat for those that claim the federal estate is currently too large and cannot be effectively

operated or managed due to the lack of operation and maintenance funds. In my state and federal experience, this is a difficult charge to counter. State park agencies complain about the lack of funding for state projects. State fish and wildlife agencies complain about the difficulty in securing LWCF funds. Few current members of Congress enthusiastically champion LWCF. I suspect that they may be more interested in a fund that is of their own design rather than one that was established before many of them were even born.

What if Congress would establish a new comprehensive, conservation fund? We could start with a frame of reference based on the 50 years of positive and negative outcomes of LWCF. We should recommend an expanded energy royalty base (off-shore, wind, solar, coal, oil and gas, etc.—the “all-of-the-above approach”). The new funding source should be established as a trust fund that is based on an established percentage of each revenue source. In addition to the land acquisition aspects of LWCF, we should incorporate dedicated state and federal funding levels for such things as operation and maintenance; species in need of conservation (apportioned through the Wildlife Conservation and Restoration Account); urban parks, refuge and recreation; historical preservation; and water quality and quantity infrastructure enhancements.

If we continue to rely on the current LWCF funding model, we are doomed to experience the lack of appropriated funding, plus the controversy and criticism that LWCF has—fairly or unfairly—garnered in the past. We need a bold and powerful new vision for a conservation funding system that expands the outcomes of conservation programs. I appreciate the political complexity and difficulty of replacing LWCF with a new comprehensive, conservation funding source. However, I also see little benefit to pursuing a path that is leading us essentially nowhere—a path that does not confront conservation challenges of the present and future. ■