

Committee on Resources

Full Committee

Testimony

H.R. 701, "Conservation and Reinvestment Act of 1999
and
H.R. 798, "Resources 2000 Act"
Testimony Presented Before the
House of Representatives
Committee on Resources
by
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Mr. Chairman and members of the House of Representatives Committee on Resources, My name is Paul Hansen; I appreciate the opportunity to present the views of the Izaak Walton League of America on the Conservation and Reinvestment Act and the Resources 2000 Act. These legislative proposals, taken together with other similar proposals being considered in the Senate and along with the administration's Lands Legacy initiative, offer a truly historic opportunity to significantly advance the conservation of important natural resources. The Izaak Walton League is now in its 77th year of grassroots conservation work. We have 50,000 members and supporters throughout the country working in their local communities and on national conservation and environmental issues in over 325 chapters. It is our members who set our conservation policy and it is on their behalf that I provide these comments.

In our view, this is an especially critical and auspicious time to secure a reliable, long-overdue financial commitment to our nation's natural resources. At the brink of a new millennium, with a strong and vibrant national economy producing budget surpluses at the federal and state levels and with bi-partisan support in both houses of Congress -- now is the time to get it done. The legislative proposals that are the subject of this hearing demonstrate exactly the kind of leadership, determination and cooperation necessary to accomplish this task. I want to share with you my wish and that of our members to see all parties working together with the singular goal of achieving a major victory for natural resources in this session of Congress. We are deeply committed to working with you and others to that end.

I am especially pleased, as you requested, to address the League's interests with respect to the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) provisions of these bills. The League has a long and abiding interest in LWCF. You may know that Joe Penfold, a former Conservation Director of the League, conceived of this program 35 years ago as part of his participation on the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Committee. Our members fought hard for it then, and LWCF has had our determined and continuing support. However, League members have been over the years equally distressed to watch as the original promise of this program was robbed year after year in the appropriations process. We have watched in dismay as \$13 billion of important land conservation efforts have gone unmet while these funds were diverted for unintended purposes. I cannot overstate the importance to our members of full, permanent funding for this program.

LWCF is a critical conservation tool that supports land stewardship in two ways. It provides for acquisition of federal lands to complete National Wildlife Refuges and create important new refuges. These special lands are crucial to maintaining the nation's abundant wildlife resources. Much of the good that should flow from the recent passage of the organic act for the National Wildlife Refuge System will not be realized without a fully funded LWCF. We appreciate the pivotal role played by the leadership of this committee in crafting and passing that landmark legislation - a model for the current effort before us.

Other systems of federal lands rely equally on LWCF to complete acquisition within their authorized boundaries and purchase in-holdings from willing and often eager sellers. Some of these willing sellers have been waiting for some time for provision of sufficient financial resources to accommodate their sales. Federal acquisition needs also include new lands of special conservation value. It is often not possible to predict when these lands will become available thus management agencies must have flexibility to respond to opportunities as they arise - this includes readily available financial resources.

Our systems of public lands are assets of immeasurable value that we can and must pass on to future generations. They are the envy of the world and draw tourists from every part of the world to see and enjoy. Without securing, conserving and expanding these land resources, we foreclose future opportunities for our children and theirs as they seek to exercise wise stewardship of the legacy they will inherit.

We fully support expanding federal ownership of lands in the eastern half of the country. Expanded public lands would increase opportunities for outdoor recreation where demands from burgeoning population centers is high and fragmentation of natural habitats is impacting wildlife populations as well as wildlife-dependant recreation. In fact, League members are now working aggressively to restore a portion of the original 50,000 acre Grand Kankakee marsh, on the border of Indiana and Illinois, now designated as the Grand Kankakee Marsh National Wildlife Refuge. This is a hugely important wetland restoration effort that would have major, far-reaching benefits for resident and migratory wildlife alike. Its ultimate success will depend on the LWCF.

We understand the concern of western states regarding federal land acquisition especially where some states already have large portions of their acreage in federal ownership. However, we are concerned about the provision in Sec. 202 of H.R. 701 requiring that two-thirds of funds for federal acquisitions be spent east of the 100th meridian. This provision creates an unwise, and we think unnecessary, restriction that could well result in lost opportunities to conserve important and critical western land resources. The Payment in Lieu of Taxes provision in Title II should alleviate some of the concerns relating to the financial impact of increased federal land ownership in these states. We should also acknowledge that these public lands provide an economic resource to states and local communities. They contribute to the quality of life that draws visitors from around the country who support many local economies whether from hunting and fishing, other forms of outdoor recreation. Or simply vacationing.

