



To Keep It Alive

EDITORIAL: Wenatchee World
March 13, 2011

Speaking of unpleasant realities, there is an enormously beneficial state effort called the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program. In its 20-year life it has funded hundreds of projects — parks, trails, conservation — throughout the state. It is about to be cut off, dropped to zero or something not far above that. That is a shame.

In the current economic conditions this is mostly unavoidable, but it is possible to cut a program with the intent that in better times it can be brought back to useful life. In the alternative, you can grab what's left of a program's funding and give it to someone else, killing the good program while undermining the basic values that made it work.

These are the options. The WWRP is funded through the state's capital budget, financed by bonds — borrowed money. The program received \$70 million in the current biennium, and a generous \$100 million in the budget prior. It requested \$100 million again for the next biennium, that now widely considered impossible. Instead Gov. Chris Gregoire's budget seeks nothing for WWRP, and puts \$20 million in something new called the Puget Sound Wildlife and Recreation Program. So WWRP would be zeroed out, while geographically limited projects that wouldn't necessarily rank high in its system would receive funds. A statewide program becomes a Puget Sound program.

What a shame. WWRP was known for its stringent and fair ranking system. Projects rose on their merits, and local communities shared in the expense. Projects in faraway places could compete against the big guns near Puget Sound. In North Central Washington alone WWRP has funded 66 projects in 20 years, and leveraged local money for the good of all. Pending projects rising on the priority list included the Saddle Rock conservation purchase by Wenatchee, the restoration of Don Morse Park at Chelan, the waterfront trail for Entiat and the community trail at Twisp.

There is no use pretending there will be money for all this. The state must cut its heavy debt load. Projects of all kinds will be dropped. What money there will be in the capital budget will go first to high-priority projects, like school construction and other bricks and mortar. Legislators say a great many people will be disappointed. That is the way of it. But you can cut WWRP so it won't die.

You can cut with some sense of equity, rather than shifting funds to a limited area. You can cut so the good projects are not crushed, and so one day this good program can rise again.

This is the opinion of The Wenatchee World and its Editorial Board: Editor and Publisher Rufus Woods, Managing Editor Cal FitzSimmons, Chief Financial Officer Janine Bakken and Editorial Page Editor Tracy Warner.