

LWCF must be reauthorized, fully funded

The Land and Water Conservation Fund hasn't cost taxpayers a penny the past 54 years even as it funded everything from wildlife refuges to historic battlefields to Little League diamonds. It has also united groups as diverse as Ducks Unlimited and the Wilderness Society, while inspiring support from Democrats and Republicans alike since President John F. Kennedy first proposed it. Heck, the LWCF even sparked a fiery, supportive speech in late July from Sen. Richard Burr, R-North Carolina, a fiscal hawk and darling of the Koch brothers. Even so, nearly every environmental group, conservation organization and outdoor trade association has been working overtime this summer urging members to write letters, blast emails and generally badger lawmakers toward one goal: permanently reauthorizing and fully funding the LWCF before it expires Sept. 30.

In fact, Burr sent such a letter Aug. 1 to the Senate's majority and minority leaders. The letter was co-signed by 13 Senate colleagues—including six Republicans, six Democrats and one independent.

In March 2017, Sen. Tammy Baldwin, D-Wisconsin, cosigned legislation with Burr and 21 other senators to reauthorize and fully fund the LWCF.

OK. So what makes the LWCF so worthy of love and bipartisan support? It's simple: When fossil-fuel companies buy leases to drill offshore for oil and gas, the federal government sets aside some of those fees for conservation projects back here on land.

Imagine that: The LWCF compels companies profiting from public resources to share it with us, the American people.

Since President Lyndon Johnson signed the LWCF into law on Sept. 3, 1964, gas and oil royalties totaling more than \$218 million have been invested in Wisconsin alone. That funding helps protect and enhance such places as the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest, the Ice Age and North Country scenic trails, Devil's Lake State Park, High Cliff State Park, St. Croix National Scenic River and Apostle Islands National Lakeshore.

And those are just the high-profile sites. If you want to study all the lesser-known parks, forests, playgrounds and woodlands benefiting from oil-gas royalties, visit the Wilderness Society's website, wilderness.org. From there, navigate to the "Mapping the Land and Water Conservation Fund" page, zero in on Wisconsin and enlarge it until you can identify county boundaries.

Then start clicking. A pop-up box for each county details its population, how many projects LWCF has funded there, how much LWCF money it has received, and the per-capita funding LWCF provided. The LWCF has helped every Wisconsin county. Americans have never seen the LWCF's full appropriation go toward conservation.

Congress has raided this fund almost every year since its passage.

Although the LWCF is authorized to receive \$900 million annually, that amount has been met only twice since 1965, and only once the past 40 years. By the time the U.S. Department of Interior starts distributing grants from oil-gas lease fees, Congress has poached the fund for purposes its authors never intended.

In 2013, for example, Interior collected more than \$9 billion from offshore energy extractions, but the LWCF received only \$306 million of it. You'd think if we're collecting \$9 billion in leases that we could fully fund the \$900 million conservation allotment, not one-third of it. In fact, Congress has diverted more than \$20 billion of LWCF's rightful funding the past five decades.

Despite such raiding, 98 percent of U.S. counties have received LWCF money to buy, develop or maintain city parks, county parks, hiking trails, public- forest lands, wildlife refuges and public-hunting grounds.

Maybe that's why voters overwhelmingly support the LWCF.

A recent survey of Wisconsin voters, for example, found 91 percent of Democrats, 88 percent of independents and 79 percent of Republicans supporting its funding.

To find LWCF opponents you must look to fringe elements who want to sell off federal lands or transfer their management to states. In the spirit of compromise, we should permanently reauthorize and fully fund the LWCF before it expires Sept. 30.

Make no mistake: Funding its \$900 million conservation allotment is a bargain. If we allowed for inflation since 1964, that total would exceed \$3.5 billion.

Just imagine how much good that could do for our nation's wild places and economy if lawmakers were as bold as their 1960s counterparts.

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Without Congressional reauthorization, the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund will expire Sept. 30.

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