

OUTDOOR INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION

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STATE FUNDING PROGRAMS FOR OUTDOOR RECREATION:

Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program (WWRP)

SUMMARY

Recognizing both the threats to and benefits of the natural environment, a diverse coalition persuaded the Washington State Legislature to create the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program (WWRP) in 1989 with two objectives: acquiring important recreation and habitat lands before they are converted and developed, and improving recreation areas for Washington's expanding population. Since its founding, WWRP has generated more than $360 million in outdoor recreation grants to state and local agencies for capital projects.[1]

Funding for the WWRP is legislatively appropriated during each biennium (odd-numbered years). Since 1990, the funding has averaged $56.4 million each biennium, with a low of $42 million in 2011-13 and a high of $100 million in 2007-09. As of this writing, the 2017-19 capital budget has not been passed, but includes $80 million for WWRP.

This case study is part of a larger report describing how states fund outdoor recreation across the U.S. Access the full report "State Funding Mechanisms for Outdoor Recreation" here: http://oia.outdoorindustry.org/headwaters.

FUNDING TYPE

The WWRP grant program is funded each biennium through appropriations in Washington's capital budget, which includes funding allocations to larger, long-lasting construction and repair projects for things such as state buildings and land, schools, affordable housing, and water infrastructure. (The Washington Legislature also funds an operating budget and transportation budget.) The Legislature appropriates funding in the capital budget through the sale of general obligation bonds. A bond bill typically accompanies the Capital Budget bill in order to support the appropriations.[2]



SNAPSHOT

Created in 1989

General obligation bonds appropriated every two years through capital budget

Funded more than $360 million in outdoor recreation projects to state and local agencies

Managed by a state agency: the Recreation and Conservation Office

Supported by independent non-profit: Washington Wildlife and Recreation Coalition

Key factors of success:

- Ongoing citizen engagement
- Support from a coordinated, diverse coalition
- Transparent, fair administration by independent agency
- Frequent funding cycle

PROGRAM ORIGINS

A hallmark of the WWRP's success is its strong legacy of collaboration and community involvement. In the 1980s, a conservation sales tax measure failed in Washington. Recognizing these hurdles, the Washington chapter of The Nature Conservancy helped lead a statewide Needs Assessment, which provided a platform for public meetings and a "ground-up" approach to discussing community needs. From this assessment grew an alliance of bipartisan, diverse stakeholders, which soon organized into a formal Coalition.[3]

The first co-chairs of the Coalition were two former governors--Republican Daniel J. Evans and Democrat Mike Lowry. The Coalition included diverse membership with outdoor recreation user groups, environmental activists, working land conservationists, sportsmen, and outdoor industry leaders. After a series of retreats and lengthy meetings with dozens of stakeholders, the Coalition formed a consensus on the guiding principles and details of a proposal for a funding program. In 1989, the Coalition successfully persuaded the Legislature to pass the enabling statute (RCW 79A.15) that created the WWRP grant program, and the program was funded in 1990 with an initial biennial appropriation of $53 million.

FUNDING ALLOCATION AND ADMINISTRATION

The Recreation and Conservation Office & Board.

The Recreation and Conservation Board administers the WWRP. Made up of five citizens and three state agency directors (Department of Fish and Wildlife, Department of Natural Resources, and Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission), the board is supported by staff of the Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO).

Created in 1964 by the voters, the Recreation and Conservation Office plays a critical role in administering the WWRP. In addition to the WWRP, the RCO manages a handful of other conservation and granting programs such as the Salmon Recovery Funding Board, Habitat and Recreation Lands Coordinating Group, the Land and Water Conservation Fund, and the Recreational Trails Program.

Administrative rates from these and other grants fund the operating budget of the RCO; the RCO does not compete in the general fund with other programs for operating dollars. Since the RCO does not own or manage any land or resources, but just administers grants and supports recreation and conservation activities, it maintains a level of independence and objectivity that enables robust grantmaking.

Grant Accounts.

