

Committee on Resources

Witness Testimony

**Statement of Thomas Cove, Vice President of Government Relations
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Before the Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands
Hearing on Federal Funding for Land and Water Conservation Fund
March 11, 1997

Good morning, Mr. Chairman. My name is Thomas Cove and I am Vice President of the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association (SGMA). SGMA is the national trade association for producers and distributors of athletic equipment, footwear and apparel.

I welcome the opportunity to testify this morning and commend the Committee for its decision to hold a hearing on the stateside of the Land and Water Conservation Fund. My industry and the broader recreation community are encouraged by the attention this hearing brings to this important program.

In 1994, I was honored to serve on the National Park Service Review Committee for the Land and Water Conservation Fund. I understand our report has been made available to the Resources Committee--I urge you to look at it closely as it represents the results of countless hours of discussion and consensus building. As the sole industry representative on the review committee, I was extremely impressed by the caliber of my colleagues and new thinking they brought to problems facing the stateside of the Land and Water Fund. I continue to endorse the report's basic finding, namely, that a reinvigoration of the LWCF vision, whether in its current programmatic form or otherwise, is vitally needed in order for the country to save its cherished heritage of open spaces and parks.

Within my industry, we regard the experience of a well-funded stateside Land and Water Conservation Fund to be a demonstrable success. The Fund allowed a great diversity of land to be protected and created a significant inventory of recreational opportunities for citizens in every state. Thousands of local parks and facilities were developed under the state assistance program, providing tangible and intangible benefits to generations of Americans. Not insignificantly, beyond the actual funds it provided, the Fund's incentives created countless partnerships that have resulted in innovative programs to protect habitat, preserve historic sites and provide recreation.

The Land and Water Conservation Fund was a promise made to the American people beginning in 1965 that has delivered a return on investment that any Wall Street financier would be proud to call his/her own.

Sadly, much of the promise was broken in recent years when funding for the stateside of the Fund was cut substantially, to the point of its virtual elimination today.

We strongly urge the Committee to take action to revitalize the LWCF ideal. Technical and financial assistance to state and local conservation and recreation has a long history of bipartisan support. The program was recommended by the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission in the 1960's, President Reagan's Commission on Americans Outdoors in the 1980's, and the National Park Service Review Committee in 1994 and yet today is threatened with extinction.

Let me take a moment to highlight our view of the value of the state assistance program.

State and local parks are where the vast majority of Americans recreate day in and day out. Though most Americans might love to visit our showcase national parks regularly, they are unable to for reasons of economics, geography, or competing leisure alternatives. Most Americans recreate close to home, in local, regional and state parks. Whether for toddlers in a playground, teenagers on a ball field, or senior citizens on a nature trail, easily accessible recreation opportunities contribute significantly to quality of life for individuals, families and communities across the country.

Participation in recreation is valued not just for enjoyment but because Americans know it leads to improved physical and mental health, better appreciation of nature and the environment, and stronger, shared values.

Providing recreation opportunities close to home is more imperative than ever. In its research report titled *Recreation in the New Millennium*, the Recreation Roundtable found that the greatest barrier to participation in outdoor recreation in America in 1995 was lack of discretionary time. Twice as many people cited time versus money as a major hurdle to outdoor recreation participation. Local recreation alternatives speak directly to Americans' need to carve more time out of the day.

At the same time, the quality of recreation experiences in critical areas is diminishing. In the same Recreation Roundtable study, Americans living in large, urban areas are, as a group, the least satisfied with their recreation opportunities. The study also found that residents of America's largest metropolitan areas participate on average in fewer recreation activities and on a less frequent basis than other Americans.

A 1995 Washington Post article, entitled "No Place to Play", recounts the tragic story of two young girls who died after playing in an abandoned car in Southeast Washington. The underlying theme of the story, as articulated by many residents of the girls' neighborhood, was the lack of opportunities for local children to recreate in a safe, enjoyable way. Too often this is a way of life in low-income urban neighborhoods.

