



EDITORIAL: Conservation, the Great Investment

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We, the citizens of Washington already know well what economists might tell us: Conservation pays. Investments in our quality of life, in our natural infrastructure, in protecting the beauty of our surroundings, produce sound returns today and for generations to come. It's obvious. Our place on Earth is envied around the world.

We are fortunate our Legislature knew this when it first provided the capital for what became the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program, leveraging funding for parks, trails, farms, wildlife habitat, water access and protection of open space. The program, boosted by a bipartisan coalition of 270 organizations co-chaired by Govs. Dan Evans and Mike Lowry, has funded more than 1,000 successful projects, including many in North Central Washington. Its grants are matched by millions in local funds, multiplying their effectiveness with a strong community commitment. It is the largest source of funding for parks and trails, land acquisition for conservation, and farmland preservation.

Of course, there is no program without state funding. It comes as the Legislature approves its biennial capital budget, which pays for tangible assets like buildings and land. Coming into this legislative session the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Coalition has presented a request for a \$90 million appropriation, and their case is strong and persuasive. The program is on the rebound, after nearly being zeroed out in the 2011-13 budget and grateful for a much reduced \$40 million share. This is mostly borrowed money. The state's debt limit was recently reduced by citizen initiative, but that frees up some budget capacity. Gov. Gregoire proposes an appropriation of \$65 million, a step up, but if the full \$90 million is received it still is well below historical peaks.

There are projects ready and waiting in North Central Washington that have risen through the program's strict scrutiny. Among them, improvements at Cashmere Riverside Park, Saddle Rock access and education, natural areas at Upper Dry Gulch and Camas Meadows, Winthrop's Susie Stephens Trail and acquisition of habitat in the Upper Stemilt Basin. These projects, geographically diverse, will likely be funded if the \$90 million appropriation is granted.

For many of us, we can stand on the main street in our hometowns, look up and see land affected by a Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program project. We can look up, and know why we love our state, love the life here, and have no regrets about a single nickel spent on conservation. We should keep it up.

This is the opinion of The Wenatchee World and its Editorial Board: Publisher Rufus Woods, Editor Cal FitzSimmons and Editorial Page Editor Tracy Warner