



America's Great Outdoors Report

Summary by the Izaak Walton League of America

On February 16, 2011, President Obama released the final report of his America's Great Outdoors initiative. The report outlines a 21st century vision for conservation in America that encompasses public and private lands, places a renewed emphasis on urban parks, prioritizes our waters as recreational and community resources, and commits to long-term investment in conservation and outdoor recreation.

Some of the report's major recommendations address key League priorities and issues, including

- Fully funding the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) at \$900 million annually.
- Protecting working lands, including our farms, by supporting investments that conserve these lands and natural resources.
- Boosting outdoor recreation, including by supporting initiatives that provide access to private land for hunting and fishing and placing renewed emphasis on tapping our rivers and streams for their recreational potential.
- Connecting children and young people to the outdoors, hunting and fishing, and conservation.

The report is the product of an initiative that began in April 2010. Throughout 2010, the administration solicited input from the American people about the future of conservation. More than 10,000 people attended 51 listening sessions nationwide and more than 105,000 comments were submitted through the America's Great Outdoors Web site. This input and participation helped to identify key issues and informed specific recommendations in the report.

The League and our members participated in the listening sessions and commented through the public process. The report is a very encouraging step forward with specific recommendations to address pressing problems and capitalize on new conservation opportunities. Although the League may not endorse every recommendation or action step, the report provides a good road map for the future. The challenge will be implementing the recommendations. Some can be achieved relatively simply and for little or no cost. Others are more complex, will take more time, and require investment. The League looks forward to working with the administration, Congress, and our partners in the hunting, angling, and conservation communities to implement components of the report and achieve on-the-ground results.

The following is a general overview of the major issues and recommendations addressed in the report. For more detailed information and background, view the complete report at www.doi.gov/americasgreatoutdoors.

The America's Great Outdoors report is organized around overarching issues with recommended actions for addressing each one.

1. Provide Quality Jobs, Career Pathways, and Service Opportunities: The report focuses on the importance of job creation, especially for young people interested in careers related to natural resources and conservation, as the economy continues to recover. It also takes a longer view, recognizing that a significant percentage of the natural resource workforce at the national and state levels has reached or is nearing retirement age. Although it is critical to facilitate the next generation of this workforce, the hiring process – especially at the federal level – is complex, time consuming, and may deter interested candidates. In addition, the report recognizes that citizen volunteers, including League members, are essential partners in conducting critical conservation work across the country.

Recommendations include

- Facilitating establishment of a 21st century Conservation Service Corps to engage young Americans in restoring public lands and water.
- Reviewing federal hiring practices and reducing barriers to hiring participants in youth conservation corps and similar programs.
- Improving federal capacity to recruit, train, and manage volunteers and volunteer programs.

2. Enhance Recreational Access and Opportunities: Public lands across the country provide incredible recreational opportunities. At the national level, federal agencies manage more than 635 million acres that receive more than 1 billion visits annually. However, the listening sessions reinforced problems that have been identified previously. In some cases, recreational access is physically limited by the absence of trailheads or public transportation. In other cases, information about where and how to access recreational sites is limited, confusing, or not well integrated across federal agencies or between federal, state, and local entities. Importantly, while the report supports expanding recreational access, it makes clear that this must be balanced with conserving and protecting the natural, cultural, historic, and other resources that federal agencies are entrusted to manage sustainably for all Americans.

Recommendations include

- Establishing a Federal Interagency Council on Outdoor Recreation to better coordinate and integrate national efforts to support outdoor recreation.
- Supporting community-based efforts to increase access to outdoor recreation.

3. Raise Awareness of the Value and Benefits of America's Great Outdoors:

The America's Great Outdoors initiative was launched, in part, to address a problem that is all too familiar to League members – Americans, especially children, are increasingly disconnected from the natural world, public lands, and conservation. This disconnect has real-world implications. As fewer Americans hunt or fish, for example, funding to conserve and restore fish and wildlife could decline. If people do not visit public lands, they are less likely to understand why they are valuable not only for recreation but as sources of clean drinking water, wildlife habitat, or renewable resources. Will future generations be conservation advocates if they have little or no connection to the natural world? The future of conservation in America will be determined, in part, by how we address these challenges and answer these questions.

