

Now is the Time to Reauthorize the Land and Water Conservation Fund

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Mr. Speaker: Last year, I spoke in celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). There are now less than 100 days until the expiration of the program, and I rise today to urge timely reauthorization of this critical conservation program.

LWCF, which is paid for entirely by royalties collected from oil and gas companies, has financed generations of projects, bringing parks and open spaces to the hearts of our urban areas and protecting our natural lands, outdoor recreation opportunities, and working forests at the local, state and federal levels. Since its creation, the LWCF program has conserved more than 5 million acres of parks, recreation, forests, and other lands through the federal program and more than 2.6 million acres in communities throughout every state in the nation.

My home state of North Carolina has received more than \$200 million in LWCF funding over the past five decades, which has helped protect some of our state's most treasured places, such as the Cape Hatteras National Seashore and the Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge. LWCF funds have also helped conserve land to preserve viewsheds along the Blue Ridge Parkway and the Appalachian Trail. I was particularly pleased that one such project included the Rocky Fork tract in the Cherokee National Forest in my native state of Tennessee.

But LWCF does more than simply add to our public lands. Investing in LWCF is also an important way to grow our economy. In North Carolina alone, active outdoor recreation contributes more than \$7.5 billion annually to the state's economy, supports 95,000 jobs, generates \$430 million in annual state tax revenue and produces \$6.1 billion annually in retail sales and services. Overall, outdoor recreation contributes more than \$1.06 trillion annually to the U.S. economy. Every \$1 invested in LWCF has been found to yield \$4 in economic value.

Without LWCF funding to stimulate matching investments from state, local and private entities, this crucial economic engine will be lost.

These numbers prove the program's success, but I would note that the program is also extremely popular. In recent polls, more than 80% of voters expressed support for continuing to deposit fees from offshore oil and gas drilling into LWCF – this broad support extends from every geographic region of the country and every political persuasion. Supporters include governors, mayors, sportsmen, industry leaders, conservationists, Civil War enthusiasts, historians, recreationists, small businesses, forest owners, and the many Americans who see firsthand the tangible benefits this program has had on their communities and families. I know many of my colleagues represent states and communities that have benefitted greatly from LWCF funds.

Although LWCF has a dedicated revenue stream from offshore drilling royalties and takes no taxpayer money from the general fund, large portions of this funding have been diverted over the years to non-conservation purposes. Even at last year's appropriated level of \$306 million, we were a far cry from the \$900 million that is annually authorized for conservation work.

I am proud to be a cosponsor of the bipartisan legislation, H.R. 1814, that would permanently reauthorize LWCF. I strongly believe Congress should uphold its decades long commitment to land and water conservation and reinvigorate LWCF, thereby expanding opportunities for all Americans to have access to parks and natural areas for outdoor recreation. With the expiration coming in September 2015, the time to reauthorize Land and Water Conservation Fund is now.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I yield back.