

THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY

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Policy Brief Series

The Land and Water Conservation Fund

The Land and Water Conservation Act was passed and signed into law September 3, 1964 by President Lyndon B. Johnson creating the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). The LWCF is now the primary source of money used by federal, state, and local governments to acquire lands for conservation and public access to natural areas.

Methods

The LWCF is appropriated money each year by Congress from revenue generated by leasing offshore oil and gas permits in the Outer Continental Shelf (OCS).¹ Congress can appropriate a maximum of \$900 million per year to LWCF.¹

Both federal and state projects are funded through the LWCF. The four federal land management agencies, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), and National Park Service (NPS) of the Department of the Interior (DOI), and the Forest Service (USFS) of the Department of Agriculture, identify priority land areas that will assist them in meeting their missions. Congress then appropriates money for specific projects during the annual appropriations process.² LWCF funds can also be appropriated to related federal programs. Recent recipients of funds have been FWS's Cooperative Endangered Species Fund and USFS's Forest Legacy Program.^{3,4}

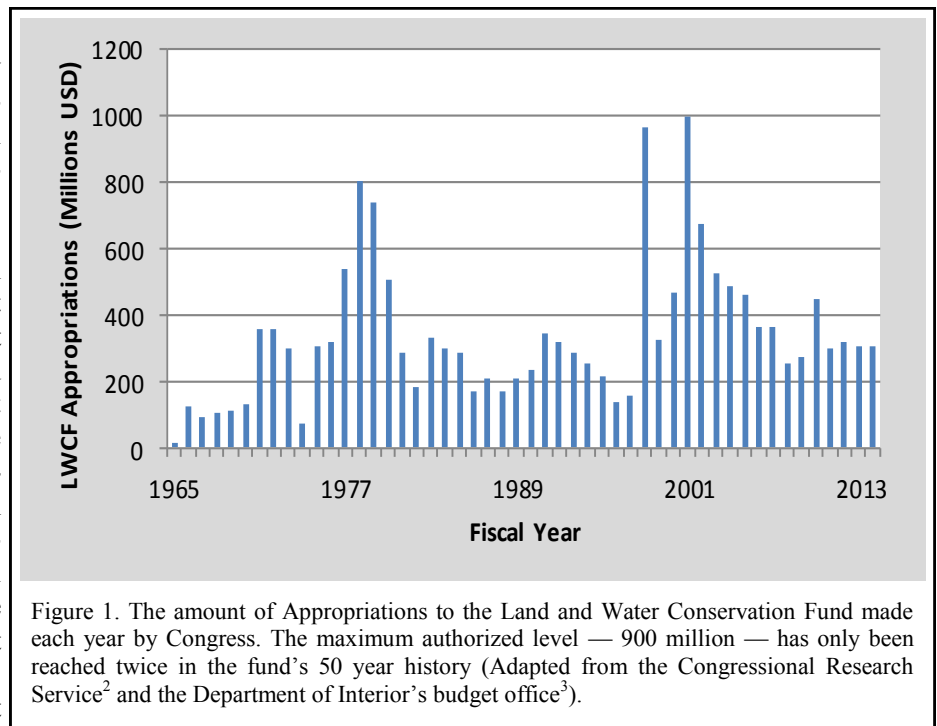


Figure 1. The amount of Appropriations to the Land and Water Conservation Fund made each year by Congress. The maximum authorized level — 900 million — has only been reached twice in the fund's 50 year history (Adapted from the Congressional Research Service² and the Department of Interior's budget office³).

The LWCF acts as a matching grant source to either state projects or state-identified local projects. These matching grants can provide up to 50% of the total cost and are primarily used to provide outdoor recreational opportunities through land acquisition and facility enhancement.⁵ Projects receive funding through a formula based on state population and the project value to the state's formal recreation plan.⁵ The remaining portion of the project funding is matched by state and local governments, non-profit groups, or private firms.⁵

Results

Over \$16.8 billion have been appropriated into the LWCF since its inception in 1965 (Figure 1).^{2,3} These funds have been used to purchase and conserve over 7 million acres across the United States.¹ Almost one-fourth — \$4.2 billion — has been appropriated to states, territories, and local governments through states resulting in over 40,000 projects that have conserved 2.6 million acres.¹ Other related federal programs have received \$2.3 billion.^{2,3}

Discussion

The LWCF has only been appropriated the full \$900 million twice in its 50 year history.² Congress appropriates \$340 million on average, just over a third of the authorized budget.^{2,3} There is a considerable backlog of projects that do not get approved due to chronic underfunding.² The fund was temporarily reauthorized in 2015 for three years, and will expire in September 2018.

Implications for Wildlife Professionals

The LWCF is the primary means in which government agencies acquire new lands for conservation and recreational use. The protected land financed by LWCF enables wildlife professionals to perform science-based management of wildlife resources, contributing to the protection of wildlife species held in the public trust.

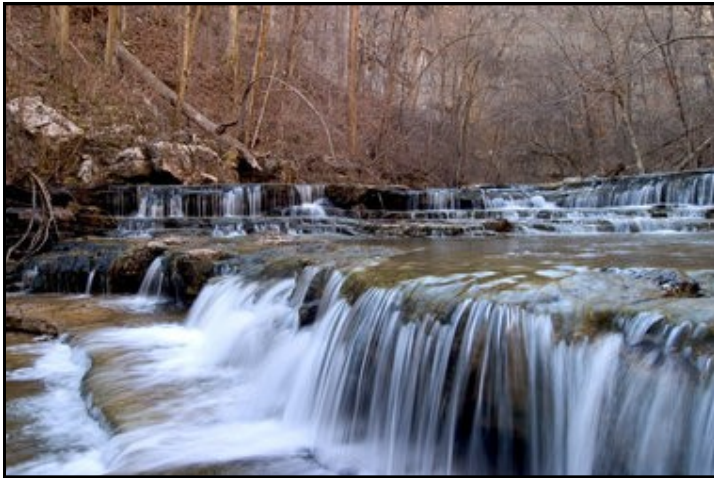
The Land and Water Conservation Act: Features

Expanding Federal Land to Improve Access and Manage Costs⁶

Elk herds are a huge draw to the Black Hills National Forest (BHNF) and Wind Cave National Park (WCNP) in South Dakota. Hunting and tourism bring in state revenue and are a large part of the local culture. \$7.15 million in LWCF funds were used to purchase a 2400 acre ranch adjacent to the BHNF and WCNP. Elk herds consistently travel between the two federal areas and the private ranch. By incorporating the ranch into federal property, the elk herd (which uses the private ranch frequently) could be more effectively managed and more easily accessed by hunters and hikers alike.



A herd of elk at Wind Cave National Park in South Dakota (Credit: Charlie Baker).



The headwaters of the Paint Rock River in the Walls of Jericho of Northern Alabama (Credit: Beth Maynor Young).

The Forest Legacy Program: A Working Lands Program Funded Through the LWCF⁷

The LWCF is the primary funding mechanism for the Forest Legacy Program (FLP). The FLP, which is administered by the U.S. Forest Service, provides matching grants to states for forests projects that involve working lands. The states buy easements from private landowners to ensure sustainable use and habitat for wildlife. Over 2.3 million acres have been protected through FLP projects including the protection of the unique “Walls of Jericho” canyon and cave ecosystem in Tennessee and Alabama. USFS conserved 8,938 acres of the area through FLP which includes the headwaters of the Paint Rock River.

Sources

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