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Recreation**
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Christine B. Mahler

November 8, 2022

Governor Jay Inslee
Office of the Governor

SUBJECT: SIGN ON LETTER FOR FULL FUNDING FOR WWRP IN 2023-2025 BUDGET

Dear Governor Inslee:

The Washington Wildlife & Recreation Coalition, along with the organizations and individuals who have signed onto this letter, respectfully urge you to support the WWRC's Capital Budget request for Full Funding for the Washington Wildlife & Recreation Program (WWRP) for the 2023-25 biennium, totaling approximately \$153 million.

The COVID19 crisis has affected our outdoor recreation needs in significant ways, bringing more people outside to recreate for their mental and physical health. Indeed, the demand for outdoor recreation has never been higher. Meanwhile, the economic crisis created by COVID19 has made the outdoor recreation economy even more important.

For over 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 \$1.6 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. Maximizing capital budget funding for the WWRP couldn't come at a more important time.

The ongoing impacts of COVID-19 have presented challenges to our partners around the state. Staffing challenges at all levels mean agencies and non-profits are struggling to balance the needs of their communities with the capacity of their teams, which has led to a decrease in grant applications even as we know the need and demand are there.

Consequently, this year is unique in that WWRP application numbers dropped significantly from the previous round. Our Board responded to this unprecedented situation with a request for full funding of the WWRP. This is a position that we have not taken before, but is exactly what is needed at this unusual time in our history.

Land prices in Washington have continued their astronomical ascent, now combined with the surging cost of building supplies and staffing shortages with contractors. This means the cost of buying and developing land has also drastically increased. Meanwhile, agencies and nonprofits face continued belt tightening, especially as the threat of a recession looms, causing matching funds to be harder to secure.

The need for investment has grown as our state's population has increased, demand for recreation opportunities has grown, and wildlife habitat continues to be threatened. This

growth has also driven up construction and land costs, so funding for the WWRP must increase to simply maintain purchasing power. Unfortunately, the state is not keeping pace with the needs of this growing population. For these, and the additional reasons laid out below, we assert that Full Funding for the WWRP is both appropriate and aspirational, and, quite frankly, needed to accommodate the growing demand for recreation and need for conservation in our state.

Rising Demand

Use of Washington's outdoor spaces is at an all-time high, as residents rushed to outdoor spaces for safe, healthy fun during the COVID-19 pandemic. When coupled with the continued population growth—with thousands upon thousands of people flocking to the state for its beauty and abundant recreation opportunities, acquiring new spaces and increasing services and maintenance is critical to keep them safe and well-maintained.

Funding WWRP projects will help disperse crowds, ensure emergency vehicles have access to trailheads, and mitigate our ecological footprint while improving access to our state's great outdoors.

Economic Growth

Investing in the WWRP will also invest in our economy and fuel job growth, providing much-needed stimulus across the state. Outdoor recreation and habitat lands in Washington support 264,000 jobs and generate \$26.5 billion in consumer spending, as shown in RCO's own analysis of the outdoor recreation economy. These spaces also provide at least \$216 billion in ecosystem services, such as water storage and disaster risk reduction.

Studies show that rural counties in particular benefit from the outdoor recreation economy and tourism made possible by programs like the WWRP. In fact, an analysis by Earth Economics demonstrated that WWRP projects often provide millions of dollars in benefits to communities each year in the form of ecosystem services, tourism dollars, and other consumer spending. That means that in addition to the immediate stimulus these funds would provide in construction jobs and material purchases for some projects, Full Funding would also be a critical long-term investment in our state's economic vitality.

Mental and Physical Health

Study after study has indicated how much healthier people's minds and bodies are when they engage in outdoor activities. However, there's nothing like personal experience to bring scientific studies to life in a new way. Each and every Washingtonian—and really everyone around the world—discovered just what an important role the outdoors plays in their lives once they were no longer able to enjoy it at will. Everyone discovered just how healing that neighborhood walk can be when undergoing intensely difficult situations like those encountered during the COVID19 pandemic.

Equity

Not every community has equitable access to the outdoors. Communities of color are less likely to have access to parks and rural communities have less local funding to invest. WWRP encourages local governments to plan projects in communities lacking access to parks through reduced match requirements.

