



# The Olympian

## EDITORIAL: Natural-Areas Program Deserves Better

By The Olympian Staff  
The Olympian  
November 25, 2012

The state Legislature had the foresight 24 years ago to launch a capital funding program to pay for new parks, open space, trails, boat launches, and fish and wildlife habitat all across the state.

It was then, and remains today, the state's primary vehicle for making sure special natural areas are protected and community recreational opportunities are developed for generations to come. Eight years ago, farmland preservation was added to the list of eligible projects.

Funding levels have varied over the years, depending in large part on the condition of the economy. For instance, the program received \$40 million in the 2011-13 biennial budget, down from a high of \$100 million in 2007-09.

With 2013-15 budget talks about to begin, a broad coalition of 135 members, which calls itself the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Coalition, is making a compelling case to up the ante on behalf of quality of life, habitat protection and the state's robust recreation-based economy.

The coalition's request for \$90 million for the next two years deserves serious consideration by state lawmakers. Here are a few reasons why:

Voters this month approved Engrossed Senate Joint Resolution 8221, which will reduce the state debt limit relative to the overall budget from 9 percent to 8 percent, reducing the state's debt service payments. This means the state capital budget could grow next year by as much as \$400 million. The conservation program should be allowed to benefit from the increased funding.

When the program began in 1991-93, it received 6.8 percent of the capital budget, but only 2.7 percent in the 2011-13 biennium. A \$90 million allocation would bring it back up to a reasonable 4.6 percent of the capital budget.

Cutting Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program funding does nothing to solve the state's operating budget woes. It just means other interest groups get a larger share of the pie.

The interest rates on general obligation bonds that finance the WWRP and other capital projects are at historic lows. It translates into purchasing power on behalf of the state's natural heritage and a parks and recreation economy that generates some \$8.5 billion in retail spending and 115,000 jobs statewide per year.

Working with the state Recreation and Conservation Office, the WWRP uses objective criteria to rank proposed projects. They are funded on their merits, rather than political pressure. Here are some of the 11 projects that would benefit South Sound, if the program is fully funded:

- The state Department of Natural Resources would have \$325,000 to improve shoreline access at the Woodard Bay Natural Resource Conservation Area, a popular place for people and wildlife along the shores of Woodard and Chapman bays and Henderson Inlet. The bulk of the habitat restoration work at Woodard Bay has been funded by the wildlife and recreation program.

- The state Department of Fish and Wildlife would receive \$324,500 to combat invasive species at Scatter Creek, Mima Mounds, Bald Hill, Rocky Prairie and West Rocky Prairie – all key prairie and oak woodland habitat that is disappearing fast in South Sound.

- Mason County would receive \$285,000 to renovate two baseball infields at its Mason County Recreation Area Park near Shelton, improving use of the fields and reducing maintenance costs.

- Olympia would receive \$1 million to help purchase and demolish a derelict building as part of the ongoing effort to build the Capitol Olympic Vista Park on the downtown isthmus.

All of these projects and others will improve the quality of life in South Sound, and across the state. The state Legislature needs to understand that fact, and reverse the decline in program funding.