

## **Our Request: Preserve Operating, Capital, and Transportation Budget funding that fuels the outdoor recreation sector**

*“Outdoor recreation spending is vital to the tourism and retail sectors...That industry deserves robust support, especially during the ongoing economic crisis. Its benefits go beyond money into the quality of life that comes from having ample urban parks, forestlands and mountain trails to explore — an effect amplified by months of self-isolation.”*

– *Seattle Times* Editorial on Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), June 11, 2020

Recreating outdoors is a cherished way of life for Washington residents, etched into the DNA of many of the 7.8 million residents who call the Evergreen State home. Outdoor recreation is an outlet for activity, for fun, for reflection and respite – all while enhancing our physical health and our quality of life.

Outdoor recreation is big business, too. The kaleidoscope of fields, fishing holes, trails, rivers and lakes, snow-capped mountains, summer festivals and tournaments – and the businesses that provide a gateway to all of them – generate more than \$21 billion in revenue each year and account for over 200,000 jobs across every corner of our state.

### **Requests of our State Legislators**

As we review the financial impacts already absorbed by outdoor recreation agencies and organizations, as we examine the economic toll this takes on tourism and visitation, and as we reflect upon public health and quality-of-life advantages from a sector that is more valued than ever, we urge lawmakers to recognize the benefits of “outdoor rec” by doing the following:

- ***Leave intact operating funds*** for state natural resource agencies and work to restore cuts if possible. The overall \$8.8 billion revenue shortfall the state projects would only *worsen* with further cuts to agencies, non-profits, tourism organizations, and fairs and event centers that draw droves of visitors to Washington State;
- ***Make robust investments in Capital and Transportation budgets*** and grant programs to the maximum extent practicable, which will regenerate the outdoor sector and leverage new jobs and construction activity, build lasting infrastructure, and stimulate economic activity;
- ***Use the lessons learned from the pandemic to reinvest in an outdoor recreation sector*** that generates over \$21 billion in economic activity, employs Washington residents in urban and rural areas like, enhances our public health and quality of life, and brings significant tourism visitors and discretionary dollars to the state we love.
- ***Recognize the equity*** that comes from having outdoor and public lands available to those of all incomes, all races, and all religions. During COVID-19, we saw those living in smaller homes, co-housed in congregate settings, or living in multi-generational households were hit harder by direct and indirect impacts of a pandemic.

## **COVID-19 Impacts to Outdoor Recreation Agencies, Businesses, Events**

The outdoor recreation sector that fuels economic well-being, physical health, and quality of life has suffered devastating losses these last few months, even as the public turns more and more to its outdoor recreation spaces in the midst of a pandemic.

The impacts reverberate far and wide. Metro Parks Tacoma had to lay off 520 part-time workers; both Renton's and Lacey's parks departments furloughed over 100. Rural campgrounds and urban boat-launch ramps went simultaneously quiet. REI temporarily shuttered 162 stores nationwide, and American Heritage Railroads permanently closed the Mount Rainier Scenic Railway and museum that breathed economic life into the town of Elbe. A survey by 57Hours, a company that connects individuals with certified guides for outdoor adventures, found that 92 percent of them have been out of work for three months or more.

Operators have canceled about 80 percent of the summer fairs that draw millions of visitors – and five carnival companies that offer rides at those fairs have gone silent as well. The Grays Harbor Fair and Events Center estimates a \$500,000 reduction in lodging taxes to fund its events. Those running Sea to Ski in Bellingham, WIAA Track & Field events in Yakima, and a Spokane-Coeur d' Alene wood bat tournament in the Lilac City saw a combined 5,550 room nights dry up when those events were cancelled – part of an overall loss of more than 43,000 overnight stays washed out in those three cities alone. Spokane County has experienced a \$21 million loss in tourism revenue as over 35 events went from scheduled to canceled.

