

June 28, 2023

Senator Jeff Merkley
Chairman
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment
and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20515

Senator Lisa Murkowski
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment
and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Merkley and Ranking Member Murkowski:

As your subcommittee's markup of the FY24 Interior Appropriations bill approaches, we write to express our strong support for several programs in your jurisdiction as well as our opposition to new policy riders that, if included, would greatly complicate passage of this important bill.

Although we acknowledge your subcommittee's allocation this year will require some tough decisions on your part, we believe the programs listed below demonstrate their value each year by improving the quality of life for tens of millions of people in communities across the country. We strongly encourage the subcommittee to fund the important priorities below to at least at the levels contained in the President's budget request and to oppose new policy riders that would undermine conservation.

Land and Water Conservation Fund

The Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) advances federal, state, and local efforts to conserve irreplaceable lands and expands access to the outdoors in communities across the country. We appreciate your work in FY23 to fully invest in LWCF and continue the long-standing bipartisan support for LWCF. We urge you to ensure we build on LWCF's record of success in FY24 by including specific project lists, providing a balanced allocation among programs, and protecting prior-year funds from rescissions.

The President's FY24 budget request for more \$1 billion for LWCF, along with \$288 million for land acquisition, will help address immediate needs and support growth in the outdoor recreation economy. We also urge you to allocate at least \$130 million to the Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership (ORLP), which is the only federal program focused exclusively on supporting parks and recreation in cities.

Additionally, we urge you to maintain the approach from the FY23 bill that retains unobligated, prior-year discretionary LWCF funds. LWCF programs are oversubscribed, which has led to a backlog of conservation and recreation needs across the country.

Bureau of Land Management's National Conservation Lands

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM)'s National Conservation Lands (NCL) program consists of over 900 units covering 35 million acres in sixteen states. These units include places like the Jupiter Inlet Lighthouse Outstanding Natural Area on south Florida's Atlantic Coast; the 3,000-mile series of water routes along the Chesapeake Bay that comprise the John Smith National Historic Trail; the Organ Mountain-Desert Peaks and Rio Grande del Norte national monuments in New Mexico; the thirty-four wild and scenic rivers in Oregon, including one on a section of the Upper Klamath River Wild; and the Iditarod National Historic Trail—a 1000-mile trail between Seward and Nome with 1,400 miles of connecting trails. These units cover the length and breadth of our country and offer Americans unique and spectacular opportunities for hunting, fishing, hiking, historic exploration, and solitude.

BLM-managed lands have never been more important. Since the start of the pandemic, visitation to BLM-managed lands grew from 73 million in 2020 to 81 million in 2022, providing an outdoors escape for these visitors and a significant economic boost to the areas surrounding these sites.

The President's FY24 budget requested \$72.9 million for NCL, consisting of \$61.9 million for national monuments and conservation areas and \$11.0 million for national scenic and historic trails. Additionally, the budget included \$22.1 million for cultural resource management on BLM lands.

Since its inception in 2000, the system has nearly doubled in size, adding over 100 units and 11 million acres of lands to be managed for conservation, largely the result of acts of Congress. However, funding to manage the NCL has not kept pace with the growth of the system. This increase in funding will permit increased inventory, monitoring and protection of cultural resources, enhance proper management of all resources, and provide a quality visitor experience.

No New Policy Riders

The FY24 Interior Appropriations bill should not become a vehicle for divisive political issues or ideological policies that reverse or undermine land conservation initiatives. We strongly urge you to oppose the inclusion of riders that would that overturn existing laws or seek to make new laws on conservation, including restricting the preservation of significant cultural and natural resources of scientific or historic interests on federal lands; rolling back either the Inflation Reduction Act's oil and gas reforms or its funding of BLM and National Park Service conservation, ecosystem restoration, and climate resiliency programs; or prohibiting the promulgation of ongoing federal rulemaking and related public engagement processes.

In closing, we appreciate your time and thoughts on these matters. We understand the difficult fiscal and political challenges you face as you seek to write and pass the FY24 Interior Appropriations bill. We hope that as you do so, you fully fund the important programs we discussed above and avoid taking on partisan policy riders.

Sincerely,

Backcountry Hunters & Anglers

Hispanic Access Foundation

The Mountain Pact

National Wildlife Federation

Vet Voice Foundation