

Tri-City Herald

Editorial: Congress should renew tax-free conservation fund

By Tri-City Herald Editorial Board
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Time is running out for a federal conservation program that has generated millions of dollars for outdoor spaces throughout the nation — and it all has been done without taxpayer money.

After 50 years of success, the Land and Water Conservation Fund is set to expire at the end of September unless it is reauthorized by Congress. If lawmakers ignore it and let it go, it will be a tremendous loss to preservation efforts throughout the country.

This is one government program that has done a lot of good in a lot of communities, and it will be a shame if it is allowed to fade away.

The program was launched in 1964 and is funded by money paid by energy companies, offshore drilling royalties and natural gas leases.

The idea behind its creation was that if private companies are allowed to use natural resources owned by the public to make a profit, they should give some money back to the public for conservation.

It is a premise that makes a lot of sense.

Since the program's inception, it has provided more than \$600 million in grants in Washington. In the Tri-Cities, the fund has helped Sacajawea State Park and Columbia Park in Kennewick, the pools in Kennewick and Richland and the Badger Mountain Spray Park.

It also has helped pay for the 23-mile Sacagawea Heritage Trail along the Columbia River, as well as Highland Park in Pasco, Vista Park in Kennewick and Burlington Park in Connell. If the fund is reauthorized, \$840,000 is set to be spent on stream restoration in the Umatilla National Forest.

So far, Sens. Patty Murray and Maria Cantwell, both D-Wash., have pledged support for the program. But Rep. Dan Newhouse, R-Wash., has not.

We hope he reconsiders.

His staff said he supports the goal of the fund, but that he does not like giving it permanent authorization, which the House bill would do. Another reason he is hesitant to back the fund is that it has strayed too far from its original purpose.

It is true that Congress has a sad history of raiding it. Since it was created, more than \$18 billion that could have gone into the conservation fund has been diverted away.

But that is a flaw of Congress, not a flaw of the fund itself.

In addition to the environmental benefits, there also is an economic aspect to consider. According to a report released in January by the state Recreation and Conservation Office, outdoor recreation generated \$2 billion in annual state and local tax revenue, \$21.6 billion in annual consumer spending and 198,000 jobs. If our parks and outdoor spaces suffer, so does our economy.

There is too much to lose, both environmentally and economically, if this tax-free fund is allowed to expire. Our lawmakers need to support it and push it through as quickly as possible.

That fall deadline will be here soon.