These kinds of losses are felt throughout the state. Snohomish County estimates that 318,000 individuals who would have come from 50+ miles to visit the county simply did not – an \$11 million impact. The Wenatchee Valley Chamber of Commerce was relying on the early-April “Triple Crown” baseball tournament to fill nearly 1,800 rooms and induce more than \$600,000 in spending – a cancellation meant it didn't materialize. The Olympic Peninsula Visitors Bureau had projected more than 525,000 participants and an economic impact of nearly \$5.9 million from the array of outdoor events, rides, marathons and more that it hosts. Not this year. The Kittitas Valley Event Center had 180 events canceled and sacrificed nearly \$90,000 in short-term rental income (March-June). And the list goes on.

## **Short- and Long-term Impacts on State and Local Agencies**

The measurable financial impacts to state and local natural resource and parks agencies have been eye-popping as well. To cite a series of them:

- Washington State Parks anticipates a 6-month (March-September) revenue loss of \$19 million at its revenue-generating facilities. The agency laid off 60 non-permanent employees in April after instituting a hiring freeze on 40 full-time positions in March.
- The Department of Fish and Wildlife collected 68 percent less revenue from fishing and hunting licenses this April than it had in April 2019. WDFW, along with other state natural resource agencies, is also identifying positions and programs to cut as part of a 15 percent agency budget reduction exercise directed by the Office of Financial Management (OFM).
- The April 2020 gas-tax revenues that go to the Recreation and Conservation Office for the development and maintenance of boating facilities nosedived nearly \$300,000 from what RCO received in April 2019.
- The Department of Natural Resources saw gas tax proceeds for its contribution to the Non-Highway Off-Road Vehicle Account (NOVA) fall nearly \$350,000 from January-April

2020 projections. Unlike revenue from Discover Passes, which is beginning to rebound, that gas tax revenue is permanently lost and may continue to plummet.

- Pierce County Parks estimates that three-fourths of the \$2 million in earned revenue it budgeted for 2020 – or \$1.5 million – will not materialize. Deep cuts at golf courses, beachfront parks, and sports complexes are the likely result.
- The Vashon Park District cannot afford to hire any seasonal workers.
- The Regional Athletic Complex (RAC) in Lacey, which usually injects about \$4 million into the local community each year, expects its usage and revenues to be cut in half.
- Key Pen Parks, serving 18,000 people on the Key Peninsula, has cancelled several mountain-biking events, a 4<sup>th</sup> of July social, and two logging shows, meaning thousands of visitors – and the discretionary spending dollars they bring – will not be arriving.
- The Peninsula Metropolitan Park District projects 2020 losses of more than \$500,000 in sales tax, recreation fee, and rental-sales revenue.
- Burien’s Parks and Recreation Department furloughed all 35 of its part-time workers, projects \$500,000 in 2020 cuts, and anticipates a loss of \$277,000 in revenues.

Paired with the short-term financial impacts are the long-term setbacks to keeping up with maintenance of the public lands we love to use. Agencies that already struggled with M&O are dealing with several months of closures, restrictions to access, a loss of volunteers to assist them, and more. The cumulative M&O deficit only worsens.

### **Non-Profit Organizations Take A Hit, Too – and Disproportionate Impacts to Rural Areas**

Beyond the state and local agency budget impacts, the canceled events, and the lost hotel room nights, there are very real impacts to the non-profit organizations that rely on volunteer stewardship and large fund-raising events. The inability to utilize volunteer maintenance on trails has decreased revenue for organizations like The Back Country Horsemen of Washington (BCHWA) and the Washington Trails Association. Grant and contract agreements that comprise large portions of revenues for these organizations have been restructured or have gone unfulfilled, given the cancellation of events during the height of the maintenance season. The Back Country Horsemen estimates it will sacrifice more than \$80,000 in fund-raising revenue that it uses to promote the value of horseback and trail riding. Washington Trails Association’s largest public-facing event, Hike the State, was cancelled.