WWRP projects can also help upgrade or build parks to meet ADA accessibility standards to improve park access for all. Though more needs to be done, WWRP is an important part of improving equity in the outdoors.

The WWRP alone is not enough to solve systemic inequities in the outdoors. But, robust funding will continue to help as we work together to develop more comprehensive solutions, including those forthcoming as part implementing the equity review recommendations.

Environmental Protection

Climate change, population growth, and increased demand mean it's more important than ever to protect our lands before it's too late. 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. The WWRP can help here too, if you provide enough funding.

The WWRP grant program funds outdoor recreation and conservation projects across the state to preserve habitat, restore areas impacted by fire and degradation, and mitigate the environmental impact of our growing population. Just as we need more spaces to recreate, we must also take care of the ecosystems that sustain us, and provide funding for restoration after disasters strike.

For example, 19 proposed WWRP projects will aid our threatened salmon populations, protecting an additional 2167 acres and almost 25 miles of stream bank. Now more than ever, robustly funding the WWRP is critical to protecting the diverse lands and iconic species that are integral to our state's identity and our environmental health.

RECOMMENDATION

With surging demand for outdoor spaces in WA, a spike in inflation, and worsening environmental dangers, NOW is the time to make a record investment in Washington's outdoors.

WWRP projects mitigate the impacts of rapid population growth on the environment, create outdoor recreation opportunities for families across the state, preserve wildlife habitat, and protect cherished places all across the state. They also allow hunters, anglers, farmers, ranchers, and foresters to protect the land their families have depended on for generations. And because our world is so integrated, the WWRP isn't just about the outdoors—it impacts many other state priorities, including mental health and childhood academic performance.

The WWRP does all this in an exceptionally cost-effective manner, leveraging local, state, and federal funding to make projects possible.

For all these reasons, we urge you to support this request for Full Funding for the WWRP in the 2023-25 Capital Budget. This funding will boost the economy, support equitable recreation and conservation efforts statewide and preserve Washington's natural heritage for future generations.

Respectfully,



Christine B. Mahler
Executive Director

Opinion Leaders

Governor Daniel Evans, Former Governor of Washington
Eric Artz, President and CEO, REI
Tom Reeve, Former National Board Chair, The Trust for Public Land

Business

AKWA-DC LLC
Art Works Auto LLC
Golden Bricks Events
LBC Action
Live To Play, LLC
Parallax Perspectives
Rayonier
REI
WA Realtors
Washington Forest Protection Agency
Whidbey Island Kayaking

Recreation Nonprofits and Groups

American Whitewater
Eastrail Partners
Emerald Alliance for People, Nature and Community
Evergreen Mountain Bike Alliance
ForeverGreen Trails
Friends of the Centennial Trail
Kubota Garden Foundation
Leavenworth Winter Sports Club
Move Redmond
Recreation Northwest
Sierra Club Washington
Sports Safety and Education Association
The Mountaineers
Washington Recreation and Parks Association
Washington Trails Association
Wenatchee Outdoors
Woodland Trail Greenway Association

Agencies

City of Burien
City of Covington
City of Hoquiam
City of Sumner
Metro Parks Tacoma
Olympia Parks, Arts, and Recreation

Snohomish County Department of Conservation and Natural Resources
South Whidbey Parks and Recreation

Hunters & Anglers Nonprofits and Groups

Ducks Unlimited
Inland Northwest Wildlife Council
Washington Chapter, Backcountry Hunters & Anglers
Washington Wildlife Federation

Conservation Nonprofits and Groups

American Farmland Trust
Bainbridge Island Land Trust
Capitol Land Trust
Chelan-Douglas Land Trust
Columbia Land Trust
Conservation Northwest
Cowiche Canyon Conservancy
Forterra
Friends of Rocky Prairie
Inland Northwest Land Conservancy
Kittitas Environmental Education Network
Mountains to Sound Greenway Trust
Nooksack Salmon Enhancement Association
Okanogan Land Trust
Spokane Audubon Society
The Nature Conservancy
The Trust for Public Land
The Wilderness Society
Vancouver Audubon Society
Washington Scuba Alliance
Western Rivers Conservancy
Whatcom Land Trust

