



A Program That Pays Us All Back

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There are many government programs where the benefits are questionable; some where benefits are nonexistent. There are few with benefits you can see clearly, right out your window or just down the street. The Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program is one. It may be the best government program you've never heard of.

It started in 1989 with broad coalition of unlikely partners -- conservationists, business, sportsmen, families -- formed to wrest funds from the Legislature to preserve open land and provide for human enjoyment of it. They thought it a wise investment to preserve our dwindling resources of land for human recreation and wildlife. The Legislature responded, and the program has been immensely successful, with more than \$450 million appropriated in 15 years and distributed in grants, money doubled by local matching funds.

The program, overseen by the Interagency Committee for Outdoor Recreation, has helped fund such local projects as Rotary Park, the Cashmere city pool, Lakeside Park in Chelan, Leavenworth Skate Park and Peshastin Pinnacles State Park. It helped preserve habitat and natural areas at Larkspur Meadows, the White River, Sagebrush Flats and many other places. Since it began, the program has sent nearly \$10 million to Chelan and Douglas counties.

Now comes the program's first advocates, the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Coalition, co-chaired by former governors Dan Evans and Mike Lowry, asking the Legislature to do more. Twice as much, to be precise. They want the \$50 million appropriation of the current biennium to be increased to \$100 million in the next.

Doubling appropriations from the General Fund is not routine, but the needs will far exceed even that. This year the state has already received \$150 million in project requests. The program's abilities have been lessened by inflation while needs have increased with the state's population. To keep the good going, more must be done.

It is an efficient program. The local governments, state and federal agencies receiving grants go through a competitive, and notably strict process, and match every grant with

their own resources. They will tell you that money invested in parks, recreation and conservation pays financial dividends by improving communities and their quality of life.

Consider just one example. There are hundreds of Wenatchee residents using Rotary Park every day. It would not have been built, its backers say, without a grant from the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program.

This is one case where doubling an appropriation seems like a sensible investment. We know, because we can see the returns, very close by.

This is the opinion of The Wenatchee World and its Editorial Board: Editor and Publisher Rufus Woods, Managing Editor Gary Jasinek and Editorial Page Editor Tracy Warner.