

Transition Team Brief on the Land & Water Conservation Fund
Presented by National Association of State Outdoor Recreation Liaison Officers
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Economic Recovery:

Recent studies have shown the economic impact of outdoor recreation is significant and growing. The 42,000 outdoor recreation sites acquired and developed through the State Assistance program of LWCF are distributed equitably though out the nation in both urban and rural locations. These sites form the close to home attractions that significantly contribute to the outdoor recreation economy. There is no doubt these areas and facilities also account for a significant amount of equipment sales, camping and RV purchases, travel expenses and form the basis for both rural and community tourism.

The LWCF grants need to be matched, doubling the impact of the federal investment. These projects infuse dollars into local and state economies and create and sustain jobs. 75 % of recent grant projects are for infrastructure upgrades and new construction resulting in good-paying, family sustaining jobs in engineering, planning and construction. The increase in LWCF state grants and the required matching funds in the future, will add over one billion dollars to the nation's economic output and sustain nearly 12,000 jobs. These jobs are in addition to the staff hired to operate and maintain these facilities at the state and local level. The state assistance program of LWCF significantly supports the Biden Administration's stated goals of Economic Recovery.

Data shows an equitable distribution of LWCF projects throughout the nation. Urban, city, county and rural communities have outdoor recreation projects funded by the State Assistance Program within their jurisdictions. Most of the state parks are cited in rural settings and have a significant impact on rural economies. State parks and other rural outdoor recreation projects funded by LWCF contribute significantly to local, county and state government revenues from the developments of the projects themselves, and travel to and use of these assets.

Grant Match Temporary Reduction: LWCF grants require a 50% match. NASORLO research indicates project match rises to approximately 61% or higher in some cases. The pandemic has crippled budgets while the need for public outdoor recreation outlets has grown. Communities are challenged under the best of circumstances to provide outdoor recreational services and address park needs. To encourage greater community park investment, public-private partnerships and enhance economic recovery, NASORLO recommends reducing the LWCF match requirement to 20% over the next five years. As demonstrated in other Federal programs, lower match amounts are not unprecedented. (First 100 days)

State Apportionment: State apportionments are formula based and transmitted by the Secretary of Interior to Governors. Over the past decade, Interior has taken as long as ten months to issue the Certificates of Apportionment. NASORLO seeks Certificate issuance within 45-days of budget passage. (First 100 days)

Obligation Limit: The LWCF Program currently requires state to obligate apportionments within three years of budget passage. NASORLO recommends extending the obligation limit to five-years to allow project sponsors more time to raise the necessary matching funds or to solicit donations so projects can be completed. We believe this is a critical change that will prove to be significant in assisting state and local project sponsors to successfully apply for and complete outdoor recreation projects in the LWCF program.

Covid-19:

Covid-19 has impacted parks and park users. Initial directives or recommended health practices temporarily closed or reduced park capacities. As impacts from the pandemic evolved officials and people realized they needed the outdoors as a safe and healthy way to deal with the other personal and public restrictions on their lives. Close to home outdoor places saw record visitation and in some cases limits on use had to be implemented. These circumstances reinforced the values of public parks and showed the need for upgraded facilities and more opportunities. Parks once again validated their deserved place in the fabric of our communities by providing immediate physical and mental health relief to pandemic conditions.

NASORLO and its partners anticipate the 2020 park use and exposure to these places will accelerate an increase in demand for parks and facilities. Ramping up park infrastructure improvements, developing new parks and filling gaps in the provision of outdoor activity for underserved areas will be valuable in managing the related lingering and expected ongoing effects of COVID by allowing people to be outside and dispersed in safe and accessible places.

Public Information: In order to ensure that LWCF Stateside Assistance Program assisted sites are publicly available an updated accurate map/GIS of LWCF assisted should be completed by National Park Service and NASORLO. This new GIS will guide the public to parks and outdoor places essential for life-sustaining health and wellness activities and celebrate the legacy made possible for these federal, state, and local investments through the LWCF program.

