

SUBJECT: SIGN ON LETTER FOR WWRP 2019-21 FUNDING LEVEL

Dear Legislative Caucus Leaders:

The Washington Wildlife & Recreation Coalition, along with the many organizations and individuals who have signed onto this letter, respectfully urge you to support the Recreation & Conservation Office's (RCO) \$130 million Capital Budget request for the Washington Wildlife & Recreation Program (WWRP) for the 2019-21 biennium.

For nearly 30 years, the WWRP has been our state's premier tool for habitat conservation and outdoor recreation opportunities. The program has played a significant role in our state's landscape and quality of life, investing over \$1.4 billion into state and local parks, trails, wildlife habitat, working lands, and more. It is nationally recognized for its fair, objective, and independent funding process.

In seeking a \$130 million appropriation for the WWRP, we recognize that the need for the WWRP has grown as our state's population has increased, wildlife habitat continues to be threatened, and the demand for outdoor recreation has never been higher. In many ways, this request is actually quite conservative. Even with a \$130 million appropriation for the next biennium, we are concerned that we will still fall short in meeting the urgent need to preserve Washington's most precious natural resources and invest in recreational opportunities.

Robust funding for the WWRP is more important than ever as our state's population growth has accelerated in recent years, adding almost a quarter of a million people in the last two years alone. Indeed, since 2008 the state has added over 700,000 residents—that's like dropping a Denver, CO or Washington, DC right in the middle of our state. Unfortunately, the state is not keeping pace with the needs of this growing population. This growth has also driven up construction and land costs, so funding for the WWRP must increase to simply maintain purchasing power.

This growing population also impacts our environment. Some of the Northwest's most iconic plant and animal species are in rapid decline due to habitat loss and fragmentation, declining water quality, and ecosystem degradation. This year, over 30 proposed WWRP projects seek to aid our threatened salmon populations and to protect an additional 220 miles of stream bank. Now more than ever, robustly funding the WWRP—the state's primary means of conserving native ecosystems and important wildlife habitat—is critical to protecting the diverse lands and iconic species that are integral to our state's identity and our environmental health.

Local communities are stepping up to meet this increased need and demand, as demonstrated by the significant increase in WWRP applications. This year, 273 applications requesting \$197 million were submitted to the RCO, a 12 percent increase over the last grant cycle. Without increased WWRP funding, many of these communities' highest priority conservation and recreation needs will not be met.

The new match reduction policy is also increasing demand for the program while making it more equitable for communities across the state. The WWRP has always been a key tool for underserved communities to secure much-needed funding for parks and recreation facilities. The match reduction policy is giving even more communities the ability to create critical green spaces for kids and families to enjoy. Communities have responded well to this exciting new policy: in the current grant round 55 projects qualified for the match reduction to improve program equity, including 3 new WWRP sponsors.

We recognize the importance of the WWRP for many other state priorities, including mental health and childhood academic performance. The WWRP contributes to the physical health and the mental wellbeing of children and adults, through the creation of countless opportunities for outdoor exercise and relaxation. Research has consistently shown the importance of outdoor access on childhood development, academic performance in school, and the mental and physical health of people of all ages.

Investing in the WWRP also invests in our economy and fuels job growth. The WWRP helps support 201,000 outdoor recreation jobs in our state—more than the information technology sector or the aerospace industry. Outdoor recreational lands generate more than \$26.2 billion in consumer spending annually and are responsible for generating \$2.3 billion in state and local tax revenue. Studies show that rural counties in particular benefit from the outdoor recreation economy and tourism made possible by programs like the WWRP.

The WWRP does all this in an exceptionally cost-effective manner. For every state dollar invested in the WWRP, an additional 63 cents is leveraged from local communities. According to a recent analysis by Earth Economics, WWRP projects often provide millions of dollars in additional benefits to communities each year in the form of ecosystem services, tourism dollars, and other consumer spending.

For all these reasons, we urge you to support this request for \$130 million for the WWRP in the 2019-21 Capital Budget. Adequate funding for the WWRP is more important than ever to address our state's rapid population growth, the need to preserve our shrinking green spaces, and the strong demand for recreational opportunities. We believe this amount is necessary to support recreation and conservation efforts statewide and preserve Washington's natural heritage for future generations.

Respectfully,

Christine B. Mahler
Executive Director