

CAPITOL COMMENTS



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The Ecstasy and the Agony

Following months of anticipation and 51 listening sessions conducted around the nation, President Obama announced goals and recommendations for America's Great Outdoors initiative. In February, conservation and outdoor recreation

leaders from across the country gathered in the East Room of the White House to hear the president discuss "America's Great Outdoors: A Promise to Future Generations." I reported on the initiative's origin in the summer 2010 issue of *Fair Chase*, although there were no details available at that time. It is obvious this effort was designed to be the signature conservation legacy of the Obama administration. However, as we were waiting in line to attend the announcement, our discussions centered on the federal budget and Congressional efforts to cut approximately \$100 billion from discretionary spending. The juxtaposition of these two events, one of soaring optimism and the other of draconian reductions, provide foresight into the difficult path forward for conservation.

The overarching goal of America's Great Outdoors (AGO) initiative is to connect the American public with the outdoors. AGO recognizes the physical and mental health benefits associated with outdoor recreation. It also recognizes the impact of human population growth and the urbanization of our nation. In the last 100 years, our population has increased from 92 million to 308 million people in the United States. Coupled with this population growth was the loss of fish and wildlife habitat, approximately 1.6 million acres each year, due to

development and fragmentation. As presented, AGO reflects the nation's collective voice to address these issues at the federal, state, and local levels of government.

The three major themes of AGO are connecting Americans to the outdoors, conserving and restoring outdoor resources, and working together as public and private entities to achieve all the goals of the initiative. Specific goals for reconnecting citizens with the outdoors include: providing outdoor jobs and careers, enhancing recreational access and opportunities, raising the public's awareness and appreciation of the value and benefits of outdoor recreation and resources, and engaging young people in conservation efforts. Currently, more than 80 percent of our population resides in urban areas. There is no doubt that connecting those people to the outdoors is necessary but difficult to accomplish.

Conservation and restoration of outdoor resources, as presented by the AGO initiative, would result from enhancing the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). This enhancement would include full funding at \$900 million and establish strategic priorities for its use. Urban area parks and greenways would receive support from the AGO to promote their maintenance and development. AGO plans to conserve rural landscapes by working with ranchers, farmers, and forest landowners, primarily by using financial incentives and technical assistance. Conservation of federal parks, refuges, forests, lands and waters would be accomplished in the context of the larger landscape in which the federal land is located. In addition, the AGO initiative envisions federal lands and the larger landscape, which are more resilient to external stressors such as climate change.

The AGO initiative directs the federal government to improve its performance as a conservation partner with states, local governments, and conservation organizations. AGO recognizes the power of public-private

partnerships. With the ambitious agenda presented in the AGO initiative, these partnerships will be essential. In addition, the AGO relies heavily on full funding of the LWCF, something that has not occurred since its inception in 1964.

As I stated at the onset of this article, at the same time that conservationists and outdoor recreation leaders were daring to dream of the promises of the AGO initiative, members of Congress were offering more than 500 amendments to the continuing resolution for the current federal fiscal year. Among these amendments were funding reductions or eliminations to some of the most effective national conservation programs. Included in those amendments were the State Wildlife Grants, North American Wetlands Conservation Act, LWCF, Forest Legacy Program, and the Conservation Reserve Program. The president's budget request for next fiscal year was also met with strong criticism and promises of similar funding cuts.

The future of the AGO initiative and funding for long-standing conservation programs is unknown. Although I appreciate the presidential level of attention to conservation and outdoor recreation, it is difficult to remain optimistic given the current budget environment in Washington. We all know that our nation has to come to terms with its budget deficit, debt, interest expense, and a myriad of other domestic and foreign issues. Neither political party seems to have a consistent and successful solution or message to address these issues. Rather they seem content to strategize on how to assign blame to the other party. Let us hope that current and future conservation programs do not fall victim to political ideology. We are in a fight to maintain what currently exists and to institute what we really need. ■

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