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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BEFORE THE
HOUSE NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE
ON
H.R. ___, THE PROTECTING AMERICA'S RECREATION AND CONSERVATION
ACT**

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Chairman Bishop, Ranking Member Grijalva and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss one of America's keystone conservation programs, the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). The Administration supports the permanent reauthorization of the LWCF to sustain our Nation's outdoor heritage and commitment to providing resources to Federal land managers, states, and local communities who want to invest in conservation, historic preservation, and recreation opportunities. The Administration believes that the foundational principles of the LWCF remain as valid today as fifty years ago. What remains left undone is meeting our commitment to the American people to provide \$900 million annually to LWCF, which is why the Administration supports full mandatory funding for this program.

Today, the Committee is considering the discussion draft bill, The Protecting America's Recreation and Conservation Act. The Department will provide views on the legislation after the bill's introduction; however, if introduced in its current form, the Administration would oppose the legislation.

Benefits of the Land and Water Conservation Fund

The LWCF is regarded as one of the most successful programs for public outdoor recreation and conservation investments in our history. By taking a small portion of the money collected from oil and gas development in federal offshore waters and investing it into conservation and recreation projects for the benefit of all Americans, the LWCF gives back part of what we take from nature by conserving public lands and creating outdoor recreation opportunities in communities in nearly every single county across the country. The LWCF federal program supports the acquisition of public lands and waters – focused on inholdings within national parks, forests, wildlife refuges and recreation areas and voluntary conservation on state and private land. The State Grants program provides matching grants to state and tribal governments for the acquisition and creation of public parks and other outdoor recreation sites.

From building urban parks and playgrounds, trails, and boat ramps, to protecting priceless landscapes, iconic places like National Parks and Civil War battlefields and providing access to

important wildlife habitat, the LWCF is one of the best tools we have to enrich America's great outdoors for all Americans.

Conservation Benefits

The LWCF program is a critical conservation tool. Each year, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and National Park Service (NPS) acquire land from willing sellers in fee title or conservation easement through the LWCF. The acquired lands provide improved habitat for wildlife, and often enhance resource management capability. Fee title acquisitions generate economic benefits for local communities and provide the public with opportunities to hunt, fish, observe and photograph wildlife, and enjoy environmental education and interpretation.

For example, in Arkansas, the 71,000-acre Cache River National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge), a Wetland of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention and the most important wintering area for mallard ducks in North America, has an active land acquisition program. Willing landowners see the Refuge as an opportunity for their lands. Many landowners consider their land to be a part of a conservation legacy to have it conserved in perpetuity by the Refuge. Much of the land within the approved acquisition boundary is of marginal agricultural value, due to perpetual flooding, and landowners appreciate having an alternative opportunity to sell their lands. The FWS invested \$11,854,799 in LWCF funds to acquire over 10,000 acres of land at the Cache River National Wildlife Refuge helping to return upwards of 25,000 acres of flood prone, low-productivity agricultural lands to bottomland hardwood habitats. There is broad public support in the community for reforestation of these lands, lands that support a healthy forest that will be available for hunting, fishing, and wildlife viewing – at no charge. In 2014 alone, the Refuge welcomed over 140,000 hunting visits and over 135,000 fishing visits.

Economic Benefits for Communities

The LWCF is a popular and effective conservation program *and* it is a powerful economic driver. According to the Outdoor Industry Association, the overall outdoor recreation economy on Federal, state and local lands and waters generates \$646 billion in consumer spending and over 6 million jobs in the United States annually. In 2014, our national parks, national wildlife refuges, national monuments and other public lands managed by the Department hosted an estimated 423 million recreational visits in 2014 – up from 407 million in 2013 – and these visits alone supported \$42 billion in economic output and about 375,000 jobs nationwide.

Timely acquisition of important natural areas today can help avoid much higher costs to taxpayers in future years by protecting natural resources with economic value to the public and the economic benefits for communities. An independent analysis of the return on the investment from the LWCF for Federal land acquisition found that every \$1 invested returns \$4 in economic value for local communities. Dollar-for-dollar, the LWCF program is one of the most effective Government programs we have.