Recommendations include

- Launching a public awareness initiative to show that experiencing the outdoors is fun, easy, and healthy.
- Working with the Department of Education to support efforts to integrate environmental education at the local and state levels.
- Promoting and supporting replicable programs that teach about and connect children and families to their natural and cultural heritage.

4. Engage Young People in Conservation and the Great Outdoors: The report consistently recognizes that getting young people outside and engaging them in conservation activities is essential to achieving the overarching goal of reconnecting Americans with our environment. To engage young people in developing the vision for the future, there were 21 listening sessions with diverse youth audiences. The main recommendation here is to actively engage young people in implementing the recommendations contained throughout the report.

5. Strengthen the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF): The LWCF is the most important source of funding to acquire lands and waters at the national level and can provide critical financial support to state and local governments for a similar purpose and to develop outdoor recreational facilities. The LWCF is funded with a portion of revenue from offshore oil and gas drilling and is authorized by law to receive \$900 million annually. However, Congress must appropriate this funding each year and has provided the full \$900 million only *twice* since LWCF was established in 1964.

While appropriations for LWCF have fallen far short of the authorized amount, the demand for funding has grown as land values have increased and federal agencies struggle to acquire private land wholly within the boundaries of national forests or wildlife refuges. Demand for funding at the state and local levels is routinely in the hundreds of millions of dollars while LWCF funding is frequently less than \$50 million. Conserving nationally significant resources and supporting outdoor recreation across America requires investment, and the LWCF is the best – yet badly under-funded – source.

Recommendations include

- Providing full funding (\$900 million) for the LWCF.
- Focusing a portion of federal LWCF funds on projects related to large-scale land conservation, urban parks and community green spaces, and river restoration and access.
- Investing a portion of LWCF funds to increase recreational access to federal lands.

6. Establish Great Urban Parks and Community Green Spaces: With 80 percent of Americans now living in or near cities, urban parks, forests, gardens, and other green spaces are essential to connecting citizens with natural resources and conservation. These areas also provide access to close-to-home recreation for tens of millions of Americans. Many urban communities have extensive networks of parks and other facilities, but others have very few. The listening sessions also reinforced well-known problems that limit access to or use of green spaces where they do exist, including crime, aging and unsafe infrastructure, lack of public transportation, and shortages of staff to run facilities or deliver recreational programming.

Recommendations include

- Establishing the Great Urban Parks and Community Green Spaces initiative by targeting increased LWCF funding for states and localities to leverage investment in new and enhanced urban parks and green spaces.
- Supporting and aligning federal programs to promote creation, expansion, and enhancement of urban parks and community green spaces.
- Targeting technical assistance – including through the National Park Service Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program (RTCA) – to support community efforts to create and enhance urban parks.

7. Conserve Rural Working Farms, Ranches, and Forests Through Partnerships and Incentives: More than 70 percent of the land in the United States is privately owned. These lands and the resources they contain – from clean water and habitat for fish and wildlife to timber and energy resources – are essential to natural resource management and conservation nationwide. However, we continue to lose open space, farms and ranches, and forests to development at an alarming rate. According to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), one out of every three acres developed in the United States was developed between 1982 and 2007. The Department of Agriculture reports that 1.6 million acres of farms, ranches, and private forests are sold annually for development. As these lands are converted to subdivisions, malls, golf courses, or a multitude of other uses, public values – including clean water, habitat, and places to hunt and fish – are affected.

The report also recognizes that effective conservation must be cross-boundary, taking an “all lands” approach that works across private and public lands. Conserving large landscapes requires cooperation and coordination among all

levels of government, private landowners, nonprofits, and many other partners. Finally, because funding is limited and public acquisition and management is not the only means to achieve conservation results, the report highlights the value of partnerships and leveraging conservation dollars using easements and emerging environmental market-based tools. These approaches keep lands and resources in private ownership while securing public benefits.

