



For Conservation, a Bad Choice

By Bill Pope and Bob Manetta
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In what seems like only a small change in policy, merely a tiny maneuver in a year of drastic cuts, the Washington state Senate has managed to jeopardize the integrity of a 21-year program and threaten a key part of Washington state heritage: our farmland.

When we think of farms in Washington we think of the wineries, apples and wheat that we have become famous for. But what we don't often stop to think about is the land we farm and the jobs it provides. And when development and subdivision threaten working farms in Washington, they have one place to turn to save their land — and the jobs those of those who work it — from becoming vacation homes or suburban sprawl: the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program (WWRP), which funds high-priority land conservation projects across the state.

Earlier this month, the Washington House of Representatives released its proposed capital construction budget, resurrecting the WWRP, which had been slated for elimination in the governor's budget, and providing over \$4 million in funding for six key farmland preservation projects in Washington. While the House budget only funds the WWRP at \$50 million — that's a 50 percent drop from previous years — the proposal is a victory for outdoor recreation, natural habitats and farmland all over our state in these tough times.

But all that has been put at risk by the counter-proposal outlined by the Washington Senate. Its proposal doesn't just further decimate the WWRP's funding by slicing an additional \$30 million from the House's proposal, it also moves \$16 million into a different fund for hand-chosen projects, in key districts, rather than funding projects based on their merits. And by doing so the Senate managed to cut every single farmland preservation project in Washington.

Locally, the Senate's budget would cut four projects in Chelan and Okanogan counties, which the House had proposed. In addition to the parks, trails and wilderness projects that would not be funded if the Senate's proposal prevails, the budget also eliminates a project that would have saved the Ellis Barnes Livestock Co. in Okanogan County. By changing the independent, merit-based criteria for selecting projects, we not only risk losing another local farm, but the opportunity to receive funding for future farmland, orchard and livestock projects.

The WWRP funds projects statewide based on an independent ranking criteria that decides on the best projects, a process that demonstrates integrity and competition. This means every community has an equal opportunity to get a project funded, whether it is saving the migration grounds of Washington's mule deer, creating parks for our children to play at, or making sure farms stay in production and protected from developers. It also means there is no chance of earmarking politically popular but less critical projects.

The Senate proposal sets a dangerous precedent: If legislators are allowed to cherry-pick pet projects in tough times, what is the point of a time-tested, objective, non-political ranking process? And if we allow politics to seep into the WWRP, does it mean that farm land will continue to lose out forever?

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