



Wildlife Gets a Legislative Win: State Doubles Funding to Protect Public Lands

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FEDERAL WAY -- West of the freeway, past the fast-food pit stops, the vast shopping mall parking lots and manicured cul-de-sacs, a narrow dirt road peels off the blacktop into a 25-acre swath of unkempt ferns, big leaf maples and evergreens that somehow escaped the suburban expansion that continues to put the squeeze on most of Western Washington.

Step out of the car and into air that feels about 15 degrees cooler in the shade under the dense canopy above the winding path that wraps along the ravine and you'll hear songbirds (and an occasional jet) and smell nearby Puget Sound.

Welcome to Camp Kilworth.

Since 1932, it's been a place for young Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts to step out of the city and hone their skills for the big woods. Now it's one of the 135 places on which the state is spending \$100 million to protect for public recreation and wildlife.

This year, the Legislature doubled the amount it is spending on land acquisition and development for wildlife habitat and recreational access.

The money is going to Washington Wildlife and Recreation grant program projects, ranging from \$4.7 million expenditure in the Methow Valley watershed in Okanogan County to \$236,000 for a 50-acre natural area along the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River near North Bend.

The increased investment level for wildlife and recreation access is seen as a huge victory for the environmental community, which made it one of their top four priorities going into this year's legislative session.

Joanna Grist, executive director of the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Coalition, said that since 1990, the state's capital budget has included about \$50 million each biennium for the program, for a total of \$450 million invested so far.

"It's the largest investment in parks and natural areas in Washington's history," Grist said. "It's a huge win for us and we are extremely pleased about it. It shows that there is a great demand, there are a lot of great projects out there that need funding, and it shows that we have strong bipartisan support for it."

The capital budget passed with overwhelming bipartisan support in both the House and the Senate.

Grist said the program originally was set up because of declining federal appropriations for habitat and recreation. She said the organization does not select the projects, only advocates for the appropriations.

Each of the 135 projects was selected through the Washington Wildlife and Recreation competitive grant program. In many cases the city, counties or state agency applying for the grant also contributes. This year, there were more than 200 applications for the grants.

In the case of Camp Kilworth, for example, the city of Federal Way will contribute \$2 million for the project to preserve the section of Puget Sound shoreline that is habitat for chinook salmon and other wildlife. The state has provided \$1 million for the project.

The property sale and proposed park development in Federal Way is still in negotiation.

But with Washington's population growing every year, Grist said the need is much greater still.

"We need more places for people to get outdoors, for kids to play outside, and we also need more habitat to be protected from encroaching development," she said.

In addition, many of the projects -- totaling \$21 million -- are designed to protect and restore the waters of the Sound.

Tom Geiger of the Washington Environmental Council said the increased investment this year is largely a result of a much more organized lobbying effort by the environmental community.

As opposed to years past, when various environmental groups came to Olympia with individual priorities, the groups coordinated their efforts through the Priorities for a Healthy Washington coalition.

The environmental community approached the Legislature with a focused set of its four priorities, and lawmakers passed all four: the \$100 million funding for the Wildlife and Recreation program, a Clean Air/Clean Fuels bill, a Puget Sound restoration plan and a ban on toxic flame retardants.

Because they limited the number of proposals to four and chose issues that connect with the general public, the coalition said lawmakers were much more supportive, and the coalition's success rate is increasing.

"The Legislature has done great work for the environment this year. The success of all four coalition priorities speaks volumes about the priorities in Olympia," said Clifford Traisman, state lobbyist for the Washington Environmental Council.

At Camp Kilworth, Ranger Eric Conger and volunteers still maintain the BB gun and archery ranges, keep the nettles and brambles trimmed back from the trails and do their best to make sure the camp looks the same this year as last.

In his 17 years as a ranger, Conger says a lot has changed. Where the camp used to be a plot of forest within a much larger wild and wooded area, development has come on hard and now the camp is more like an island of nature in a sea of subdivisions.

"Now we are basically surrounded," he said.

Conger said he hates to see the Scouts sell the parcel where he's watched eagles learn to fly, finches return with the seasons and countless merit badges earned.

The city is getting an incredible deal, he said, and if they decide they need a live-in groundskeeper, "I'll do it for free," he said.

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