

Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program - Little Known Program

By Cecilia Vogt, guest to the Yakima Herald Republic
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Since 1980, we have all watched the Yakima Greenway grow from a vision to the "Jewel of Yakima," providing parks and pathways for everyone to enjoy. Precious land along our river corridor has been protected, and people have a wonderful place to go to enjoy healthy outdoor recreation and get closer to nature. Much of this good work would have been impossible without the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program, or WWRP. This little-known program has also provided many opportunities to our state parks. As your local state parks commissioner and former director of the Yakima Greenway, I've been fortunate to work closely with the WWRP and take advantage of these funds for the betterment of our community and state.

The Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program is a state grant program that helps local communities create new parks and protect wildlife habitat. Since 1990, a total of \$408 million has been provided for more than 650 neighborhood parks, ball fields, trails, local beaches, wildlife habitat and state parks.

Local communities apply for grants, and a competitive process is used to assess which projects should be funded. The governor and state Legislature set the funding level in the state's construction budget and approve the final list of projects. To date, \$1,557,365 has come to the Yakima area for the Greenway and city and county parks. This year, through the WWRP grant program, we have the opportunity to build the Sunny-View Skate Park, create access to Tim's Pond, and preserve 3,200 acres of the Tieton River Canyon.

Every day our population continues to grow, translating into nonstop development in our rural and urban areas. In addition, we continue to see shrinking city and county budgets. Rescuing, protecting and preserving our parks and recreation areas are key to the vitality of our community and maintaining our quality of life. Our communities have a responsibility to care for wildlife and outdoor recreation areas for our families and future generations.

I take that responsibility seriously. I hope you share in that concern and will join me in voicing your support.

The Washington Wildlife and Recreation Coalition advocates for state funding for the WWRP grant program. This highly diverse group of citizen activists and leaders represents business, recreation, labor, fishing, hunting and conservation interests. The coalition is very effective, but it needs our help in communicating to our legislators how important this program is for our community.

Gov. Christine Gregoire's proposed capital budget includes \$45 million for the WWRP. With legislative support, this number could increase to \$60 million, preserving many more special places around the state, including 4,640 acres of critical habitat for elk, mule deer, and bighorn sheep in the upper Yakima River flood plain near the city of Yakima.

If you have a favorite place that needs protection or additional enhancements, contact your local park director about a WWRP grant or contact the coalition (www.WildlifeRecreation.org) to learn about projects in your community. Also, consider contacting the governor and your local state legislators to thank them for supporting the WWRP grant program.

The WWRP helps provide the oxygen that breathes life into our community parks and protects our wildlife. It helps make our communities a great place to live, work and play.

Cecilia Vogt is a Washington state parks commissioner and former executive director of the Yakima Greenway Foundation.