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November 4, 2011

Mr. Joel Lynch
Office of Strategic Planning
National Park Service
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240

Re: LWCF State and Local Assistance Program

Dear Mr. Lynch:

Thank you for giving us an opportunity to review and comment on the proposed Stateside Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) national competitive grant program. In Washington State, the Recreation and Conservation Funding Board (board) through the Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO) administers the stateside LWCF program. We appreciate the efforts of the National Park Service (NPS) to plan for future funding for the program.

We believe that the existing LWCF program has worked well for many years and that NPS's interest in ensuring that federal priorities are met could be accomplished through minor modifications that link existing state planning and grant processes more closely to those priorities rather than creating a new national program.

If the NPS is firmly committed to a national program, we have several recommendations we believe would strengthen and streamline the process. Following this summarized list of recommendations is a more detailed explanation.

- Begin the national grant program only if total stateside funding exceeds \$200 million.
- If the competitive state grant program is created, and before placing remaining funds in the competitive pot, ensure states receive amounts at least equal to what they are currently getting.
- Include clear definitions of terms including metropolitan areas, significantly-sized projects, peer reviewers, panels, etc.
- Make it easy for states to modify their plans and selection processes to include the federal priorities for the competitive grant program.



- Clearly articulate what “filters” regional offices will use to determine if a project is submitted to the Washington office so that the parameters are consistent across the country and they are known up front.
- Notify applicants of suggested changes during the technical review and allow time for applicants to modify their proposals.
- Evaluate and rank projects on their own merits, not according to suggested changes that may or may not be incorporated into the project.
- Maintain the integrity of the process by funding projects based solely on their ranking.

Funding, Apportionment and Creation of the National Program

Our primary recommendation is that instead of splitting the funds and creating a separate competitive state grant program, NPS apportion all stateside monies using existing formulas. While the concept of a national competitive program is interesting, it seems like this proposal adds additional process at a time when Washington State, like other states, is experiencing significant budget shortfalls and is looking for ways to streamline processes and reduce impacts to grant applicants. As discussed below, we believe that federal priorities can be addressed and accommodated through other means.

If this proposal moves forward, we recommend that NPS disburse funds in a way that ensures states receive amounts equal to what they’ve had during the last few years, and then place any remaining funds into the pot for the competitive program. We also believe that the program should not be created if overall funding for stateside projects is less than \$200 million. As with other states, we have seen LWCF funding dramatically decline over the years. We are currently able to fund only one or two proposals and have a worthy backlog of many projects. Our first priority should be to adequately fund the traditional state program.

Also, please clarify whether this is the new plan for future LWCF funding or is this process planned for 2012 only. If it is setting the course for all future LWCF funding, we believe there needs to be a clear statement of the minimum funding levels needed before this process will be used.

Vision and Expectations

The vision and expectations for the program align well with the priorities for grants administered by our board. Similar to this proposal, the board has eliminated caps for some of its program to allow applicants to pursue large scale acquisitions and developments.

The proposed vision for the competitive program encourages “significantly-sized projects.” Does NPS plan to place limits on the amount requested for a project? Will there be a minimum and maximum request amount? Is there a plan for some type of equitable distribution to the regions? We recommend you define or provide examples of “significantly-sized” projects and if there are limits, that you clearly articulate that up front. Also, we believe it should be clarified if the funds would be for a single project or a consolidated project. For example, would a package involving a cross-state trail with funding disbursed to various jurisdictions, qualify for fund consideration?

We also believe there needs to be a clear definition of “metropolitan area.” How does NPS describe communities with “significant population densities?” Also, there are many states where the most populous urban areas are much smaller than populated areas in other states. We recommend that NPS define a metropolitan area, describe or provide examples of “significant population” densities, and incorporate into the definitions urban areas in less populated states.