As of 2016, WWRP funding is divided into three accounts, each with individual grant subcategories:

1. **Outdoor recreation** (45%) – including local parks, state parks, state land improvements, trails and water access.
2. **Habitat conservation** (45%) – including natural areas, urban wildlife areas, state lands, and critical habitat conservation.
3. **Farm and forest preservation** (10%) – including conservation easements and restoration.

In 2015, Governor Inslee directed the Recreation and Conservation Office to conduct a review of the WWRP to ensure the criteria and requirements still match Washington's needs and goals, and to prepare a report to the Legislature. Some of the grant allocations, eligibility criteria, and categories were modified in 2016 as a result. Overall, the review reaffirmed the state's commitment to funding both outdoor recreation and conservation and recommended increasing the emphasis on partnerships, incentivizing projects with multiple benefits, and allowing variances for local match requirements and decreasing the acquisition requirements for local agencies. For a complete examination of all grant accounts and these recent modifications, refer to the 2015 Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program Review.[4] The remainder of this report will focus on the Outdoor Recreation grant account, as shown in Table 10.1 and Figure 10.1.

Grant Applications and Criteria.

Projects are identified by the sponsoring agency or organization. The RCO employs nine grant managers, each with a specific geographic territory, who help sponsor organizations develop quality, competitive projects. The RCO staff have developed systems and tools such as detailed workshops, manuals, and even sample pitch presentations[5] to help grant applicants, regardless of size and capacity, compete for resources.

Eligible applicants vary for each grant category (see Table X). For the Outdoor Recreation account, only governmental entities are eligible to apply, but many projects have nonprofit partners that assist with technical grant-writing support, fundraising for matching dollars, and project development. Project eligibility also varies with each grant category, but is exclusively focused on acquisition of new lands and improvement to facilities – not ongoing operations and maintenance.

Currently, most grant categories have a match requirement of 50 percent and all categories rank proposals higher if they can be leveraged with matching sources. Any match must be documented and confirmed before WWRP funding can be approved. Since RCO manages other grant programs, grant managers sometimes act as matchmakers, helping connect project sponsors with partners, additional funding programs, and community resources.

The grant application period opens in even-numbered years. Applications are reviewed for eligibility and technical merit by RCO staff and then scored by voluntary advisory committees for each grant category. Committee rankings then are evaluated and approved by the Recreation and Conservation Funding Board, where a comprehensive list of projects from all grant categories is developed. This list is submitted to the Governor and Legislature for funding consideration. All proposed projects are tracked in an online database called PRISM, fully accessible to applicants, citizen advisory committees, legislators, and the public.

The Legislature and Governor cannot modify the ranking or the list, but can allocate less funding than requested by WWRP. When this occurs, funding is directed to projects in the ranked order until all the dollars are allocated. Unfunded projects are considered alternates and may receive grants if any funding is returned. Projects begin in July of the odd-numbered year and grant agreements are typically for multiple years. WWRP also historically has funded phased projects with sequential grants.

The Role of the Coalition.

Washington's budget request for WWRP typically enjoys strong bipartisan support before it arrives at the Legislature, thanks to the focused, coordinated efforts of the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Coalition (the Coalition), the original alliance responsible for establishing WWRP. The Coalition lobbies the legislature for each biannual appropriation, fulfilling a role that grant applicants – typically local, state, and non-profit agencies – are prohibited by law from doing. Built on the leadership of visionary, bipartisan, and diverse organizations, the Coalition has been critical to WWRP's success from the beginning.

Today, the Coalition is a stand-alone non-profit organization with a full-time, professional staff. Its membership includes more than 280 organizations from outdoor recreation, conservation, and farm organizations, local agencies, labor interests, and important business and industry leaders such as Boeing and REI. The Coalition is supported entirely through membership dues, foundation support, and individual contributions; no WWRP grants go to the Coalition.

A policy subcommittee of the Coalition's 50-member board of directors develops a funding recommendation each biennium to support the budget request, based on the grant proposals RCO received. The Coalition helps ensure the request is reasonable, realistic, and defensible, balancing the diverse needs of its membership.