One striking example of the program's economic benefits is in Colorado, where the State invested over \$1 million from the LWCF to acquire land and compensate families whose lives

were impacted by the devastating Big Thompson flood of 1976. The flood plains are now home to four new county parks – popular destinations for anglers, birdwatchers, and families – instead of vulnerable structures. When another major flood hit the area in 2013, Larimer County avoided an estimated \$16 million in property damages

Another illustration of the economic impact of the LWCF is in Southeast of Moab where the 90,000-acre Colorado Riverway Special Recreation Management Area (SRMA) is one of Utah's busiest recreation areas. Drawn by the spectacular red rock scenery, over 800,000 visitors annually enjoy the scenic and recreational opportunities offered within this area, including 60,000 visitors who float the "daily" stretch of the Colorado River that flows through the SRMA. The river is an important economic asset to the local community as it supports many local river-running businesses.

Reduced Costs for Land Management

Acquiring Federal public lands protects important natural and cultural resources and secures access for outdoor recreation, and it often delivers an additional financial benefit: cost savings for American taxpayers. When acquisition is the best tool for land management, acquisitions almost exclusively focus on inholdings. During the past five years, over 99 percent of the Department's acquisitions were inholdings, already within the approved acquisition boundaries of existing park or wildlife refuge units. By policy, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Park Service are required to acquire parcels within the boundaries of park or wildlife refuge units. The BLM's manual prioritizes inholdings for acquisitions. The acquisition of inholdings can reduce maintenance and manpower costs by reducing boundary conflicts, simplifying resource management activities, and easing access to and through public lands for agency employees and the public.

For example, at San Diego National Wildlife Refuge in California, the purchase of inholdings through the LWCF reduced management costs while conserving wildlife habitat corridors. The Fish and Wildlife Service added ten small, but important, inholdings to the refuge, which helped consolidate ownership in the heart of the refuge and protect areas of coastal sagebrush and chaparral that support a variety of rare plants and animals. These key acquisitions reduced costs in several areas: Wildlife surveys can now be conducted without having to work around "donut holes" in land ownership - saving staff time and providing better information for management. Refuge users were benefited because the Refuge could incorporate existing public use trails instead of re-routing trails around private lands and further fragmenting essential habitat. Substantial fire cost savings were realized. Refuge fire-fighters will not have to do separate planning and pre-suppression activities by constructing and maintaining individual fire/fuel breaks. Importantly, if a fire occurs, fire-fighters will not have to place themselves in danger to protect these inholdings. Overall, the San Diego NWR Complex has estimated that purchase of these inholdings resulted in an annual savings of approximately \$40,000 in operations, maintenance and fire costs.

Proposed NPS acquisitions at Alaska's Lake Clark National Park and Preserve would yield significant cost savings over time from reduced firefighting needs. The NPS's acquisition of native allotment tracts that are currently designated as high priority for firefighting purposes

would reduce the need for firefighting resources in the area, yielding an estimated savings of \$60,000 per tract during fire events.

Supporting Local Priorities

The LWCF has supported projects in every state and nearly every county in the United States. Federal acquisitions projects are planned collaboratively with local stakeholders, and often depend on the significant support of State or local government, or of locally-based non-profit conservation partners.

The Administration's strategic approach to using the LWCF land acquisition funds includes the Collaborative LWCF initiative. This interagency program brings federal partners together with local stakeholders to identify large natural areas where the LWCF can achieve the most important shared conservation and community goals in the highest priority landscapes. The Rivers of the Chesapeake is one of eight proposals included in the President's budget that uses the LWCF process as a tool to enhance federal-state collaboration as part of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement. The 2016 budget proposes \$33.3 million derived from the LWCF to protect high-value forests that contribute to water quality, add dozens of new public access sites, and providing critical habitats for fish and migratory birds.

A significant driver for the Chesapeake's listing in the President's budget was the Rivers of the Chesapeake Collaborative LWCF proposal, which was guided by the Chesapeake Conservancy. This bipartisan proposal carried the support of four governors, nine senators, 17 representatives, six American Indian tribes, 34 nonprofits and numerous local elected officials. This is but one example of how the LWCF supports broad collaboration around locally driven priorities and more efficient and coordinated ways of investing in, restoring, and managing the country's natural and cultural resources.

This kind of collaborative approach can be seen in central Wyoming where the vegetative corridor hugging the banks of the North Platte River represents the rarest of Western ecosystems, riparian wetland habitat. The North Platte River Special Recreation Management Area includes a 45-mile segment of the North Platte River between Pathfinder National Wildlife Refuge and the City of Casper. The North Platte River is regarded by the Wyoming Game & Fish Department as a "Blue Ribbon/Class I" trout fishery. Minutes away from Casper's 50,000 residents, an intermingled land ownership pattern stymies public access to and use of the River, and local outdoor enthusiasts and area visitors have turned to the BLM to address their need for access. BLM investments to secure public access along the North Platte complement state and local efforts, including the popular Platte River Parkway, Casper's highly successful "greenway" project initiated in 1982, and public fishing access easements purchased by the Wyoming Game and Fish Department.

