

President's budget plays shell game as wildlife, lands continue to fall behind

by Deborah Bagocius

The budget released today by President Bush proposes major cuts in the Land and Water Conservation Fund, zeroes out funding for land owner incentive programs, cuts endangered species conservation and shortchanges wildlife refuges, thereby leaving our nation's wildlife resources in increasing jeopardy, according to Defenders of Wildlife.

In total, the president's budget cuts overall appropriated funding for natural resources and the environment by nearly \$1.5 billion, a 4.8 percent cut.

The budget figures for the Land and Water Conservation Fund alone show a cut of nearly \$85 million below FY 2006 levels, about a 60 percent cut. The fund was established in 1964 to provide money to federal and state governments to purchase land, water and wetlands for the benefit of all Americans. LWCF is funded from receipts from oil and gas drilling off the outer continental shelf and authorized to receive \$900 million a year.

Already faced with a crippling \$2.5 billion budget backlog, the National Wildlife Refuge System is undergoing a massive budget restructuring to deal with funding shortfalls. The meager increase in the administration's request still leaves the system more than \$55 million behind the inflation adjusted 2004 funding level.

"Daily we are seeing reports of the impacts of severe budget shortfalls in the refuge system," said Jamie Rappaport Clark, executive vice president of Defenders of Wildlife. "Overall, the system is losing a fifth of its staff. Across the country refuges are eliminating active outreach, visitor programs, habitat maintenance, wildlife restoration and education programs. Without more funding the refuge system will not be able to fulfill its vital mission to conserve our nation's fish, wildlife and their habitats for generations to come."

Based on today's budget figures, the future also looks bleak for our nation's endangered wildlife and the lands necessary to conserve them. President Bush's budget reduces the endangered species recovery program by 7.5 percent for a \$5.5 million cut below FY 2006.

"These cuts to the endangered species program will condemn imperiled wildlife to a continued downward spiral," said Clark. "Under this administration, critical programs that conserve our nation's lands and wildlife continue to hemorrhage."

In addition to these direct cuts to the endangered species program, funding for programs that help private landowners conserve at-risk wildlife were zeroed out. This cut to the Landowner Incentive and Private

Stewardship Grants programs totals \$29 million.

The nation's refuges and other federal lands are not just being threatened by budgetary neglect, but also by the clear focus on resource extraction by this administration.

"Just as he's done year after year and despite a call to reduce the nation's dependence on oil, the President continues to push for drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, an idea that does absolutely nothing to solve our energy problems or reduce our dependence on foreign oil," Clark continued. "The Arctic refuge must remain off-limits and permanently protected to prevent drilling threats like those President Bush continues to make."

The budgetary smoke and mirrors extend to the farm bill conservation programs as well.

Even though Defenders is pleased by the increased funding going to the Wetland Reserve Program, the administration's budget results in a net loss for key conservation programs funded through the farm bill. "The President continues to under fund proven and effective initiatives, like the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, effectively ignoring the thousands of landowners who want to participate in these programs and do good things for wildlife on their land," stated Clark.

While the administration touts an increase to the Park Service's budget, Defenders notes that it comes on the backs of equally important programs in the Department of Interior's budget.

"Programs that protect our nation's lands and wildlife are in structural collapse," said Clark. "We urge the new Congress to begin to reinvest in all critical lands and wildlife conservation programs, including those in the farm bill, so that we can leave a true conservation legacy for our children and grandchildren."

Defenders of Wildlife is recognized as one of the nation's most progressive advocates for wildlife and its habitat. With more than 500,000 members and supporters, Defenders of Wildlife is an effective leader on endangered species issues.

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