The Coalition then asks the Recreation and Conservation Board to include its recommendation with RCO's budget request. Communications between the Recreation and Conservation Office, Board, and Coalition are transparent because directors of the RCO, State Parks, and the Department of Fish and Wildlife are all Ex-Officio Directors on the Coalition's board. Once the Recreation and Conservation Board's budget request is submitted, the Coalition then directly lobbies the legislature for its appropriation.

The Coalition creates a unified approach and strength in numbers. Healthy, robust debates are encouraged within the Coalition through the budget vetting process before the Governor or Legislature review the budget request. Any disagreements among members are sorted out well before the legislative session begins. The budget proposal to the Legislature is holistic and does not pit one type of grant program, applicant, or user-group against another.

Further, the Coalition can advocate for projects proposed by agencies and organizations that are legally prohibited from lobbying or that do not have the capacity to lobby.

SUCCESSES

According to data downloaded from the RCO's PRISM database,[6] the Outdoor Recreation account of WWRP has funded $360 million for 810 projects since 1991, with another $86 million proposed. More than 225 project sponsors have submitted successful applications. In total, these projects have leveraged another $385 million in sponsor match, more than doubling the investment of the WWRP in Washington's outdoor recreation infrastructure.

The scope and scale of projects accomplished through WWRP vary widely, from small community parks and playgrounds, to acquisitions of new state parks, to long-distance, multi-phased trails. In 2014, WWRP helped complete the creation of Kukutali Nature Preserve. Brokered by the Trust for Public Land, it is the first state park jointly owned and managed by a sovereign Indian nation, the Swinomish, and the Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission. In central Washington, a coalition of partners such as the Chelan-Douglas Land Trust and City of Wenatchee worked with WWRP funding to acquire multiple properties and build a series of trails, which have become a regional destination and economic benefit to the community. In the Methow Valley, WWRP helped install a refrigerated ice rink, allowing the community to lengthen its season of outdoor skating. The PRISM database has more details on a portfolio of flagship projects assembled by the Coalition in honor of the WWRP's 25th anniversary.[7]

WWRP's success has also helped generate additional coalitions and initiatives that leverage synergistic opportunities to advance outdoor recreation in Washington. In 2015, the office of State Policy Advisor on Outdoor Recreation and Economic Development was created to strengthen the state's outdoor industry economy and increase participation in outdoor recreation. The office advises the Governor and works closely with the RCO and Coalition and is one of four such positions in the U.S. In addition, an association of the 45 primary outdoor recreation organizations in Washington formed the Big Tent Coalition in 2012 with the goal of raising the profile of outdoor recreation and its economic, social, and health benefits. The RCO and Washington Wildlife & Recreation Coalition are members.[8]

CHALLENGES

Funding security is an ongoing challenge for the WWRP. Recent capital requests related to education are increasing the competition for funding and are expected to grow in the future. New coalitions—modeled after WWRP's success—are trying to copy the approach and are increasing the demands on the capital budget.

Like many states, ongoing funding for operations and maintenance is unstable. WWRP funds only capital projects – not ongoing operations and maintenance – and some local jurisdictions are frustrated with WWRP funding for new state agency acquisitions when there is a perceived maintenance backlog on existing state-owned properties. Compounding the problem is the unreliability of the state's payment in lieu of taxes (PILT) program, which requires the state make payments to counties in lieu of property taxes on state-owned property.

Matching funds also present many challenges in Washington. Most WWRP grants require a 50 percent match, which inevitably favors communities with more capacity. Urban communities are better able to raise matching funds through other grant sources and urban voters are often willing to approve bond initiatives for local recreation measures, thereby creating a reliable source of matching funds. Smaller and more rural communities sometimes lack the voter appetite or bonding capacity to create local matching funds, as well as the capacity to write and develop competitive grant proposals. As a result, more grants are given to larger communities; underserved populations remain underserved. To address this problem, the RCO is creating a match waiver program for WWRP grants that will be driven by measures of hardship such as median household income, declarations of disaster areas, and other risks. It aims to have the program developed by 2018.

LESSONS LEARNED

Citizen engagement adds fairness and transparency.