Importance of Reauthorization and Permanent Funding for the LWCF

We live in an era when people — especially young people — are increasingly disconnected from the great outdoors. If we are going to raise a new generation with healthy lifestyles and a connection to nature, we must provide more opportunities for, and access to, affordable outdoor recreation, particularly in urban areas where 80 percent of Americans live.

The LWCF is comprised of numerous programs to support conservation and outdoor recreation, including land acquisition, conservation easements, grants to states and localities, and partnerships that leverage funds to achieve conservation objectives and provide public, recreational access, historic preservation, and economic development.

The stateside LWCF program provided over 40,000 grants since 1965 to states and tribal governments for acquisition, development, and planning of outdoor recreation in the United States. The \$4.1 billion in grants, which matched provide at least \$8.2 billion to support purchase and protection of 3 million acres of recreation lands and over 29,000 projects to develop recreation facilities in every state and territory of the Nation. Seventy-five percent of the funds went to locally sponsored projects to provide close-to-home recreation opportunities that are readily accessible to America's youth, adults, senior citizens, veterans and persons with disabilities including our wounded warriors.

The Department utilizes the LWCF for land acquisition and disposition as authorized in the now expired Federal Lands Transaction Facilitation Act, to help to right-size the Federal conservation estate, consolidate checkerboard ownership, and conserve areas rich in ecological and cultural diversity. As a result, the Federal estate actually decreased by 18 million acres since 1990, according to the Congressional Research Service.

The Administration appreciates that periodic review and assessment of laws and programs ensures their continued efficiency and effectiveness. Based on our review of the program, the Administration's budget proposed full mandatory funding for the LWCF in its current form. The LWCF is a highly successful program. But the job is not done. For example Congress authorized 197 new units to the National Park Service since the authorization of the LWCF in 1964 of which there still remains 1.6 million acres of land with an estimated value of \$2.1 billion that still needs to be protected. This land represents the acquisition of inholdings in the boundaries of parks that Congress created.

The Administration believes that the Act's promise to the American people to use a small portion of offshore oil and gas revenues to invest in public outdoor recreation and conservation is just as important, if not more important, today as it was 50 years ago. Efforts to direct resources away for the programs original purpose are misplaced. The LWCF was put in place to conserve natural areas, lands and waters, as well as our culturally significant history, and to provide recreational opportunities for all Americans across the United States.

Access to our nation's public lands and waters for recreation – including hunting and fishing – is a national priority. One of the strengths of the LWCF is its flexible approach to conservation and recreational access to public lands for sportsmen and women. Agencies work with willing landowners to secure easements that provide public access and consolidate federal tracts of land so that the public has intact spaces to hike, hunt and fish.

The Administration's strategic approach to using the LWCF land acquisition funds includes the Collaborative LWCF initiative. This interagency program brings DOI and USDA together with local stakeholders to identify large natural areas where the LWCF funds can achieve the most

important shared conservation and community goals in the highest priority landscapes. Conserving large scale natural areas provides multiple resource and economic benefits to the public, including clean drinking water, recreational opportunities, protected habitat for at-risk and game species and jobs generated on and off these lands. Since the Collaborative Initiative was launched in 2013, investments totaling \$116 million have conserved critical landscapes in Montana's Crown of the Continent, the California Desert, and the longleaf pine ecosystem of South Carolina, Florida and Georgia.

The draft bill proposes overly prescriptive, top-down, and arbitrary limits on federal land acquisition, which would undermine efforts to create, protect and preserve public access to some of our nation's most important outdoor spaces. The draft bill would also seek to redirect money to promote offshore oil and gas exploration, representing a departure from a foundational principle of the Act – to use a small portion of offshore oil and gas revenue to invest in outdoor recreation and conservation for the benefit of the American public. We would oppose any effort to alter the LWCF in these fundamental ways.

Conclusion

The Administration appreciates the thoughtful proposals introduced in the House and Senate that enjoy bipartisan support to reauthorize and fund the LWCF, such as H.R. 1814, a bill introduced by Representative Grijalva and cosponsored by 195 bipartisan members of the House, which would permanently reauthorize the LWCF. We look forward to continuing to work with Congress to reauthorize and fully fund this important program that has successfully served to protect and conserve our Nation's cultural and ecological resources for the past 50 years, in addition to supporting local economies

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. I would be pleased to answer any questions you or other members of the Committee may have.