

No Reason to Cut Funding for Outdoor Enhancement

Op-Ed: Lee Fouts, Tacoma News Tribune, March 17, 2009
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In 2009, Pierce County has the opportunity to receive \$5.8 million in state funds for projects that will create local outdoor recreation opportunities all over the county.

These projects are eligible to receive funding from the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program, or WWRP, a state grant program that funds parks, wildlife habitat and working farms. The Legislature will determine whether or not our projects are funded when they decide how much to allocate to WWRP grants.

In 1989, former Govs. Dan Evans and Mike Lowry co-founded the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Coalition, a group of business, conservation and community leaders. This diverse group recognized that population growth, if left unchecked, would overtake landscapes that support wildlife and outdoor recreation.

To address this concern, the coalition persuaded the Legislature to create the WWRP grant program as an ongoing source of funds for conservation. Applicants go through a rigorous review by a state agency that uses independent experts to competitively rank each project.

The coalition is asking the Legislature to renew its support for the WWRP at the \$100 million level to provide grants for 115 projects. Pierce County would receive grants for the following projects:

- Wollochet Bay Estuary – Protecting a public waterfront that includes a boat launch, dock and tidelands.
- Chambers Creek – Providing public access to more than two miles of Puget Sound shoreline.
- Devil's Head – Protecting 98 acres at the south end of the Key Peninsula for nonmotorized boats, kayaking, trails and hiking.
- Interurban Trail – Adding one mile through the city of Pacific.

- Wapato Lake Trail – Completing a multipurpose trail system around the lake while enhancing water quality.
- Wright Park – Creating a children’s water spray park in Tacoma.
- Tacoma Nature Center – Creating a children’s nature exploration area.
- Knight Forest – Acquiring and preserving 18 acres next to Harbor Family Park on the Gig Harbor Peninsula.
- Minter Creek – Protecting fish and wildlife habitat near Gig Harbor.
- West Farm – Preserving a 60-acre farm near Orting that provides critical open space and agricultural land.

If the WWRP is cut in half, Pierce County loses funding for the second half of the projects on this list at a time when they are most highly needed by the public.

For this year’s round of funding, the Legislature received a record high number of applications for WWRP grants, demonstrating that the demand for this program is greater than it has ever been in the past. Yet the state is proposing to cut WWRP funding in half, providing grants for only 17 percent of the projects.

It’s true that our state is in a budget crisis, but WWRP projects are capital projects that are paid for over decades, so they don’t compete with classroom sizes and human services.

In fact, a quarter of the WWRP’s projects are development projects that would create jobs. The rest are acquisitions and conservation easements that will put dollars into the pockets of local landowners, helping to stimulate the local economy.

In these challenging economic times outdoor recreation becomes even more important. Washington families may not have money for vacations or a night at the movies, but they can always get out and spend time together in parks and on trails, along the beaches of Puget Sound, and in the wilderness, camping and hunting.

As an avid outdoorsman, I support the Coalition and the WWRP because I care deeply about protecting wildlife habitat so that my kids and future grandchildren will enjoy the same benefits I did when I was growing up. As a father, I see the WWRP as an investment in quality of life.

Over the past 20 years, the WWRP grant program has protected nearly 1,000 parks and wilderness areas across the state, granting \$620 million to

communities in need. Pierce County has received \$28.5 million to support parks and other local outdoor recreation opportunities.

The state can continue to make wise investments in protecting our way of life now and for future generations by sustaining WWRP funding and working with our local agencies to apply for future WWRP grants.

Lee Fouts of Puyallup serves on the board of directors for the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Coalition.