

**American Rivers • Clean Water Action • Defenders of Wildlife • Earthjustice • Endangered Species Coalition • Environment America • Environmental Defense Fund • Izaak Walton League • Land Trust Alliance • National Parks Conservation Association • National Wildlife Federation • The Nature Conservancy • Sierra Club • Trust for Public Land • The Wilderness Society • World Wildlife Fund**

**Program Proposal from Conservation and Environmental Organizations  
A Landscape-scale Conservation Initiative for the U.S.**

**February 1, 2010**

**Introduction**

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Americans realized that the industrial revolution and rapid increases in population were threatening our country's extraordinary natural lands and waterways. A great national movement for land conservation was born of this concern. With the leadership of people like John Muir, Gifford Pinchot and Theodore Roosevelt, conservationists set aside public lands to protect water, forests, and wildlife habitat and to provide opportunities for recreation and renewal in the outdoors.

There continues to be a broad public consensus that such places are a valuable national legacy to be passed on by each generation to the next. Conservation of our natural resources at a large scale is widely supported by the American people.

But our national legacy of natural and recreational resources is now threatened by an ever-growing population, unplanned infrastructure development, climate change, and unsustainable demands on water resources.

The cumulative impact of these threats, if we do not respond to them, will be an accelerated fragmentation of the American countryside—the separation of plants and animals from their essential habitats, of watersheds from downstream estuaries, of people from experiences in the outdoors, of Americans from our common historic and natural heritage. Our lands and waters will be broken into pieces beyond repair to the detriment of the health, happiness and welfare of the American people.

We believe the Obama Administration can address these threats by collaborating with communities across America to create a new and popular legacy of large conservation and recreation areas that will reconnect Americans to their land and water and represent a tangible, durable and visible accomplishment by the President and his natural resource agencies.

**Our Vision for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Conservation**

Our vision is for the Federal government to act as the catalyst for federal, state, tribal and local agencies and private interests to work together across America to protect a network of critical ecosystems, natural resource areas and recreation lands from the inner city to wild lands. This network would include:

- Large areas of mostly undeveloped public and private land including existing, expanded and new Federal and state parks, forests and refuges insulated from the impacts of unplanned growth by working farm, ranch and forest lands protected with conservation easements and other economic based land conservation measures. These open space corridors should conserve whole functioning ecosystems that will be resilient to climate change and provide a wide range of recreational opportunities and other services to people. Examples are the Crown of the Continent in Montana and the Northern Cumberlands in Tennessee, Kentucky and Virginia.
- Important rivers, their watersheds and estuaries where a combination of acquisition of land in fee and easement, non-point pollution reduction measures, restoration incentives, and the creation of blueways (the water equivalent to hiking trails) provide clean and abundant water for human use and to sustain aquatic species as well as opportunities for water-related recreation. Examples include the Cache River in Arkansas, the Penobscot River in Maine, tributaries to the Chesapeake Bay, Puget Sound, and the Congaree River Blue Trail in South Carolina.
- Metropolitan and urban parks and greenways that structure urban growth, connect urban area residents to natural areas, and provide access to high quality recreation. Large scale urban greenways, park, and trail systems can greatly enhance the opportunity for all Americans to experience the outdoors and learn about nature. Examples include the Chattahoochee River in greater Atlanta, the South Platte River Greenway and Commons Park in Denver, and the San Francisco Bay trail system.
- Cultural landscapes that protect and interpret America's diverse cultural heritage. Examples include the Blackstone Valley National Heritage Corridor in Massachusetts and Rhode Island and the Trail of Tears in Oklahoma.

## Key Goals

The key goals of this effort are:

- **To protect ecosystem integrity and connectivity.** Ecosystem fragmentation impairs the survival of plants, fish and wildlife and the natural systems on which they depend, as well as the many benefits provided to human communities by healthy ecosystems.

- **To restore and protect water resources.** Water quantity and quality to sustain habitat and for human use are dependent upon whole watershed conservation strategies.
- **To provide access to high quality outdoor recreation for all Americans.** The health and fitness of children depends upon having safe places to play; family life is greatly enhanced by access to relaxation and adventure in the out of doors both close to home and in natural areas across the country.
- **To assist fish, wildlife and other natural resources and human communities to adapt to climate change.** The conservation of large, connected landscapes is a key factor in helping natural systems to be resilient to climate change. Protection of large watersheds and their wetlands is essential to mitigating the impacts of flood and drought that result from changing weather patterns.
- **To sustain the working farms, ranches and forests so important to our economy and our environment.** Private owners hold 70% of land in America; these lands provide important habitat, are a foundation of the American economy, and are an important part of our culture.
- **To protect and interpret the cultural resources that is part of our national heritage.**
- **To enhance the economic and environmental viability and the quality of life of metropolitan areas.** Federal, state, and local parks, greenways, trails and natural areas in or around urban metropolitan areas are essential to economic development, reducing the impacts of global warming and fostering the health and well-being of the American people.

### **Proposed Program Attributes**

We propose a program to accomplish these goals that includes a related combination of actions to appropriate additional funds, to authorize new authorities and to take administrative actions within existing law. Given this mix of actions the program should have the following attributes:

- Provide Federal matching funds to broad based coalitions for the planning and coordination of strategies to conserve whole watersheds, ecosystems, greenways and corridors.
- Focus existing Federal programs and authorities in these areas
- Maximize the use of existing administrative authorities that can readily be brought to bear with little additional funding or delay
- Use the fully funded Land and Water Conservation Fund as a key resource for this program recognizing that, even at full funding, the LWCF cannot meet all program needs.
- Include acquisition and designation of new protected areas, including national parks, national wildlife refuges, national monuments, wilderness areas, wild and scenic rivers and national conservation areas as components of larger conserved landscapes.
- Employ existing and new tax incentives, tax credits, easement purchase programs, ecosystem service payments, cost share and reserve programs and

management agreements to encourage the conservation of private working lands as part of larger conservation areas.