Individuals

Aaron Milner
Adrian Miller, Director of Public Affairs, Rayonier
Alan McCoy, Board President, Spokane Audubon Society
Alex Baier
Alex Crane
Alex Jeffers, Conservation Director, Whatcom Land Trust
Alex Stanovsky

Amy Brockhaus, Deputy Director, Mountains to Sound Greenway
Andrea Imler, Advocacy Director, Washington Trails Association
Andrea Smith, Board President, Tacoma Metro Parks
Andres Guerrero-Guzman
Andrew Fuzak
Andrew Trinh
Angela Chabot
Angela Stewart
Anita Wilkins
Anna Farrell-Sherman
Anthony Houston
Arlen Bogaards
Arthur Foster
Ashlee Davis
Ashley Willmarth
Barbara Rosenkotter
Barbara Stein
Betsy Robblee, Conservation & Advocacy Director, The Mountaineers
Bill Chapman
Bill Clarke, Policy Director, Washington Realtors
Bill Robinson, Board President, Capitol Land Trust
Brenda Bard
Brenda Running
Brian Carpenter
Brian Larson
Brian Shay, City Administrator, City of Hoquiam
Brian Sun
Brienne Vanderlinden
Bridget Potter
Caitlin Kimura
Carolyn Bureson
Carolyn Hope, Director of Parks, Recreation and Cultural Services, City of Burien
Carolyn Sanborn
Cassidy Giampetro, Statewide Advocacy Senior Coordinator, Washington Trails Association
Cathy Haworth
Celisa Hopkins, Executive Director, Cowiche Canyon Conservancy
Charlie Raines
Chelsea Elmer
Chevon Powell, Founder, Golden Bricks Events
Chris Johnson
Cindy Hoover
Cindy Hoover

Clayton Wright
Cleve Pinnix
Cleveland Pinnix
Cliff Smith
Coleman Byrnes
Colette Berna
Corlan Carlson
Cullen Brady, Executive Director, Bainbridge Land Trust
Curt Soper, Projects Director, Chelan-Douglas Land Trust
Cynthia Bates
Cynthia Brast
Dale Spoor
Dan Senour
Dani Madrone, Pacific Northwest Policy Manager, American Farmland Trust
Daniel Lucio
Daphne Fairbairn
Dave Battey
Dave Johnson, President, Washington Recreation and Parks Association
David Brook
David Graves
David Holte
David Roche
Deborah Hammond
Deborah Shibley
Delmar Fadden
Devnee Gadbois
Doug Coutts
Elaine Reese
Elizabeth Visconti
Emily Nguyen
Ephraim Froehlich, Managing Principal, AKWA-DC LLC
Eric Demers
Erik Jokinen
Ethan Newton, Parks and Recreation Director, City of Covington
Frances Haywood
Fred Wert
Gary Brill
Gene Bullock
Gilbert Plascencia
Glen Anderson, Founder Organizer, Parallax Perspectives
Gwen Jones
Gwen Vernon

Hannah Clark
Hazel Wolf
Heidi Eisenhower
Hilary Hilscher
Hillary Clark
Howard Lazzarini
Hunter George, Policy & Government Relations
Officer, Metro Parks Tacoma
Isaac Scott
Jack Horton, President, Woodland Trail Greenway
Association
James E Trask, President, Washington Scuba
Alliance
James King
James Munly, General Manager, Leavenworth
Winter Sports Club
James O'Hare
James O'Hare
James Pierson
Jana Hobbs
Jane Stone
Jan-Marc Jouas
Jayme Jonas
Jean Mylen
Jennife Larsen
Jennifer Cox
Jenny Lange
Jesse Piedfort, Chapter Director, Sierra Club
Washington
Jill Sheffer, President, Kittitas Environmental
Education Network
Jim Byrne
Joan Wright
Joe Sambataro, Sr Managing Director
Conservation Transactions, Forterra
Joel Rogers
John Hoard
John Willett, President, Sports Safety and
Education Association
Jon Hoekstra, Executive Director, Mountains to
Sound Greenway Trust
Jon Soine
Joy Okazaki
Joyce Breithaupt
Junus DaRugna
Kamuron Gurol
Karen Daubert
Karen Wood

