



National Recreation and Park Association

**Written Testimony of Kevin O'Hara, Vice President for Urban and Government Affairs
Committee on Appropriations,
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
Regarding Fiscal Year 2016 Appropriations
April 30, 2015**

Thank you Chairwoman Murkowski, Senator Udall, and other honorable members of the subcommittee for the opportunity to submit written testimony pertaining to funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund's (LWCF) State Assistance Program and the Urban Parks and Recreation Recovery Program (UPARR) in the Fiscal Year (FY) 2016 Interior Appropriations bill.

Overview of Funding Request:

As outlined below, we encourage you to renew the federal investment in the LWCF. However, given that the purpose of the Act is to help preserve, develop, and assure access to outdoor recreation facilities to strengthen the health of U.S. citizens, we urge you to make a greater investment in states and local communities by:

- Allocating a minimum of 40 percent of FY 2016 LWCF appropriations to the State Assistance Program;
- Continuing the innovative, "Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership" (ORLP) competitive grant program in the amount of \$5 million;
- Allocating up to \$25 million in funding for UPARR out of total FY 2016 LWCF appropriations; and,
- Ensuring that any amount allocated to either the ORLP or UPARR program is not done at the expense of the existing core formula grants distributed to the States for conservation and active recreation.

About the National Recreation and Park Association:

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA), is a nonprofit organization working to advance parks, recreation and environmental conservation efforts nationwide. Our members touch the lives of every American in every community every day. Through our network of approximately 48,000 citizen and professional members we represent park and recreation departments in cities, counties, townships, special park districts, and regional park authorities, along with citizens concerned with ensuring close-to-home access to parks and recreation opportunities exist in their communities. Everything we support and do is focused through our three pillars: Conservation; Health & Wellness and Social Equity.

40 Percent Allocation of Total LWCF Appropriations to the State Assistance Program:

There is a common misconception that LWCF is merely a federal land acquisition program. Nothing could be further from the truth, as the LWCF State Assistance Program provides dollar-for-dollar matching grants to states and local communities for the construction of outdoor recreation projects. The land purchased with LWCF State Assistance funding remains the property of the state or local government, and the resources developed through the LWCF remain publicly accessible in perpetuity.

The LWCF provides numerous benefits to local communities across America, and it does so through a dedicated funding source - namely oil and gas leasing revenues from the Outer Continental Shelf (OCS). Over \$9 billion was provided through these leases in 2013, with a small fraction provided to the LWCF. Unfortunately an even more miniscule amount is provided to the State Assistance Program. This is in large part due to the fact that current law mandates that a minimum of 40 percent of the total LWCF annual appropriations must be provided to the federal land acquisition program without specifying an amount for the State Assistance Program.

As a result, states and local communities have historically received a very disproportionate share of the total LWCF appropriations, with little more than 12 percent of total LWCF funding going to the State Assistance Program since 1998. More recently, in Fiscal Year 2013, when final discretionary spending was subject to “sequestration,” you provided \$305 million overall to the LWCF and \$39.9 million to the State Assistance Program – also 13 percent. We appreciate that you’ve recently recognized the importance of the State Assistance Program and allocated a larger percentage of total LWCF appropriations to it in FY2014 and FY2015 – pre-sequestration levels of \$45 million, which includes the innovative \$3 million “Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership” competitive grant program. However, even with these increases, State Assistance continues to receive less than 15% of overall LWCF appropriations.

What we find has gotten lost in the ongoing discussion over the reauthorization of the LWCF is, first and foremost, the issue of fairness in how LWCF dollars are being distributed. For nearly 50 years the bulk of the work to carry out the purpose of the Act has fallen on local communities to handle alone. While four-out-of-five Americans live in larger metropolitan areas, the LWCF is now only providing about 13% of overall funding to the very program – State Assistance -- which impacts people where they live, and recreate, the most. Urban communities, in particular, suffer from the severe lack of resources currently provided through the State Assistance program.

The State Assistance Program is consistently listed as a key tenant of the overall LWCF program. We value preserving and providing access to our national treasures for all to enjoy, but we want to remind you that many treasured areas are NOT located on federal property.

We’d like to specifically note that the Administration’s FY2016 Budget request includes a total of \$400 million in discretionary funding for the LWCF with the current \$50 million (12.5%) being allocated for the State Assistance Program continuing the pattern of falling well short of a fair and equitable percentage being made available for state and local outdoor recreation. We note that it would take \$160 million of overall LWCF appropriations to State Assistance to achieve the 40% threshold.

For the reasons outlined below, we are asking you to empower states and local communities to do more to preserve, develop, and assure access to outdoor recreation facilities to strengthen our nation by allocating 40 percent of total LWCF appropriations to the State Assistance Program in FY2016.

LWCF State Assistance’s Return on Investment and Return on Objective:

One of the key aspects of the LWCF State Assistance Program is the ability to create jobs. The outdoor recreation industry, as such is supported by LWCF State Assistance, is an economic powerhouse in the United States. According to the Outdoor Industry Association, the industry generates \$646 billion in consumer spending and supports over 6 million jobs annually.¹

¹ Outdoor Industry Association, “The Outdoor Recreation Economy Report 2012”

Considering there are 7,800 state and over 100,000 locally managed parks throughout the country, it is obvious that outdoor recreation is most prevalent at the state and local level. In fact, the National Association of State Park Directors reports that America's state park system contributes \$20 billion to local and state economies each year.² There is no doubt, that it is the LWCF State Assistance Program that provides the vast majority of places, spaces, and opportunities for outdoor recreation which stimulates the outdoor industry.

