



Opening Statement
Full Committee Hearing to Examine the Land and Water Conservation Fund
Chairman Lisa Murkowski
June 25, 2019

Good morning, everyone. The Committee will come to order.

We are here this morning to talk about the Land and Water Conservation Fund – the “LWCF.”

The last hearing we held on this was in 2015. The authority to credit the LWCF with \$900 million each year was expiring that September, if you’ll recall. Our Committee was beginning to piece together an energy bill we were looking to ultimately include a permanent authorization of this authority and programmatic reforms. Didn’t happen then, but four years later, our lands package, including the LWCF provision, became law as the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act.

Now that the collection and deposit functions of the LWCF have been permanently authorized – and we have made some important reforms along the way – it is time to look at what has worked with the program and then the areas that can be improved.

When LWCF was established in 1965, it was largely focused on building a recreation system. There was an understanding that in order to build the system, the federal government would need to acquire land, but that acquisition would be focused on the states east of the 100th Meridian. And that made sense, as eastern states had far fewer public lands and therefore fewer opportunities for outdoor recreation.

The House and Senate Committee reports made this point, and the original LWCF Act includes an express provision limiting Forest Service acquisitions in the west to “not more than fifteen percent.”

The congressional intent expressed back then about federal land acquisition still rings true with this particular senator. In Alaska, close to 63 percent of our lands are already held by the federal government. That’s more than 220 million acres – and just by size comparison, it’s more land than there is in all of that state of Texas, and people think that Texas is a big state, so it just puts it into context there. So I’ve been skeptical of the need to acquire more, and I think many of my colleagues share that skepticism.

Over the last 50-plus years, most of the dollars appropriated to the LWCF program have been allocated to federal land acquisition. And despite Congress’ intent to see land acquisition occur in the east, the land management agencies, as evidenced by the prioritization lists they produce for those of us on the Appropriations Committee, continue to push for land acquisitions in the west.

Just last week, the Government Accountability Office released a report that examined how the land management agencies used \$952 million in appropriations from the Fund between the years 2011 and 2014. Most of the acres acquired were in the west, notably with North Dakota and Montana topping the list.

I’m sure many of these acquisitions served important conservation and recreation purposes, but our challenge now is to think differently and more creatively about the LWCF. Instead of federal land

acquisition, I think we should ask what else it can accomplish for conservation and outdoor recreation in the future.

We started to lay the groundwork in our recent lands package. We brought back a dedicated allocation in the LWCF for states of no less than 40 percent. We all know that states are critical partners in conservation and outdoor recreation, providing some of our favorite parks and hunting and fishing grounds. And as authorizers, we placed additional parameters on federal land acquisitions so that we prioritize access to and through our public lands and enhance recreation opportunities on those lands.

It was just last week, we held a hearing on deferred maintenance at our federal land management agencies. And just reinforced where we are with the backlog. That backlog totals nearly \$20 billion and continues to grow, despite our efforts to increase funding on the Appropriations Committees. A lot of folks say we can't cut the backlog in half without providing full dedicated mandatory funding for LWCF. I think most people know I don't like mandatory funding, adding mandatory funding and I ques question if tying these together makes good sense.

LWCF itself recognizes the importance of maintaining what we already have. The Act states that it is not just about the quantity of recreation resources – it is about the quality. Addressing the maintenance backlog is the best way to put the conservation and recreation system we have built over the last 50 years, with the help of LWCF, on the path to long-term viability.

Congress and the executive branch have previously recognized this related purpose, choosing to fund maintenance activities through the LWCF. From Fiscal Year 1998 through 2001, LWCF was used to address the maintenance backlog at all four land management agencies. It is no coincidence that it was in those fiscal years that appropriations from the LWCF reached and slightly exceeded the \$900 million authorized level.

LWCF also has strong ties to offshore drilling, as most of the funding credited to the fund is coming from OCS revenues. That is not lost on me and I know Senator Hyde-Smith and Senator Cassidy, and other coastal state members who support revenue sharing also recognize and appreciate that.

As an appropriator, I continue to hold the view that Congress should determine the appropriate level of funding for LWCF and how it should be allocated. We should look at it on a yearly basis, determine its funding levels relative to all of our other needs and priorities.

I know we have diverse views in this Congress certainly even in this committee. The conversation that we are having today is an important one. The witnesses we have gathered I think will give us a good perspective on these very important issues on how we might possibly move forward.

Today we have our newly confirmed Assistant Secretary for Policy, Management, and Budget, Susan Combs, from the Department of the Interior. Ms. Combs, we were really getting tired of seeing your name on that calendar for confirmation. So After 600 and some odd days it's nice to see you in an official position

We also have Deputy Chief Chris French, from the U.S. Forest Service, here to help discuss the federal side of the program. Congrats to you, on your recent promotion.

Lauren Imgrund with the National Association of State Outdoor Recreation Liaison Officers and she will discuss how states use financial assistance to run and support their recreation programs.

And Collin O'Mara from the National Wildlife Federation can speak to how outside partners are able to support the program. We've had some really good conversations and I appreciate that.

Brian Yablonski will provide a think tank perspective from the Property and Environment Research Center, based out of Montana. I know you have had some good ideas out there on the table.

I want to thank each of you for being here today and I look forward to a productive discussion.

Senator Manchin?

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