

CAPITOL COMMENTS

Promises to Keep — Will They Be?



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Promises are easy to make and difficult to keep. We have just gone through an election year in which many were made, and the future scorecard will be of interest to resource managers. Vigilance and involvement in tracking programs will be necessary if wildlife are to continue prospering. Recent announcements by the Administration and long-term inaction by Congress threaten wildlife and make wildlifers nervous—how will we respond?

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), the most successful and popular private land conservation program ever, is being reimplemented under the 1996 Farm Act. Wildlife professionals across America are

devoting more time than ever because of the dramatic potential to enhance wildlife, fish, and other resources. In only 11 years previously, CRP has measurably reversed long-term population declines of game birds, ground-nesting songbirds, and other wildlife. Ducks have rebounded in record fashion, and the outlook is excellent for continuing these benefits.

Incomprehensibly, 10 days after an historic meeting between wildlife organizations (including Boone & Crockett) and Vice President Al Gore and other Administration officials, the White House announced that it plans to divert

\$100 million from CRP to pay for the buy-out of the New World Mine near Yellowstone Park. This came after both private and public statements from the highest levels in the Administration praising the partnership with conservationists that has led to the CRP program and “the strongest conservation Farm Bill ever.”

At the 62nd North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference, speaking for the Administration, Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman announced the intent to divert funds from CRP. Opposition has been widespread and bipartisan. Organizations ranging from wildlife management groups to environmentalists are uniting in opposition.

On its face, this controversy is an attempt by the Administration to divert much needed private land conservation funds from CRP to solve a public land and public policy dilemma regarding the New World Mine itself. Not only would this action undermine hard won conservation incentive programs of the 1996 Farm Act, but it would establish the undesirable precedent that conservation on private land is less important than on public land. As important as public land issues are, 70 percent of the nation's land is privately owned. The future of many wildlife species, and much of our hunting lies with the private landowner.

This Administration's record on CRP from the past is not clean. Emergency haying and grazing declarations have been made in every year since CRP began, but in 1996, the Clinton Administration outdid itself. In response to serious drought in the Southwest, the Administration inappropriately opened all of the CRP acreage nationwide, to emergency haying and grazing. The result was a disaster for wildlife

that is being paid for this spring across the prairies from Montana to Minnesota. That action removed vegetative cover from CRP that would have provided nesting cover for pheasant, grouse, partridge, and songbird populations to recover from this year's extremely hard winter. Pheasant losses in some places have been as high as 90 percent, but they will find no residual cover on much of CRP because of this action.

The deeper problem with the New World Mine is the 1872 Mining Law, which allows private corporations to pay your government almost nothing for the right to mine the public's mineral resources, but also to get title to the public land from which the minerals are extracted, by paying as little as \$2.50 per acre. Stories are rampant throughout the West of corporations buying land, mining the minerals, and selling the land at huge profits to developers. There are hundreds of patented mining claims like this awaiting action, but little prospect of a rational change in this antiquated law.

Let's be clear about what is going on here. While many cheered the President's announcement last year that the New World Mine would not be allowed at the edge of Yellowstone National Park, what is happening is no bargain. A Canadian-owned company, Crown Butte Mines, Inc., has legal claim to national forest land near the park. The claim reportedly contains \$600 million worth of gold, silver and copper. For not digging up the public's land and the public's minerals transferred to it under the 1872 Mining Law, the Clinton Administration is prepared to divert \$100 million from CRP to pay off Crown Butte Mines. The sportsmen of America are being taken to the cleaners again by

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unkept promises on CRP. Maybe that is what it will take to galvanize action. Perhaps wildlife have to lose directly more than the direct impacts of one mine. Perhaps losing big time will spread the pain around and get our attention.

The logical place to find money to solve problems like this, given that the Congress is likely to leave the problem in place and let it recur, is the Land and Water Conservation Fund. Established in 1964 as a promise to the American people to protect our heritage of wild places, it is a promise largely unkept. Royalty receipts from offshore oil and gas extraction, are supposed to be deposited in a fund each year totaling over \$900 million, to be used to provide a secure heritage of lands for outdoor recreation for America. Congress has been reluctant to appropriate the full amount from the fund for its intended use. Instead, in recent years, all but \$100 million or so has been diverted to the black hole of deficit reduction. What sense does it make to take royalties from extraction of a non-renewable resource owned by all the people, and not provide a tangible benefit in response? Those monies and the promise made by the Congress to the American people, should be kept through use of the Land and Water Conservation Fund as it has been intended.

Two movements have begun on behalf of the Land and Water Conservation Fund that bear watching. A group called Americans for our Heritage and Recreation met in early February this year, and more than 100 organizations committed to what is likely to be a long-term effort to reinvigorate the Land and Water Conservation Fund. This is a serious intent by committed people representing recreation interests from the inner cities to the wild lands of America. It can be an

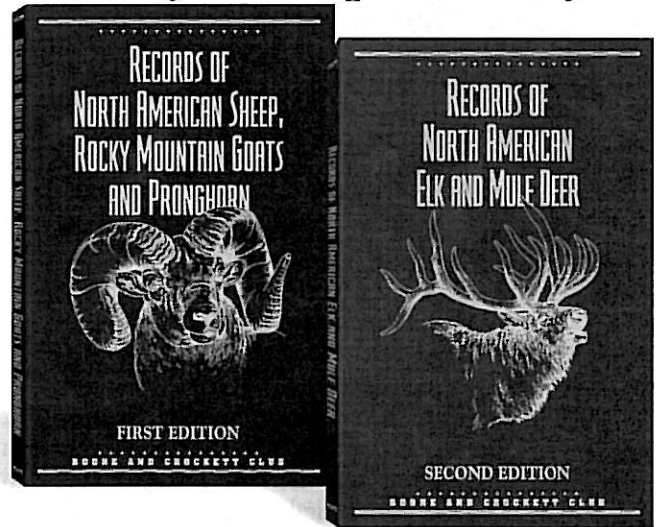
effort that is unifying across the broad spectrum of conservation interests. A second effort to address the Land and Water Conservation Fund and the recreational needs of Americans is being discussed by staff working for Senator Frank Murkowski (AK), a Boone and Crockett Club member. Senator Murkowski's staff have met with an array of conservation organizations and indicated the likelihood of workshops to develop potential legislation to try to meet the needs for outdoor recreation.

Finally, there is a groundswell of interest in what is being called the Public Lands Funding Initiative. The federal investment through the budget for natural resources has been reduced almost by half since 1980. This is reflected in huge backlogs of hundreds of millions of dollars needed to maintain and operate the National Wildlife Refuge System and National Parks. Each year wildlife and other groups fight for small pieces of a shrinking pie once the money gets to the Appropriations Subcommittees that fund land management agencies. This initiative is an attempt to increase the initial allocation from the Budget Committee to the 602(b) account for the Interior and Related Agencies budget. This would allow greater funding to be available for distribution to the public land agencies which affect wildlife programs the most.

The proposed raid on CRP, the long-term failure to meet the promise by the Congress to the American people of the Land and Water Conservation Fund, and continuing problems with funding for the natural resource agencies that manage our public wildlife resources and habitats are threats to wildlife and future hunting opportunity. Conservationists must work to assure that these unkept promises are rectified.

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