

Wildlife and Hunting Heritage Conservation Council

June 20, 2011

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

Re: The President's FY 2012 Federal Budget

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

As you are aware, the Wildlife and Hunting Heritage Conservation Council (Council) is charged with advising the Secretary of Agriculture and the Secretary of the Interior on issues concerning wildlife and wildlife habitat conservation – including matters related to recreational hunting and conservation partnerships. As such, we want to thank you and express our support for the leadership you have actively demonstrated for existing conservation programs and the new conservation initiatives you have fostered. Conservation is a long-held American value, its fiscal and quality-of-life benefits to the American people are many and varied, and we applaud your actions to maintain this important legacy.

As we expressed in our February 16, 2011 letter to you, the Council is concerned about recent actions in Congress (e.g., House Continuing Resolution 1) that undermine and threaten to eliminate or seriously curtail long-standing, successful conservation programs via the federal budget process. At the same time, as a Council we recognize that current economic conditions dictate that the President and Congress act responsibly to reduce federal government spending.

Thus, the Council would like to express our appreciation and support for the conservation funding objectives included in the President's FY 2012 Budget Request and the strong overall statement they make about the importance of conservation programs. We ask that you remind Congress of the importance of America's wildlife heritage and the importance of funding management of our wildlife resources and federal public lands at a level that maintains these valuable assets for the American people. Further, we provide you with the following recommendations regarding FY 2012 federal appropriations, as reflected against the President's proposed FY 2012 budget. The recommendations focus on ensuring that long-standing conservation goals and programs continue to be addressed in an effective manner while the President and Congress act to reduce overall federal spending.

Key principles underlying our comments and concerns are:

1. Maintain adequate funding levels for existing core conservation programs that have a proven record of on-the-ground conservation success in creating/restoring habitat on public and private lands, and providing recreational access (*see representative list below*);
2. Maintain funding levels for programs that leverage non-federal dollars and partnerships in a significant, efficient and effective manner;
3. Integrate new goals and initiatives into existing core programs so that long-standing core programs do not lose funding and support – and so that they continue to serve as a foundation upon which to build new initiatives;

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4. Prevent any negative impact to recreational hunting and other outdoor recreation opportunities as a consequence of reduced appropriations to key programs, including access to lands for these purposes;
5. Implement certain new initiatives, like Landscape Conservation Cooperatives and Climate Change Centers, at an initial level that tests the concept and prevents any decrease in funding for long-standing proven conservation programs before expanding such initiatives;
6. Exercise caution and a measured approach in funding any additional new initiatives, so that they are not implemented at the expense of long-standing successful conservation programs;
7. Adequately fund wildlife management personnel at USDA and DOI to ensure conservation programs and initiatives have proper support to be effective and successful over time;
8. Craft the FY 2012 budget with an eye toward FY 2013 and beyond regarding program priorities, leveraging money and resources, integrating common goals among federal and state agency programs.

Specific federal appropriations recommendations for long-standing core conservation programs we would like to highlight are:

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE – *except as otherwise indicated the Council strongly supports the President's Budget request:*

Farm Service Agency:

1. Conservation Reserve Program
2. Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentives Program

Natural Resources Conservation Service:

1. Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program – *fund at authorized level*
2. Wetland Reserve Program
3. Grassland Reserve Program – *maintain FY 2010 funding level*
4. Farm and Ranchland Protection Program
5. Environmental Quality Incentives Program – *fund at authorized level*
6. Conservation Operations Technical Assistance

U.S. Forest Service:

1. Forest Legacy Program
2. Wildlife and Fisheries Program
3. Stewardship Contracting Program
4. Land and Water Conservation Fund*

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR – *except as otherwise indicated the Council strongly supports the President's Budget request for:*

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service:

1. North American Wetlands Conservation Fund
2. Joint Venture Administration Program
3. State and Tribal Wildlife Grants
4. Habitat Conservation – through the Endangered Species, National Wildlife Refuge System, Aquatic Habitat and Species Conservation, and Partners for Fish and Wildlife Programs – *fund at levels equal to or that exceed FY 2010 levels*
5. Land and Water Conservation Fund*
6. Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund
7. Law Enforcement – *maintain FY 2010 funding level*
8. National Fish Hatchery System Operations – *maintain FY 2010 funding level*

National Park Service:

1. Land and Water Conservation Fund*

Bureau of Land Management:

1. Land and Water Conservation Fund*
2. The Council expresses our concern that the combined national budgets for managing native species of wildlife in the Wildlife and Fisheries Management and Threatened/Endangered Species Management programs are less than the Wild Horse and Burro Management program's budget. We feel this represents an imbalance in priorities at the very least, perpetuates an overpopulation of these non-native animals if more effective management is not achieved soon, and is detrimental to conservation of *native* species on federal and private lands.

US Geological Survey:

1. Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Units – *maintain FY 2010 funding level*

**The Council firmly supports the President's budget request to fully fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund at the \$900 million level. We further recommend that a portion of this fund (1.5% or a minimum of \$10 million) be used for hunting, fishing and other recreational access to public lands.*

America's Great Outdoors:

Regarding President Obama's America's Great Outdoors Initiative (AGO) as chartered in April of 2010, the Council encourages you to work closely with the Secretaries of the Department of Defense (Army Corps of Engineers), Department of Commerce (NOAA) and Department of Energy (Renewable Energy and Alternative Fuels) – perhaps through the Council on Environmental Quality – to urge that they embrace the spirit and intent of AGO with respect to engaging Americans in outdoor recreation and in particular providing outdoor recreational access to public lands. Just as the Department of Agriculture and the Department of the Interior are investing in AGO via the budget process and their existing programs, so should these other agencies.

The programs highlighted above are of great importance to sportsmen and sportswomen and the collective conservation agenda of a broad coalition. As a Council, we add our voice to the voices of other conservation organizations you and the President have heard from on these critical issues. In doing so, we continue to stress that funding for the programs noted above is vital to the delivery of fish and wildlife conservation and the interests of sportsmen and women, landowners, communities, industry, and small businesses across the country. Thank you for your consideration of our request, a copy of which was also submitted to Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar.

Sincerely,



John Tomke, Chair
Wildlife and Hunting Heritage Conservation Council

Cc:

Robert Bonnie, Senior Advisor to the Secretary
Bruce Nelson, Administrator (acting), Farm Service Agency
Dave White, Chief, Natural Resources Conservation Service
Tom Tidwell, Chief, U.S. Forest Service