

Wildlife and Hunting Heritage Conservation Council

November 1, 2010

The Honorable Tom Vilsack, Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

I am pleased to write to you on behalf of the Wildlife and Hunting Heritage Conservation Council. During its inaugural meeting in Washington, D.C. (October 4th and 5th, 2010), the Council voted unanimously in support of two critical conservation programs, the Land and Water Conservation Fund (used by the Department of the Interior and the Department of Agriculture) and the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants Program (administered by the Department of the Interior).

Not only does the Council strongly support full funding of the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), we also recommend a “making public lands public” initiative that would direct 1.5% or \$10 million – whichever is greater – of the total LWCF funds annually for fee, seasonal or permanent easements, or rights of way acquisition on willing sellers’ property that will significantly expand access to existing public lands for hunting, fishing and other recreational activities.

Numerous reports indicate that access to pre-existing federal lands is problematic in many places. For example, a 2004 report to the House Appropriations Committee concluded that more than 35 million acres of Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service lands have inadequate access. Using input from fish and wildlife agencies, landowners and others, federal agencies can identify public access point needs as part of developing their LWCF priorities. Supported by a dedicated pool of LWCF funding, agencies can then secure these critical public access points. The nation’s sportsmen and women are heavily dependent on public lands for abundant fish and wildlife, habitat and access for outdoor recreation. For millions of American hunters, federal public lands are an increasingly important destination. Nearly half of all hunters conduct a portion of their hunting activity on public lands. LWCF has helped save some of America’s richest wildlife areas and most popular nature-based recreation destinations from development and closure. The conservation easement features of LWCF have helped many ranching and farming families stay on their lands and continue their traditional way of life, a way of life that includes providing public access for hunting while conserving healthy landscapes.

Allowing federal agencies to identify and prioritize smaller parcels on the edges of federal land that provide public access for hunting and other nature-based recreation is common sense. Directing a modest portion of LWCF funds to secure those parcels would help the Department of the Interior and the Department of Agriculture maximize the value of their existing federal land holdings.

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The Council also recommends that there be no diminution in funding for the State and Tribal Wildlife Grant Program, even during these fiscally-challenging times. Our support for this program is rooted in our charge to help secure funding to conserve our nation's fish and wildlife, and helps implement Final Recommendations #1 and #8 of the Recreational Hunting and Wildlife Conservation Plan.

The State and Tribal Wildlife Grants Program is the *principal* source of funding for implementing and revising State Wildlife Action Plans. Reduced funding for this program will increase the likelihood that more species will require federal endangered species listing in the future, and would curtail important conservation priorities identified in the plans. This relatively modest federal investment has already made a positive impact and exemplifies strong and effective partnerships between state, federal and private conservation groups.

In 2001, Congress created the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants Program to support state efforts to conserve at-risk fish and wildlife. Each state and territory completed a comprehensive wildlife conservation strategy – a State Wildlife Action Plan – to be eligible for these funds. The plans used best available science to identify more than 12,000 species considered at risk, their key habitats, threats to those species and associated conservation actions, monitoring and research. The plans provide a foundation for landscape-level conservation and can inform the development of climate change adaptation strategies.

We understand the magnitude of the current fiscal situation and know that difficult budget decisions will need to be made in the coming months. However, we feel support for the Land and Water Conservation Fund and the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants Program should be very high on the list of administration priorities for fish and wildlife conservation. This letter has also been submitted to Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Tomke". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

John Tomke
Chair

Cc: Robert Bonnie (USDA)
Wildlife and Hunting Heritage Conservation Council Members