When viewed through the lens of the importance of the American outdoor recreation industry, the LWCF State Assistance Program has, for more than four decades, achieved a proven return on investment (ROI) demonstrated by the fact that nearly \$4 billion in federal support has leveraged over \$4 billion additional dollars in matching funds. But the benefits of this program, don't stop there, as the State Assistance Program has not only provided a ROI, but has also done a tremendous job of providing an outstanding return on objective for the American taxpayer by ensuring access for all.

It is well known that not everyone has the ability to visit one of our treasured national parks, and even those who do so are unable to on a regular basis as national parks are often vacation destinations or once-in-a-lifetime trips. To the average American, however, the neighborhood park – down the street, open and accessible to the public, and without an admission fee – is the most important public space in their lives. The majority of our country's public places, spaces, and opportunities for outdoor recreation are provided through the State Assistance program, with more than 42,000 grant projects covering nearly every county across America.

The LWCF State Assistance Program is the only federal investment tool dedicated to ensuring that Americans have access to close-to-home public recreation opportunities. Because the program develops and provides local outdoor recreation, millions of Americans, of all ages and abilities have places where they can regularly connect with nature, be physically active and simply enjoy the outdoors. It is a means by which this committee can provide investment to critically important local park infrastructure, including: a new soccer field at Sisterhood Park in Anchorage, Alaska; enhancements at Bluewater Lake State Park near Perwitt, New Mexico; and an accessible playground at Fall Creek Falls State Park in Spencer, Tennessee. Each of the aforementioned communities benefited from State Assistance grant funding since 2013.

LWCF State Assistance Provides Health and Environmental Benefits:

In addition to creating jobs and ensuring access for all, the LWCF State Assistance Program delivers tangible health benefits, contributing to the overall health and well-being of Americans. The National Park Service recognizes this through its Healthy Parks Healthy People US initiative, which aims to increase public recognition of parks and public lands (including state, local, and regional park and trail systems) as places for the promotion of physical, mental, and social health. The CDC reports that childhood obesity has tripled in the last 30 years, less than 25 percent of adults engage in recommended levels of physical activity, and that obesity is a leading cause of chronic disease. As noted by the CDC, increased access to parks, green space, and recreation opportunities is essential to becoming a healthier nation and reducing unsustainable health care costs.

The LWCF State Assistance Program also significantly contributes to protecting the environment and promoting environmental stewardship. LWCF State Assistance projects have a historical record of contributing to reduced and delayed storm water runoff volumes, enhanced

² NASPD Annual Report, March 2013

groundwater recharge, storm water pollutant reductions, reduced sewer overflow events, increased carbon sequestration, urban heat island mitigation and reduced energy demands, resulting in improved air quality, increased wildlife habitat, and increased land values on the local level.

Revitalizing Urban Parks and Recreation through Funding of UPARR:

While the LWCF has indeed benefited virtually every community in the country, many of our nation's cities and urbanized counties face distinct challenges that require additional resources. Recognizing this fact as well as the importance of public parks and recreation to larger urban renewal and community development efforts, Congress established the Urban Parks and Recreation Recovery Program (UPARR) to provide matching grants directly to localities in metropolitan areas. Over the course of more than two decades UPARR provided \$272 million for nearly 1,500 projects in 380 communities. This enabled neighborhoods across the country to restore both outdoor and indoor recreation facilities; support innovative recreational programming and enhance delivery of services and programs that provided constructive alternatives to at-risk youth.

Despite its successes, UPARR has not been funded since FY 2002, yet many of the urban open space and recreation challenges still exist today. NRPA is very pleased to see UPARR in the President's FY 2016 budget and calls on Congress to update and fund this needed program to enable metropolitan areas to address quality of life, health and wellness, and conservation issues as they work to make their communities more attractive for families and businesses alike. Both LWCF State Assistance and UPARR are critical to providing Americans close to home recreation opportunities. The programs complement each other and NRPA implores Congress to fund UPARR from total LWCF appropriations but not at the expense of the already underfunded State Assistance Program.

Maintaining The Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership Competitive Grant Program:

The FY 2014 Interior Appropriations package included an "additional" \$3 million of funding for a pilot "Competitive Grant Program" managed under the State Assistance Program. NRPA is pleased to have worked with NPS to help craft this pilot initiative and believes the first set of grantees will prove successful in highlighting the innovative projects and partnerships the State Assistance Program provides across America. We support the continuation of what is now called, the "Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership" (ORLP) program, provided the funds allocated are not done at the expense of the existing core formula grants distributed to the States for public recreation.

Madam Chairman and members of the committee, few programs can address so many national priorities as effectively as the LWCF State Assistance Program and UPARR, with so few dollars and without negatively impacting the federal budget. This subcommittee and Congress have the rare opportunity to achieve national goals without increasing spending or adding to the deficit, and can do so by adopting three simple recommendations: Allocate a minimum of 40 percent of LWCF funding to the State Assistance Program; continue the innovative ORLP grant program, and address the need for improved infrastructure in urban areas by allocating a portion of the total LWCF funding to UPARR.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share NRPA's recommendations and your consideration of our request.