



EDITORIAL

Promises on Open Space

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In 1965, Congress came up with an elegant idea: Use some of the royalties from offshore oil and gas drilling to buy and conserve open space threatened by development. The dollars raised from depleting one natural resource would be used to protect another. Since then, the Land and Water Conservation Fund has invested more than \$13 billion and added more than five million acres to the national parks, wildlife refuges and national forests.

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Beginning in 1977, Congress annually authorized a spending level of \$900 million (from a much larger royalty pool, which now totals \$12 billion). But because Congress routinely diverted much of the money to the Treasury for deficit reduction, actual appropriations have

been far less. In President George W. Bush's last year, only \$155 million was appropriated for the fund.

President Obama promised more than \$400 million this year and the full \$900 million in 2015. Senators Jeff Bingaman of New Mexico and Max Baucus of Montana have a better idea. Last week, they introduced a bill that would guarantee financing of \$900 million every year, beginning with the next fiscal year, and would insulate the fund from future raids. Representative Nick Rahall of West Virginia is promoting the same idea in the House.

There is plenty of evidence that, even in the midst of a recession, Americans are willing to spend money to protect open space. According to a tally by the nonprofit Trust for Public Land, a conservation group, voters approved two out of three open space bond issues across 11 states last week, including a \$400 million "Green Acres" measure in New Jersey.

More federal dollars are needed to help complete long-pending acquisitions from Hawaii to Yellowstone National Park to the Everglades. The money would also help hard-pressed states, like New York, whose own land conservation program has been severely squeezed by huge budget shortfalls.

A guaranteed source of revenue for land and water conservation is something the original architects of the fund had in mind. It's past time for Congress to honor their wish.

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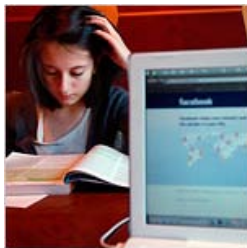
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