Kate Miller, Executive Director, Okanogan Land
Trust
Kathe Fowler
Katherine Pugh
Kathleen Car
Kelli Refer, Executive Director, Move Redmond
Ken Vanden Heuvel
Keri Healey
Kip Clinton
Kitty Craig, Urban to Wildlife Director, The
Wilderness Society
Krista Loercher, Owner, Whidbey Island Kayaking
Kristi Weir
Kurt Dahmen
Kurt Hellmann, Advocacy Associate, Conservation
Northwest
Kyler Sisson
Larry Leveen, Executive Director, ForeverGreen
Laura Zerr
Laurie Busse
Laurie Wasson
Len Hightower
Leslie McGuire
Liliana Day
Lin Provost
Lincoln Bormann
Linda Belyeu
Linda J Clark
Lindell Haggin
Lindsay Walker
Liz McNett Crowl
Lizz Pilkington
Loreen McFaul, Executive Director, Friends of
Centennial Trail
Lori Heath
Lori Lennox
Lorraine Patterson-Harris
Lys Burden
Malcolm Legette
Marcia Davidson
Marie Neumiller, Executive Director, Inland
Northwest Wildlife Council
Marilyn Reichenberger
Marilyn Vail
Maritza Lauriano Ortega
Mark Boyar
Mark Eliassen
Mark Helpenstell
Martin LeBlanc, Principal, LBC Action

Mary Dodsworth
Mary Gladhard
Mary Jokela
Mary Kay Voytilla
Mary Norton
Matt Little, Policy Director, Ducks Unlimited
Matthew Surprenant
Matthew Tyler
Megan Vining
Melanie Brown
Melanie Stam
Melissa Campbell, Executive Director, Washington
Farmland Trust
Melody Winkle
Meryl Bernstein
Michael Collins
Michael Gaul
Michael Lampi
Michael Lawrence
Michael Storace
Michael Woodsum
Micheal Christen
Micheal Leach
Michelle Larson
Mike Keary
Mike Preacher
Mitsu Iwasaki, Northwest Director and Associate
Vice President, Trust for Public Land
Nancy Peacock
Nathan Daniel
Nathan Hamilton
Noreen Hyre
Olga Kachook
Owen Fairbank
Patricia Hinneburg
Paul Fior
Paul Fish, Founder, Live to Play LLC
Paul Graves
Paul Kundtz
Paul Simmons, Director, Olympia Parks, Arts, and
Recreation
Peter Renner
Rachel Vasak, Executive Director, Nooksack
Salmon Enhancement Association
Rebecca Braun
Richard Botts
Richard Tschetter
Rick James
Robert Michelson

Roberta Goodnow
Rocklynn Culp
Roth Leahy
Ruth Gilford
Sally Cahill
Sam Knox, Board Member, Cowiche Canyon
Conservancy
Sandy Lacey-Baker
Sara Holtzinger
Sarah Shaffer, Executive Director, Wenatchee
Outdoors
Scott Schell
Sharron Coontz, President, Friends of Rocky Prairie
Sheila Sokolosky
Skye Dunn, Recreation Supervisor, South Whidbey
Parks and Recreation
Stephen Cook, General Counsel, Columbia Land
Trust
Stephen Sundquist
Steve Bumstead
Steve Tauscheck
Steven Woolpert
Steven Woolpert
Sue Jensen
Susan Janow
Susan Saul, Conservation Chair, Vancouver
Audubon Society
Suze Woolf
Swee Glenn
Terry Karro
Thomas Bugert
Thomas DeGraff
Thomas O'Keefe, Pacific Northwest Stewardship
Director, American Whitewater
Tim Ayers
Tim Franks
Tom Cahill
Tom McClelland
Tom Straub
Tom Teigen, Director, Snohomish County
Department of Conservation & Natural
Resources
Tom Weir
Tonya Morrey
Tracy Stanton, Executive Director, Emerald
Alliance for People, Nature, and Community
Vanessa Lee
Victoria Egesdal
Wendy Tyner

Wendy Walker
William Bosch
WP Lyssie Burden
Yvonne Kraus, Executive Director, Evergreen
Mountain Bike Alliance