We believe consideration should be given to less populated communities that serve as outdoor recreation destinations for people living in metropolitan areas (or example communities that are destinations for water recreation, mountain climbing, snow skiing, fishing, and off-road vehicle recreation). Also, many important natural conservation landscapes are just outside of metropolitan areas. These are great candidates for protection since they serve to connect children with nature through the environmental programs that are typically offered by the land managers. It is important that the rules clearly allow these projects to be eligible.

Proposed Process

We urge that states be allowed to use their existing processes to develop and submit projects to NPS for the competitive state grant program. Currently, to participate in the stateside LWCF program, states must develop a statewide comprehensive outdoor recreation plan (SCORP) and must develop an open project selection process (OPSP). The Recreation and Conservation Funding Board uses a standing advisory committee made up of representatives from state and local agencies, citizens, and a representative from NPS to review program plans, policies, and project proposals. Committee members, who have experience and expertise in outdoor recreation, habitat conservation, and preservation of open space, use the board adopted OPSP to score and rank projects for fund consideration. Our process is open and all funding decisions are made in open meetings where members of the public are given an opportunity to comment. Our OPSP assesses how well a project meets the priorities outlined in SCORP and includes an evaluation criteria to assess how well a project meets federal priorities outlined in the AGO report.

Since each state develops its own SCORP and OPSP, the regional NPS staff could work with states and figure out the best way to incorporate federal priorities, and the best way to conduct the technical review to ensure eligibility, compliance with the LWCF Act, and consistency with SCORP.

The proposal states the NPS regional staff would “filter as necessary” before forwarding projects to the Washington office. If these “filters” involve issues that relate to the eligibility of the applicant or the project proposal, we recommend that NPS clearly define them so the parameters are known up front. We are concerned about applicants taking time to prepare and submit proposals only to find they are “filtered” out of the competition without a clear understanding of why. Providing clarity now helps ensure an open, consistent, and fair process.

We also believe it is important to define up front who will be the peer reviewers and that this group include representatives from the states. We strongly encourage selection of a diverse committee with citizen and governmental representation and inclusion of individuals from across the country who have knowledge and expertise in outdoor recreation and natural resource issues and who can objectively use the evaluation criteria to review, evaluate, and rank projects.

The last bullet of the proposed process on page 2 says the completed application should include suggested changes (as identified by the panels) to the original proposals. We are not clear what is meant by “panels.” Second, we recommend that any “suggested changes” be identified and shared during technical review. The applicant can then incorporate recommended changes into their proposals before projects are evaluated.

One statement of concern is that after the ranking by the peer reviewers, projects could be selected “out of order based on overarching competition factors.” This could turn a fair competition into something that could be perceived differently. If there are “overarching

competition factors” that would elevate one project over another, those factors should be clearly incorporated into the evaluation criteria so each state has the opportunity to consider those factors when deciding which projects to submit for competition.

The two-step process of submitting a “pre-application” for state and regional review and requiring complete applications only for the projects selected is very helpful. It should reduce application costs and make it easier for financially stretched communities to participate in the competition.

Evaluation Criteria

One of the factors being considered, “Project Costs and Leveraging,” speaks to the sponsor’s ability to leverage or exceed the match required. If a one-to-one match is required, it seems like the criteria should assess or give additional points for match already secured and that exceeds the minimum.

We encourage NPS to use a numeric scoring system for ranking projects. However, we also recommend distributing complete scoring results to the states/applicants. Seeing the scores and rankings will help states determine whether to resubmit a project during future grant rounds or to understand what modifications are needed to better meet the national priorities.

Again thank you for giving us the opportunity to comment on this proposal. If you have questions or need additional information, please let us know. The letter from NPS asked for nomination of an individual with grants experience to participate in a small workgroup to consider the proposed project criteria. I recommend Marguerite Austin, Recreation Grants Manager, of my office to participate. She has 23 years of experience working with the Stateside LWCF program and would be a great asset. You may contact Marguerite at (360) 902-3016 or e-mail marguerite.austin@rco.wa.gov.

Sincerely,

 Rachael Hanger, Deputy Director


Kaleen Cottingham
Director