LWCF also provides for important state conservation and outdoor recreation needs. Funding for this part of LWCF has been particularly neglected in recent years. The state-side program can provide resources that states and localities need to help control and mitigate for urban sprawl. Sprawl, with its consequences to quality of life, is a growing concern across the country, a trend clearly identified in the last election cycle. Sprawl is, as shown in a study we just released, an important limiting factor to hunter access and other wildlife-dependent recreation. Copies of this report have been provided for the committee members and an Executive Summary is appended to this testimony.

Time is against us in the battle to wisely manage land use and conserve open space across our country.

Planning options for local communities increasingly are foreclosed. Now is the strategic time to address this problem, and financial resources must be provided to help. Once converted to developed uses, open space is lost and with it the wildlife and other amenity values it supports.

For the record, it is fair to say that given a choice between the funding level provided for LWCF in H.R. 701 and H.R. 798, we would predictably choose the later which provides more funding for both the federal and state sides of the program. The need will continue to out-strip available resources. Every conservation dollar is important.

For many years, the League has worked with groups around the country to secure a dedicated funding source for state fish and wildlife agencies. The agencies need these funds primarily for non-game wildlife management. This category of wildlife, unlike game and threatened and endangered species, has no specifically directed funding. We continue to feel that the Teaming With Wildlife funding mechanism that called for a small excise tax on outdoor equipment would have addressed an equity issue. Hunters and anglers have for decades willingly paid such a tax on their equipment and continue to provide the vast majority of funding for state fish and wildlife agencies. While we regret the loss of an opportunity to create equity in funding for wildlife, we do fully support the principle of reinvesting revenue from non-renewable resources in renewable natural resources -- the concept embodied in LWCF and as provided for in these bills.

The need for financial support of state fish and wildlife agencies is well documented. Support is long overdue, both from within the states and from a dedicated federal source. We believe that federal aid is a critical and appropriate component. Wildlife is oblivious to political boundaries. While states have a statutory responsibility for managing most wildlife, these populations can and do cross boundaries and are a part of the nation's commonly held assets. All citizens have an interest in the wellbeing of wildlife populations, regardless of geography.

The states have the lion's share of responsibility to provide for the needs of wildlife under their stewardship. With a few notable exceptions, they have not met this responsibility. Twenty-one states currently contribute no general or dedicated funds to their fish and wildlife agencies, and another twenty-one provide less than 20 percent (based on fiscal 1995 data). These agencies are supported entirely by license fees and existing federal aid programs - this at a time when nearly every state is experiencing a budget surplus. We are about to release a report detailing the relationship between economic benefits derived from and state reinvestment in fish and wildlife conservation. We will see that members of this committee receive a copy of that report.

The state matching provisions in Title III, Sec. 305(d) of H. R. 701 should provide a positive incentive for states to do better. However, we feel that the proposed 90:10, federal:state initial matching ratio misses an opportunity. We would encourage a matching requirement on the order of 25 percent at the outset in order to challenge the states to do their fair share consistent with existing formula - not a federal giveaway, but a partnership for wildlife. It is equally important that state matching funds not be diverted from existing fish and wildlife agency programs.

Amending the existing Pittman-Robertson, Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act to provide for allocation of these new funds to the states makes good sense, and the distribution formula is equitable. Our current federal aid programs have a long track record of achievement and effective operation, and we support that approach for handling the distribution of this new revenue.

With regard to Title I of H.R. 701, we continue to be concerned that the issue of possible incentives for

increased oil and gas development is adequately addressed. We have been reassured with statements by the bill's sponsors' expressing their similar intentions. We remain willing to continue cooperative efforts to resolve this matter in bill language.

Lastly, given the realities of budget constraints, we want to reiterate our opposition to seeking any budget offset that may be necessary from other important programs in Function 300 - Natural Resources and Environment. Robbing Peter to pay Paul is not an acceptable solution.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee - let me end by challenging all of us to set aside politics and organizational and personal agendas to work together on this important initiative. We have a unique and fragile window of opportunity to accomplish a historic conservation measure. If we do it boldly, not shrinking from the size of the task or magnitude of the financial need, and if we do it right, not trading one valued resource for another, then we can do it now - and in a way that will allow us all to celebrate together.

Thank you for your attention.

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