

DATE: March 22, 2012

TO: House Committee on Appropriations; Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies

FROM: Robert E. Doyle, General Manager East Bay Regional Park District

SUBJECT: Support for the Land and Water Conservation Fund and State Competitive Conservation Grants

Chairman Simpson and Ranking Member Moran, it is an honor to be here today. I am Robert E. Doyle, General Manager of the East Bay Regional Park District located in the San Francisco Bay Area of California. I wish to express our Agency's support for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) and the State Competitive Conservation Grant proposal within the National Park Service's proposed budget.

Formed in 1934 at the depth of the Depression by East San Francisco Bay residents who voted to tax themselves to protect parklands, the East Bay Regional Park District has consolidated regional county park services for two of the largest urban counties in the State of California – Alameda and Contra Costa. The District is governed by a seven-member, non-partisan, elected Board of Directors. The District is the largest regional open space park district in the country – serving 2.6 million residents and 14 million annual visitors, managing over 110,000 acres, 65 parks and over 1,200 miles of trails. About 200 miles of the District's trails are paved and provide non-motorized, safe connections to transit, schools and businesses. The District operates this regional alternative transportation network seamlessly among the 33 cities and two counties it serves. Known as the Green Transportation Initiative, the District's paved regional trail network received \$10.2 million from the highly competitive Federal Department of Transportation TIGER II grant program.

It is both through our success in competing for TIGER II dollars and the historical benefits the District has experienced from the State Assistance program of the Land and Water Conservation Fund that lead us to come before you today. Throughout the 38 year history of the Land and Water Conservation Fund, the District has successfully competed for nearly \$8 million in stateside grant funding for the acquisition and development of some of our most used regional parks. For example:

- Over \$1.6 million to establish and develop Coyote Hills Regional Park which protects a 2,000-year old Tuibun Ohlone Indian shellmound, and offers hundreds of unique cultural and educational experiences each year.
- Over \$1.4 million to establish and develop Martin Luther King Jr. Regional Shoreline in a highly industrial, urban area near Oakland International Airport, which provides access for inner-city youth to explore the San Francisco Bay.
- Over \$200,000 for the development of Ardenwood Historic Farm which offers hundreds of environmental education programs for children and adults each year.

The LWCF has played a valuable role in the development of at least 15 of the 65 units in the East Bay Regional Park District system. Fully funding the State Assistance program of the LWCF would significantly benefit open space and resource conservation stewardship efforts in our region, all of California, and the entire country.

We agree the goal should be to allocate at least 40% of all Land and Water Conservation Fund dollars to the State Assistance program. Not only has our agency benefited from this fund, it is a fiscally responsible investment of federal dollars which leverages local funds by requiring state and localities to provide a 50% match. In addition, the recipients of LWCF capital investments are responsible for on-going management and maintenance costs with no additional funding obligated by the Federal government.

We should point out that despite continued and ongoing extraction of our country's natural resources, the LWCF has only been fully funded once. More than \$16 billion remains in the Fund on paper as an unspent balance, but has been diverted to the general fund. The LWCF was enacted in 1964 based on the premise it would assure the availability and accessibility of land and water-based recreation opportunities for all Americans. Despite maximum revenue generation year to year, the promise of LWCF has never fully been met.

Again, we support allocating at least 40% of the Fund to the State Assistance program – and that program should not come at the expense of other creative ideas. We believe, however, the proposed Competitive Conservation Grant program is an innovative approach directing much needed resources to areas where both the need is great and community involvement is strong. By keeping this program within the LWCF, it also ensures the grant recipient manages and maintains each project in perpetuity at no additional cost to the Federal government.

As our agency competes on a near daily basis for grants and other resources, we can attest to the level of commitment and matching dollars an agency must have to be successful. We also need to point out that because we are a single purpose government agency not affiliated directly with a county or the State, we are sometimes rendered ineligible to compete directly for Federal monies. We strongly encourage the committee to include specific, directive language which ensures that all local units of government are directly eligible to apply.

As technology consumes more and more of our collective “leisure” time, we are seeing real and troubling trends in increased obesity and lack of activity. Children today spend as few as four minutes outside, yet spend an average of 7.5 hours a day in front of electronic devices. High levels of obesity, diabetes and physical inactivity exist everywhere. In every state in the nation at least 21% of the population is obese. At the same time, visitation to our National Parks and federal wild lands are down, and we are now seeing the second generation of children growing up who have never been camping.

Demographics are also rapidly changing. Latino population in San Bernardino County California is 49%; Riverside County over 45%; Mesa Arizona over 26%; both Arlington and Fairfax Counties over 15%. In the East Bay, Latino population is a little over 25%. Much of the growth in diverse population is occurring in our more populated, urban cores where access to safe, clean parks is de minimis.

We all have a stake in seeing the trends of declining health (particularly in children) and lack of outdoor experiences reverse. Making the fundamental connection between individual and community health, and accessible, well-managed parks is the goal of the international Healthy Parks, Healthy People (HPPH) initiative. HPPH responds to these alarming health trends toward childhood obesity, diabetes, depression and other maladies. Children are at special risk as behavior changes, and many immigrant and disadvantaged communities do not realize the opportunities available to them at local, regional, and state parks.

Our charge is to ensure a core appreciation for natural surroundings and outdoor activity achieve salient relevancy to both new and old populations. Full funding for the State Assistance program of LWCF would go a long way toward that end, and we strongly support that goal. As a step forward, we also think the Competitive Conservation Grant program will provide a spark to those core urban areas which have taken the heavy blows in this recession: foreclosures, budget cuts, less police and more crime, fewer safe outdoor recreational opportunities, etc. It will provide a real shot at precious additional resources that we all know can make the difference in the success or failure of a project for those communities most motivated to improve parks and open space.

These grants would support one of the core components of the America's Great Outdoors initiative by targeting urban areas which lack open space and outdoor recreational opportunities. As managers of parks and open space in and around urban centers such as Oakland, Fremont, Richmond, Concord and Hayward, we have firsthand experience in improving access to the outdoors through a busing program (Parks Express) and camperships for young people most at risk. Our parks are often the first outdoor nature experience urban children and families have, and may be the only such experience they can afford.

The cumulative open space and recreational opportunities park districts, like the East Bay Regional Park District, offer in urban areas, provide residents convenient inspirational "portals" or "gateways" to the outdoors. By building these personal relationships with nearby natural resources, regional park users learn the value of open space protection beyond their immediate communities, including federal lands such as: national parks, recreation areas, monuments, national forests and wilderness areas. The threshold experiences families have in urban regional parks help educate generations of constituents about the need to support sustainable stewardship of public lands and embrace healthy lifestyles. That, in turn, helps lead to more conservation-based sensitivities which place a high quality of life value on land conservation and park visitation. The more connections we can make with high density, urban populations about the importance of protecting open space, the more relevance federal conservation strategies have to their lives – an outcome which can clearly benefit the national conversation about health, obesity and our outdoors.

For these reasons, we strongly support the Land and Water Conservation Fund and the proposed Competitive Conservation Grants. Further, we need to ensure that independent park districts (like East Bay Regional, Big Bear Valley Recreation and Park District, Riverside County Regional Park and Open-Space District, Geauga Park District, Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority and Three Rivers Park District) are explicitly eligible to directly receive

the Competitive Conservation Grants and other types of assistance as specified in Federal legislation, implementing regulations and agency guidance inspired or modified by the dialogue on America's Great Outdoors.

Thank you for providing the opportunity to share our views.