Washington's program is one of the oldest and most successful in the United States, and by all accounts one of its key ingredients is collaboration and citizen involvement. From the original campaign to create the WWRP, to review of every grant application, to the biennial lobbying for appropriations, Washington citizens, businesses, and communities are involved in the entire process and information is accessible through resources such as the PRISM database. While this level of engagement can slow down the process, it also results in transparency and fairness, local buy-in, and highly vetted projects that represent the best opportunities to improve outdoor recreation in Washington.

The Coalition helps create a unified voice.

A diverse, focused, broad-based coalition is key to Washington's success. The Coalition puts forward a unified, holistic view of the WWRP to the Legislature, making the voice of outdoor recreation in the appropriation process more powerful than if individual organizations acted alone. The Coalition also adds capacity to agencies and organizations that may be lacking lobbying abilities independently. The Coalition creates a forum for working out the real or perceived tension between sometimes conflicting values, such as conservation and open space with recreation, but keeps these debates out of the Legislature.

Administration by an agency that does not manage recreational resources makes for a robust process.

While many states combine granting programs with public land and resource management, housing grants within state parks or fish and game departments, Washington has taken the unique approach of managing funding through a stand-alone, independent agency focused exclusively on supporting recreation and conservation through grants. This allows the RCO to focus on grantmaking and effective support of grant sponsors rather than land and resource management. RCO's independent funding for its own operations means that it never competes for funding with the agencies and organizations that receive its grants.

A frequent funding cycle promotes engagement and adaptability.

While it may seem counterintuitive, the biennial cycle of WWRP appropriations creates added opportunities. The biennial lobbying and project vetting requires active and engaged partners; there is no time for complacency. The recurring need for advocacy and support has resulted in the long-term sustainability of the Coalition, as the ongoing need for communications and collaboration of the Coalition strengthen the program's effectiveness. The rapid timeframe allows the state and partners to adapt to changing opportunities, challenges, and needs in Washington.

Figure 10.1 – WWRP Funding Allocations

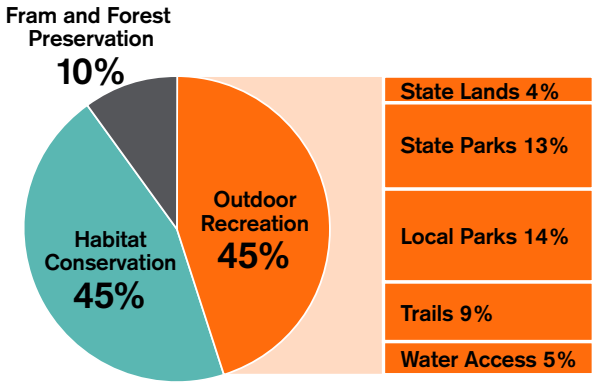


Table 10.1 – WWRP Outdoor Recreation Grant Categories and Eligibility			
Category	**Percent of Outdoor Rec Grants**	**Eligible Uses**	**Eligible Applicants**
Local parks	30%	Acquisition, development and renovation of active and passive parks. 40-50 percent must be for new acquisitions. Maximum grant is $1 million for acquisitions, $500,000 for development or renovation, and $1 million for combination grants, though no more than $500,000 can be used for development or renovation costs.	Local agencies
State Parks	30%	Acquisition and development of state parks. 40-50 percent must be used for new acquisitions. Renovations of existing facilities are ineligible. There is no minimum or maximum grant amount.	State Park and Recreation Commission
State Lands	10%	Development and renovation of outdoor recreation facilities on existing recreation lands. Grants must be between $25,000 - $325,000.	Dept. of Natural Resources, Dept. of Fish and Wildlife
Trails	20%	Acquisition, development, and renovation of non-motorized trails and trailhead facilities (excluding roadway or sidewalk improvements). This includes pedestrian, equestrian, bicycle, or cross-country ski trails. There is no minimum or maximum grant amount.	State and local agencies
Water Access	10%	Acquisition, development, and renovation of lands and facilities that provide physical access to shorelines for non-motorized, water-related recreation such as boating, fishing, swimming, and beachcombing. 75 percent must be used for new acquisitions. There is no minimum or maximum grant amount.	State and local agencies

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END NOTES

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5. See resources under Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program: http://www.rco.wa.gov/doc_pages/app_materials.shtml.
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