Racial Equity:

States evaluate grant proposals by scoring projects based upon priorities identified in each State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP), as required by the LWCF Act. SCORPs identify and address assets, needs and gaps in the delivery of outdoor opportunities. In many states underserved communities and racial discrepancies in access to outdoor recreation are noted and prioritized. The Outdoor Recreation Legacy Program funded through the LWCF State Assistance program is one effort to address these needs in underserved urban settings. Other racial inequities, including those in Native American, Latino, Black and other under-served communities have and can be addressed through the LWCF program. The formula for distributing LWCF funds to states also takes these needs into account. Another issue has been these communities raising the necessary matching funds and sponsors to fund these projects. NASORLO's recommendation to reduce the matching requirement, is one way to facilitate successful project applications by underserved communities.

It should be noted that not all interests may be represented in the state planning process and this deficiency and a plan to be more inclusive in setting LWCF grant priorities could be identified and addressed as part of our proposed **LWCF Stateside Working Group**. This working group is essential to better identify issues and gaps in the state grants program and seems necessary to better implement the Biden priorities. It should be noted many variables influence outdoor recreation preferences. These preferences vary from group to group. Understanding preferences is essential in designing and building parks that reach underserved populations and should be addressed in the State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plans.

Climate Change:

Parks are key spaces that help resist the tide of climate change and contribute to climate resiliency. Most LWCF park projects, have an array of natural vegetation, many in state and regional parks include large stands of native forest. Local parks also have a wide variety of natural and landscaping vegetation, including shrubs and trees. Growing the number of community and state parks across the nation will help reduce climate change impacts, increase air quality in the city and facilitate climate resiliency.

In addition, when outmoded or dated park infrastructure and facilities are replaced with alternative energy sources and efficient systems, as has happened already in many parks throughout the nation, these actions result in energy reductions. Installing renewable energy sources in parks will create trade specific jobs, help combat climate change, improve air quality, and reduce energy budgets.

Program Modernization

NASORLO's depth and breadth and active responsibility for LWCF administration give our members unique perspectives and abilities. Over time, decisions that were normally made at the National Park Service Regional level or by states have been centralized to Washington officials. The result is un-necessary delays, misunderstandings and overly restrictive interpretations that go beyond the intent of the law. NASORLO has addressed program modernization and administrative accommodations over the past few years, but we have seen no real changes.

To implement the Biden agenda, while addressing LWCF Program efficiency and effectiveness, we recommend establishing and empowering a team of experienced State LWCF administrators, Interior and National Park Service officials, with involvement of Congressional staff and the National Governors Association, in developing a **LWCF Stateside Working Group** to identify inefficiencies, define specific solutions to issues, and have authority to implement mutually agreed upon permanent program changes. NASORLO recommends specific attention to the following issues identified by our LWCF Modernization Committee:

- Federal LWCF Stateside Program obligations and perpetual stewardship are a strain on State offices administering LWCF Stateside Assistance. For example, the 44,000 sites in place today must be monitored to assure boundary integrity. *We recommend allowing up to 10% of a State's annual apportionment to be used to support direct and indirect costs of program management.*
- Sites of LWCF investment are required to remain in-tact in perpetuity inside a 6(f)(3) boundary. NPS now requires project sponsors to expand the 6(f) boundaries well beyond the LWCF project investment site and is overriding State administrative review and approval. *It is a priority to restore State's authority to approve site boundaries.*
- There are conditions that cause LWCF grant recipient sponsors to request boundary changes. The process for boundary conversion and replacement lands can take multiple years to receive NPS approval. *NASORLO would like this authority, especially on smaller conversions and on determining timeframes for temporary non-conforming uses, either delegated to the states or resolved in a more timely manner.*
- As indicated, SCORPs are required to maintain State eligibility for LWCF and identify funding priorities. Currently, the federal requirement is to complete each state SCORP every five years. While States support outdoor recreation research and policy encompassed in outdoor recreation plans, to allow more efficient management of LWCF on the state level, *NASORLO seeks to extend the requirement to a ten-year period.*