- Leverage additional funding from state, local and private sources to support landscape-scale projects under this initiative.
- Facilitate integrated planning among all levels of government, and, particularly among Federal agencies, to achieve more effective conservation of whole ecosystems and watersheds.
- Adopt guidelines for nominating and selecting a network of public and private protected areas and corridors that will accomplish the long term conservation of native and desirable non-native wildlife, geologic, paleontological and archeological resources, and terrestrial, freshwater, and marine ecosystems; these guidelines may reference State Wildlife and Forest Plans and other surveys identifying areas desirable for conservation through public and private means.
- Where possible, link these places to facilitate ecosystem connectivity, wildlife conservation and movement, and public access
- Select sites and designs conservation activities with the express purpose of reducing greenhouse gas emissions and adapting areas to the effects of climate change
- Encourage the hands-on involvement in conservation by an engaged public, and, particularly, young people so that we can pass on our concern for our natural heritage to the next generation.

### **Initial Funding**

Obviously none of this can happen without sufficient funding. This initiative will require incremental increases to a number of existing Federal programs:

- The Administration and Congress should accelerate the President's commitment to fully fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund by providing \$600 million in 2011, \$750 million in FY 2012, \$900 million in FY2013 and an inflation-adjusted level of \$3.4 billion per year by 2015. The LWCF should be enhanced to provide for a national competitive program to leverage state and local funding initiatives. Under this expanded program, LWCF money should be used to a greater extent for the purchase of conservation easements to protect private working ranches, farms and forests. Expanded LWCF funding should come from existing and new mineral revenues to the Department of the Interior which are sufficient to cover the projected costs. New funds should not be raised in ways that are an incentive to inappropriate or damaging development. In addition the Administration should support full, permanent and dedicated funding for LWCF as provided by S.2747 introduced by Senators Bingaman and Baucus and similar legislation introduced in the House by Representative Rahall.
- Continue funding for the Forest Legacy and Cooperative Endangered Species Programs in addition to and not part of the full funding of LWCF.

- Make the enhanced tax deductions for donated conservation easements a permanent part of the tax code. (H.R. 1831 has 261 House co-sponsors) Create transferable federal tax credits for donations of conservation easements in federally designated ecosystems
- Provide an inflation adjustment in the estate tax incentives for donated conservation easements.
- Expand or maintain funding for a wide range of other existing conservation programs in the Departments of the Interior, Agriculture, Commerce and Defense.
- Dedicate significant resources from a portion of the revenues generated by any cap and trade program to help U.S. ecosystems survive climate change; this should be distributed to the LWCF and federal and state natural resource agencies in accordance with the formula in S. 1933 introduced by Sens. Bingaman, Baucus, Whitehouse and Udall.
- Include a \$50 million allocation in one of the “continuing authority” programs in the next Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) to provide watershed restoration funds for watersheds selected under this initiative
- Coordinate and revise use of these programs with an explicit goal of leveraging state and local conservation funding to provide match for Federal funding initiatives

### **Start-up Strategy**

Given practical and fiscal constraints, a pragmatic approach is needed to get such a program up and running in the near term. Begin the program with two kinds of pilot projects: Landscape/watershed scale projects and metropolitan green space projects. The program should:

- Use existing authorities
- Employ an incremental and modular start-up so that the program can be expanded from pilots and through increasing levels of interagency cooperation and increasing funding over time
- The President should issue an Executive Order requiring that federal agencies coordinate their planning and management practices to protect ecosystems across jurisdictional boundaries.
- Where appropriate, the President should designate additional protected areas in conjunction with specific landscape pilot projects
- The Secretary of the Interior should issue a Secretarial Order requiring that any action taken on Interior Lands within ecosystems selected through this program will require early consultation and an agreement to protect the ecosystem
- The pilot projects would be supported by using matching state and local funds to leverage Federal landscape catalyst funds and by focusing other existing or expanded Federal programs in landscape project areas.

### **An Obama Administration Conservation Legacy**

We live in a society that disagrees about many things, but a September, 2009 national public opinion poll by The Nature Conservancy revealed that 79% of voters would support a program in which federal agencies, states, local communities and non-profit organizations worked together to accomplish land, water and wildlife conservation at a large scale. Very high majorities in favor of such a program were consistent across all political affiliations and regions.

We can achieve this by dedicating and directing a portion of the income already being received in mineral revenues and other sources to restore and conserve America's most important watersheds, greenways and ecosystems. This new initiative can realize our shared responsibility to meet the unprecedented threats that will otherwise separate Americans from the lands, waters and outdoor spaces that we all treasure. This initiative would bring Americans together around the love they hold in common for our nation's great natural places. This would be a remarkable gift from the Obama Administration to present and future generations of Americans.

It is our view, finally, that, while the path ahead may be steep, the journey to saving America's environmental heritage should never be thought of as a burden, but rather as the shared national privilege of passing on to those who follow us the healthy and beautiful natural systems that sustain the diversity of our native plants and animals and upon which our own lives depend".