

April 9, 2021

Dear Budget Leaders,

The 31 undersigned organizations and entities extend our thanks for your support of equity in Washington's great outdoors in your 2021-23 capital construction budget and operating budgets. As our communities work together to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and address its disproportionate impacts on communities of color, rural communities, and the mobility challenged, this investment is more important than ever. The outdoor recreation equity budget request for the Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO) is a critical step toward providing equitable access to nature and healthier communities in Washington.

We respectfully urge you to adopt the House proviso language and funding levels in the final 2021-23 capital construction and operating budgets, including:

1. \$375,000 in operating budget, solely to conduct a comprehensive equity review of state grant programs administered by the RCO, in consultation with a contract consultant to assist with community engagement and review, both of which are necessary to complete this review process; and
2. \$5 million in capital construction budget to provide grants to communities to immediately begin pilot projects and directly benefit populations and communities that lack access to outdoor recreation facilities and resources.

Combined, the requests will result in a comprehensive review of grant programs to determine ways to reduce barriers to participation in recreation and conservation grant programs for historically underserved populations while also providing opportunities for immediate funding to begin to address those barriers. The proposed approach for the equity review is unique in several ways.

First and foremost, the review funded in the operating budget will include in-depth community engagement across the state. The challenges encountered by those in Seattle's South Park neighborhood are different from the challenges encountered on the Colville Reservation, which are still different from those encountered in the town of Toppenish. No one can fully understand these challenges without engaging directly with these communities, learning from the true experts—those who live with and work to address these challenges right there on the ground.

Second, this budget request provides the opportunity to immediately begin addressing the disparities without waiting years for administrative and statutory changes to take effect. The last review of one of RCO's grant programs, the Washington Wildlife & Recreation Program, was initiated by the legislature in 2015, its recommended changes signed into law by the Governor in 2016, and the last of the changes fully implemented in 2018. As the grants are generally on a two year cycle to match the biennial budget process, we are only now able to begin to truly analyze the impacts of those solutions, six years later.

Furthermore, investment in early implementation projects will provide the opportunity to test possible solutions and identify those that are translatable between communities, bringing those learnings back to the review process to implement changes in existing grant programs—or identify needs for new programs. The simultaneous nature of the review and investments will allow the two processes to inform each other, leading to better and more rigorous end results.

Thank you for your leadership and consideration of this critical review. This investment will expand equitable access to the outdoors for everyone.

Sincerely,

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CC:

Senate Ways & Means Committee;

House Capital Budget Committee; and

House Appropriations Committee;

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