

July 8, 2011

The Honorable Denny Rehberg
U.S. House of Representatives
2448 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Rehberg:

As a coalition of Montana's leading hunting and fishing organizations, the following sportsmen groups support continued funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF).

The House Appropriations Committee's proposed budget for the Department of Interior and the USDA Forest Service includes a major cut to LWCF, effectively eliminating funding for land and easement purchases. This is of great concern as LWCF is the main federal program for acquiring new lands, linking habitats and providing Montana sportsmen access to high quality hunting lands and fishing waters. The LWCF is a wise investment in long-term benefits of clean water, protected species and recreation plans that bring investment and leisure spending to Montana. Without the fund, there would be a definite decline in the quality of hunting and fishing habitat, water quality, and access to public lands in Montana. These cuts to the LWCF program will directly impact areas of critical importance to Montana sportsmen as well as willing seller landowners choosing to pursue a conservation alternative for their property.

One excellent example of an LWCF-funded project in Montana is the 3-phase acquisition of 8,220 acres of private ranch lands in the Tenderfoot Creek watershed which are in checkerboard ownership with Lewis and Clark National Forest north of White Sulphur Springs in Meagher County. The acquired lands will be transferred to the Lewis and Clark National Forest for public recreational use, including hunting and fishing. The first payment of \$1.5 million in LWCF funds for 1,160 acres was completed in 2010. A second payment of totaling \$4.0 million for 3,160 acres is due in FY2011, although the payment actually made was reduced to \$410,000. The third payment of \$5.0 million for the acquisition of the final 3,900 acres is planned for FY2012. All of our clubs strongly supported this LWCF project.

Another important area to Montana sportsmen is the Stimson Forestlands project in the Kootenai River Valley near Troy to secure a conservation easement for 28,000 acres of Stimson Timber Company lands. Proposed as a Forest Legacy grant through the LWCF, this conservation easement would be held by the State of Montana and allow Stimson to continue to own and manage this land for timber production, while allowing the public access to hunt, fish, pick berries, and use these 28,000 acres for general recreation. Stimson would continue to pay taxes on the land, but it could not be sold for development. Any subsequent land owners would be bound by the terms of the conservation easement. This helps maintain a timber base and provide local jobs while keeping land open for public use. In our collective view, this is a win-win situation.

The money set aside for the Land and Water Conservation Fund does not come from our tax dollars. It comes from royalties paid by oil companies for off-shore gas and oil leases. It seems fitting that this lease money should help ease the pressure on our wildlife habitat and maintain access to public lands.

We are greatly concerned that the drastic cuts to LWCF proposed in the FY2012 Interior appropriations draft would eliminate critical funding for both the Tenderfoot Creek and Stimson Forestlands projects.

In your position as a member of the House Appropriations Committee, we strongly urge you to vote against any amendments to further cut or zero out LWCF. We further urge you to work proactively with House leadership through the appropriations process to defend and restore this critical program.

Respectfully,

Montana Wildlife Federation

Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership

Public Land & Water Access Association

Montana River Action

Anaconda Sportsmen's Club

Billings Rod & Gun Club

Custer Rod & Gun Club (Miles City)

Gallatin Wildlife Association (Bozeman)

Great Falls Chapter, Safari Club International

Helena Hunters & Anglers Association

Hellgate Hunters & Anglers (Missoula)

Laurel Rod & Gun Club

Libby Rod & Gun Club

Magic City Fly Fishers (Billings)

Meagher County Sportsmen's Association

Park County Rod & Gun Club (Livingston)

Polson Outdoors

Rosebud/Treasure Wildlife Association (Forsyth)

Russell Country Sportsmen (Great Falls)

Skyline Sportsmen's Association (Butte)