Meanwhile, the Mountaineers has issued roughly \$300,000 in refunds due to courses being canceled, has experienced another \$150,000 in losses from membership and events revenues, and will not see the \$300,000 it projected from its annual fund-raising gala. The Washington State Parks Foundation canceled its largest fund-raiser of the year associated with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Earth Day – an estimated loss of \$150,000. Mountains to Sound Greenway volunteers who normally work on trail maintenance and restoration projects were not able to do so, a loss of 22,119 hours and the equivalent of \$376,023 worth of in-kind labor to land management agencies that could have matched grant funds to care for parks, forests, and trails.

When outdoor recreation activities go away, when discretionary spending dries up, and when dramatic budget cuts occur, the ‘hit’ falls disproportionately on some of Washington State’s smallest, most scenic, and most rural communities. More than 70 percent of the Methow Valley businesses surveyed in that part of the state indicated they were “highly dependent” on the peak-season travels to the Valley’s picturesque trail network. The ice rink in Winthrop, recently named one of the top 10 ice rinks in the West by Sunset Magazine, will see its operating profits melt if skaters, hockey tournaments, and families can’t journey to this Okanogan County town.

## **Cutbacks Harm Quality of Life, Health – for an Outdoor Sector We Value More than Ever**

Major cutbacks and rollback in Washington State’s outdoor recreation sector don’t just take a bite out of state and local economies and our revered quality of life – they harm a preventative public health tool for a sector that provides services ranging from day care to wellness to physical fitness and nutrition to summer camps. An RCO study done last year estimated that trail use alone results in over \$390 million in health savings each year and that outdoor exercise has been demonstrated to restore attention and decrease depression and stress. An Oregon Office of Outdoor Recreation study projected that the statewide *savings* in illness and disease from outdoor activities add up to 3.6 percent of *total* health care costs in the state.

Over and above the numbers, what the COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated, convincingly, is just how much residents of Washington value their parks and trails and open spaces and waterways. DNR reports “a dramatic increase in visitation all over the state in the last three months.” Pierce County estimates “700,000 more users on Foothills Trail” in March 2020 than the parks agency counted the March before. Boating manufacturers and dealers who provide the Discoverboating.com app saw a 128 percent increase in visitors in the first weekend of May 2020 compared to the same May 2019 time frame. Clearly, people are rediscovering the multi-layered benefits of the outdoors in droves during this outbreak.

**NOTE:** The authors wish to thank a broad-based array of 30 state agencies, local agencies, non-profit organizations, tourism organizations, fairs, and event centers which contributed background information and data to make this document possible. *A list of contributors is below. Please also see the Google document linked [here](#) for further information provided by agencies and organizations and survey results compiled by the Big Tent Outdoor Recreation Coalition.*

### Washington State Natural Resource Agencies

\*Department of Fish & Wildlife  
\*Department of Natural Resources

\*Washington State Parks & Recreation Commission  
\*Recreation & Conservation Office

### Local Parks & Recreation Agencies

\*Burien Parks & Recreation  
\*Lacey Parks & Recreation  
\*Peninsula Metropolitan Parks  
\*Vashon Park District

\*Key Pen Metropolitan Parks  
\*Metro Parks Tacoma  
\*Pierce County Parks & Recreation

### Outdoor Recreation Organizations

\*Back County Horsemen of Washington  
\*Mountaineers  
\*Northwest Marine Trade Association  
\*Washington ATV Association  
\*Washington State Parks Foundation  
\*Washington Wildlife & Recreation Coalition

\*Big Tent Outdoor Recreation Coalition  
\*Mountains to Sound Greenway Trust  
\*Recreational Boating Assn. of Washington  
\*Washington Recreation & Park Association  
\*Washington Trails Association

### Carnivals, Fairs, Tourism Organizations

\*Chelan County Expo Center  
\*Grays Harbor Fair & Events Center  
\*Paul Maurer Shows  
\*Washington Tourism Alliance

\*Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs)  
\*Funtastic, Inc.  
\*Washington State Fair Association  
\*Wenatchee Youth Circus