

September 30, 2010

The Honorable Nancy Sutley
Council on Environmental Quality
722 Jackson Place, NW
Washington, DC 20503

The Honorable Lisa Jackson
Environmental Protection Agency
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20460

The Honorable Ken Salazar
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington DC 20240

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

Embrace Private Conservation Partnerships to Conserve America's Great Outdoors

Dear Administrator Jackson, Secretary Salazar, Chairwoman Sutley, and Secretary Vilsack:

On behalf of America's 1,600 land trusts, we applaud President Obama for recognizing the potential of partnering with locally supported organizations to chart a new path for conservation in the 21st century. In communities across America, land trusts are working with private landowners to keep key farm, ranch and forest lands in productive use, create community parks and open space, protect important fish and wildlife habitat, and conserve our scenic and historic heritage. You have heard from many of them at the America's Great Outdoors listening sessions you held this summer.

Below we suggest steps the Administration could champion to take this conservation work to a new level, and empower land trusts to greatly expand their conservation impact. The Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) program provides an excellent model for this. By encouraging collaborative partnerships between state and local agencies, nonprofit land trusts and private landowners, GOCO leverages commitments from all partners to create broadly-supported, cost-effective, highly leveraged conservation. GOCO also recognizes that strong partnerships require strong partners by providing capacity building grants to local conservation organizations.

1. Create permanent tax incentives for conservation by private landowners. Such incentives have helped America's land trusts protect more than 10 million of acres of significant wildlife habitat, productive working lands, and historic landscapes. By leveraging the generosity and conservation spirit of America's farmers, ranchers and forest owners and the locally-grounded, entrepreneurial efforts of land trusts, such donations and bargain sales can make land protection work on a large scale, at modest cost. Foremost amongst such ideas are:

- Make an enhanced income tax deduction for donations of conservation easements a permanent part of the tax code (H.R. 1831/S. 812).
- Expand the estate tax incentive for donations of easements (H.R. 3050/S. 3640)
- Prevent the estate tax from forcing the fragmentation, sale and loss of family-owned farms, ranches and forests by deferring estate tax on such lands (H.R. 4575/S. 3664).

2. Provide full and dedicated funding of the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) and Forest Legacy Program, and provide for more flexibility in their use. We believe that creating a competitive grants program to directly support locally-driven partnerships that are achieving

nationally important goals is an important way to leverage conservation funding and encourage collaborative partnerships that bring many hands to solve conservation problems, and build broad community and political support for their work. Funding the purchase of land and easements by land trusts can solve many conservation problems that federal acquisition alone cannot.

3. Commit significant new funding for the important easement programs in the Farm Bill, and reward applicants who are part of a strategic initiative. The Farm and Ranch Land Protection grants program is a great model for collaborative conservation, with landowners often donating a large share of the cost and land trusts and state governments taking on the stewardship responsibilities for its easements. The Grassland Reserve Program promises similar benefits, on an even bigger scale, if provided adequate funding. Giving special preference to applicants that are part of a larger landscape initiative plan, public or private, can make this program even more effective.

We look forward to working with this Administration to implement a conservation vision that nurtures the energies of local conservation partnerships to preserve the special places that are an essential part of the American Dream.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Rand Wentworth", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Rand Wentworth
President