Images of unscathed community gardens and parks located next to torched buildings and looted businesses in the aftermath of the 1992 Los Angeles riots illustrate the value urban communities place on protected open spaces.

In suburban America, conflicts over usage of parks and open space are increasingly commonplace. At the beginning of every season, soccer and football league administrators do battle over access to precious fields. Primary school parents view junior high and high school sports programs as a threat to their children's ability to get field time. Women's sports proponents are becoming more vocal, appropriately so, about receiving their fair share of choice locations and practice times.

Lack of fields, courts and facilities can limit the number of young people who are given the opportunity to play sports. Rarely are the ones who miss out the elite athletes, but more likely the intramural player for whom hurdles to participation become quickly insurmountable.

Privately owned fee-based facilities are springing up to meet the need for recreation. While these first-class complexes of sport fields and support facilities can and do deliver quality services, we should not allow personal financial resources to determine citizens basic access to recreation.

At the same time, there are almost daily reports about the negative health consequences of America's sedentary lifestyle. Just last Friday, the government's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported

that, due to inactivity and overeating, 35 percent of the country's adults and 13 percent of our children weigh dangerously more than they should. This is the most overweight the nation has been since the government began compiling statistics in the 1960's. According to the National Task Force on the Prevention and Treatment of Obesity, the economic costs of obesity in the United States exceed \$68 billion annually. The need to make recreation alternatives available to all Americans is good public policy.

I do not want to leave the impression that the LWCF is, or should be, simply a funding vehicle to provide safe, affordable recreation opportunities. I have focused on the recreation issues because I know them better, but any discussion of LWCF must include its fundamental conservation legacy. The protection of threatened land and water resources remains a central and essential basis for the fund.

Development pressures in urban, suburban and exurban America are well documented. The U.S. Department of Agriculture found that the amount of developed land in the United States increased by 14 million acres between 1982 and 1992. According to National Growth Management Leadership Project, during the last twenty years in the New York metropolitan area population grew by 8 percent while amount of urbanized land increased by 65 percent. During the same period, population in Seattle grew by 38 percent but the amount of urban area grew by 87 percent. In Denver, projections tell the same story.

Many wildlife and plant resources are threatened by this development. Strapped state and local budgets limit options to address habitat degradation. Hundreds of non-game species will benefit if action is taken before the need for threatened or endangered designations. An appropriately funded Land and Water Conservation Fund would offer real potential to protect important natural settings.

Of further concern is the possibility that we are bringing up generations of Americans who have no connection to the wonders of our country's vast natural legacy. The future policy implications of having large numbers of citizens with no hands-on contact with nature and conservation are scary. Both for our industry and for the country.

Looking forward, I offer several recommendations for consideration. First, the Fund clearly needs to be modified to allow states and localities greater flexibility to take action. Devolution requires the ability for states and localities to adapt a program to locally developed and implemented priorities. Second, the equity of private land owners must be respected. Third, federal-state-local partnerships as well as public-private collaborations should be encouraged. LWCF regulations should be amended to facilitate such partnerships. Fourth, oversight and administration of the program should be raised to the Department of Interior level. Its current status within the National Park Service does not serve the program or NPS well.

The theoretical premise of dedicating royalty income from depletion of a non-renewable resource for investment in protection of a different precious resource remains strong and valid. It should be maintained if at all possible.

Having participated in policy battles on Land and Water Fund for several years now, I must be clear that as much as my industry values the potential of an appropriately funded Stateside fund, we do not advocate draining the federal account to increase stateside appropriations. We understand the significant budget constraints facing this Congress but believe a full investment in both federal and stateside accounts will reap fully justifiable dividends for generations to come. The 1994 report eloquently captures the vision we endorse, " We envision a network of parks, preserves, open spaces, greenways and recreation sites and centers stretching across this nation, touching all communities, and accessible to all Americans." It is a noble and appropriate vision, and it will only take hold with a long term commitment of resources.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my industry's views. I am happy to answer any questions the Committee might have.

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