Recommendations include

- Supporting collaborative landscape level conservation through competitive processes, including competition for additional funds provided to the LWCF.
- Supporting landscape partnerships by targeting federal dollars, policies, and other resources toward conservation of private working lands and coordinating expenditures across federal agencies to maximize conservation impacts.
- Extending enhanced deductions for conservation easement donations beyond 2011, when they are set to expire under federal law.
- Developing and expanding new markets, including those for the environmental services (i.e., clean water, wildlife habitat) provided by working lands, for local agricultural or sustainable forest products and sustainable energy.
- Providing financial and other incentives (such as the Open Fields Voluntary Access Program funded through the U.S. Department of Agriculture) to encourage access to private lands for hunting, fishing, and other outdoor recreation.

8. Conserve and Restore Our National Parks, Wildlife Refuges, Forests, and Other Federal Lands and Waters:

More than 635 million acres of land in America are managed and conserved by the federal government. These lands include our iconic national parks, more than 550 wildlife refuges, historic battlefields, and about 260 million acres of public lands across the west and Alaska managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Hundreds of millions of Americans and tourists from around the world visit them annually. While the most important role of these lands is conserving resources for future generations, they also provide tremendous economic benefits. National parks alone generate an estimated \$6.3 billion in wages and salaries, and recreational visits to national forests contribute \$13 billion to the nation's economy.

Numerous challenges threaten the long-term health and sustainability of these lands. Climate change is a major threat to coastal wildlife refuges due to sea level rise and to western national forests as warmer winters allow harmful insect infestations to continue and worsen. Invasive plants and animals have literally overtaken millions of acres of public lands, and the problem is increasing every year. Infrastructure that is essential to providing visitor services and conserving natural, cultural, and historic resources is literally crumbling, and deferring maintenance only exacerbates the problems. In addition, there are nationally

significant natural, cultural, and historic resources that are not being protected at the national level but warrant protection.

Recommendations include

- Managing federal lands and waters within a larger landscape context to conserve and restore ecosystems and watershed health.
- Managing federal lands and waters to increase their resilience to climate change.
- Managing federal lands and waters to create and protect critical wildlife corridors and to maintain landscape connectivity in collaboration with other public and private stakeholders.
- Engaging the public in identifying and recommending potential sites on existing federal lands for protection under the Antiquities Act (including as national monuments).
- Identifying potential areas for congressional designation (e.g., wilderness areas, wild and scenic rivers) that have strong local support.
- Continuing to protect and interpret historic sites and cultural landscapes on federal lands.

9. Protect and Renew Rivers and Other Waters: The report devotes a chapter to rivers, streams, and other waterways – a topic of central importance to the League. About 3.6 million miles of rivers and streams crisscross the country, providing drinking water for tens of millions of people, habitat for fish and wildlife, and recreational opportunities for anglers, boaters, and many others. Rivers have connected the nation throughout our history, and League members monitor water quality in small streams across the country. Yet, as with most other natural resources, challenges remain. Although water quality has improved significantly since the early 1970s, many streams and rivers are not clean enough to safely support swimming or fishing. In some communities, rivers and other waters are not readily accessible for recreation or public use. At the listening sessions, participants voiced strong support for a renewed focus on conserving and enjoying our streams and rivers.

Recommendations include

- Establishing a National Recreational Blueways Trails Initiative to increase recreational access.
- Facilitating recreational access to the nation's waterways.
- Enhancing and restoring local waterways and the surrounding land by partnering with state, local, and tribal governments and the private sector to support community efforts.

10. Make the Federal Government a More Effective Conservation Partner:

The federal government has been and continues to be a leader in conservation and a strong steward of more than 600 million acres of public land. Can it do a better job? Of course, and the report recognizes this. Although a top-down approach from the federal government is largely a relic of the past, federal

agencies can surely continue to improve how they work and partner with other levels of government, the private sector, and nonprofit groups such as the League. Working cooperatively and constructively with other partners will be essential to achieving conservation results as budgets continue to decline and conservation challenges increasingly transcend boundaries of even the largest national parks or wildlife refuges. Federal agencies can also do a better job coordinating among themselves to reduce duplication and more effectively utilize expertise and experience that resides within multiple agencies.

Recommendations include

- Establishing an interagency America's Great Outdoors Council to achieve more cooperation and collaboration among federal agencies engaged in conservation and recreation.
- Launching the Partnership for America's Great Outdoors to engage leaders in philanthropy, conservation, historic preservation, government, industry, recreation, and nonprofits to support the vision, goals, and implementation of the America's Great Outdoors initiative.