



# The Olympian

## Funds for Wildlife, Recreation Program are Worthwhile

EDITORIAL - The Olympian  
October 27, 2010

One of the few bright spots of the 2009 legislative session was the decision to set aside \$70 million in the state construction budget for wildlife habitat, farmland preservation and recreation opportunities.

Even in difficult financial times, lawmakers recognized the need to preserve habitat and special parcels of property for future generations. The \$70 million funded 95 projects.

The broad-based Washington Wildlife and Recreation Coalition will be back before lawmakers in January asking for \$100 million to fund another long list of important projects.

Lawmakers will not be choosing between the worthwhile projects and smaller class sizes for kids or health care for the poor or pay increases for state employees. Funds for the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program come out of the state's construction budget, which is financed through the sale of bonds. These are not general fund dollars.

Proponents for the spending include hunting and fishing groups, the Audubon Society, organizations of soccer parents, farm and timber land owners, real estate agents and advocates for trails, boat launches and swim beaches. They are proponents because that's precisely the kind of projects that have been completed.

It's an incredibly valuable program because it helps set aside land for habitat restoration and conservation projects — land that otherwise might be lost to development.

Prior to 1989 when the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program was created at the request of former Govs. Mike Lowry, a Democrat, and Dan Evans, a Republican, the state was spending an average of just \$2 million per year on land acquisition.

Since the inception of the program, the state has set aside \$620 million for 1,016 projects spanning over 350,000 acres. City and county matching funds have added \$444 million, bringing total spending to more than \$1 billion.

That's an incredible investment in Washington's future.

Thurston County has received its fair share of funding. We count 48 different grant approvals since that first funding cycle when the state set aside \$53 million in 1990.

South Sound projects include acquisition money for Ward Lake Park, funds for Pioneer Park in Tumwater, Lacey's 45th Avenue Park, Capitol Lake Park in Olympia and Camp Kenneydell Park on Black Lake in the rural portion of the county. The Chehalis Western Trail has benefitted from the grant program, as have Millersylvania State Park, Woodard Bay conservation area, the McLane Creek Nature Trail and Mima Mounds — just to name a few.

Projects on the list if lawmakers pony up the entire \$100 million requested for 2011-13 include acquisition of 67 acres for the Carpenter Road Community Park, purchase of the Deep Lake Resort adjacent to Millersylvania, and conservation of 150 acres by the Capitol Land Trust in the Budd/Henderson area.

Eric Erler, executive director of the land trust, said the state has a limited window of opportunity to set aside sensitive lands. He's right when he says, "We're losing farms too quickly. We're losing timber lands too quickly. We're losing beach access too quickly."

That's why it's imperative that the state lawmakers continue to embrace and fund the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program at whatever level they deem necessary, given the horrible economic climate.

What impresses us about this program is its transparency and lack of political influence. Local, state, and tribal agencies send grant applications to the state Recreation and Conservation Office (formerly the Interagency Committee for Outdoor Recreation).

Independent experts rank the applications based on criteria such as the benefits to the public, level of threat to the property, or presence of threatened or endangered species. The governor and lawmakers then set the funding level and approve the project list.

This isn't a case where the legislators or lobbyists with the most clout get their projects funded.

Instead, it's a transparent, open and competitive process that has been a model followed by other states.

The state conservation office takes just 3 percent of the funds to cover administrative costs. The grant managers are not funded through the state's general fund, so cutbacks in state spending won't impact their ability to oversee the projects and ensure it is spent as intended.

In January, legislators should give serious consideration to the coalition's \$100 million request, not just to protect habitat and increase recreation opportunities, but as a jobs program to get people working and money flowing through the economy.