December 10, 2021

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Jefferson Drive SW
Washington, DC 20024

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

Thank you for your strong support for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), our nation’s most important conservation and recreation program and a primary tool for executing the Biden Administration’s ambitious America the Beautiful initiative. As you well know, LWCF supports an array of benefits, from protecting drinking water, improving climate resilience, and conserving natural infrastructure to providing landscape conservation, habitat protection, historic preservation, and outdoor recreation access for all. At this moment of climate and nature crisis and inequitable access to open space, LWCF is critical to making tangible progress on the important goals of the America the Beautiful initiative. Given the many pressing land acquisition needs outlined below, we recommend that the President’s budget request for Fiscal Year 2023 include $450 million in discretionary funding to complement the mandatory allocations provided by the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA).

This year, the Biden Administration submitted nearly $1.1 billion in LWCF needs in its budget request (including $192 million on the ready-to-go supplemental project lists), and hundreds of millions more identified during the budget process were left off the final submission lists. In fact, many projects on the priority lists represent single phases of much larger projects that could be completed in total with additional funding, demonstrating that overall demand for LWCF is even higher. An increased investment in Fiscal Year 2023 is necessary to address more of these outstanding conservation and recreation priorities across the country.

Dedicated LWCF funding has enabled additional progress on landscape-level conservation, protection of working forests through the Forest Legacy Program, access to the outdoors for underserved communities, climate resilience, preservation of historic and cultural sites, and other key goals of the America the Beautiful initiative. Still, project demand across the nation far exceeds the steady funding levels provided under GAOA. Increased investment in LWCF, above and beyond those annual dedicated funds, is vitally necessary to combat the constant and damaging overcrowding of our public lands; lack of greenspace in cities; need for natural climate solutions to protect communities; relentless development pressures; reduced carbon storage as forests, grasslands, and wetlands are lost to conversion; and other ongoing threats.

LWCF’s $900 million level was authorized in 1978, when the purchasing power of that amount was more than four times what it is today, and climate science was not prevalent. Since that time, credits to the fund far exceeded annual LWCF appropriations and outlays, leaving an unobligated balance of more than $22 billion in the LWCF Special Account in the U.S. Treasury. This chronic underfunding of LWCF (prior to enactment of GAOA) created a backlog of unmet
conservation and recreation needs and a long line of willing-seller landowners and community stakeholders clamoring for access to these funds.

LWCF’s unobligated balance provides an essential opportunity to address this backlog and to advance the President’s conservation vision. The unused deposits into the LWCF account are fully available under the law to be appropriated by Congress to augment the funds provided through GAOA. Accordingly, we respectfully request that an America the Beautiful investment of $450 million in discretionary LWCF funds, in addition to mandatory LWCF funding, be part of the Administration’s next budget proposal to address the numerous ready-to-go and now-or-never project opportunities, and to meet the groundbreaking commitment laid out in Executive Order 14008, “Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad,” and the America the Beautiful report published this spring. The attached briefing paper provides additional perspective on the need for these investments to be included in the Administration’s Fiscal Year 2023 budget submission.

Thank you for your continuing attention to and support for this important program. We look forward to working with you to grow investment in conservation and recreation across the nation.

Sincerely,

Appalachian Mountain Club
Appalachian Trail Conservancy
Coalition to Protect America’s National Parks
League of Conservation Voters
National Parks Conservation Association
National Park Trust
Open Space Institute
Save the Redwoods League
Society for the Protection of NH Forests
Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy
The Conservation Fund
The Nature Conservancy
The Trust for Public Land
The Wilderness Society

Cc: Homer Wilkes, Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment, USDA
Meryl Harrell, Deputy Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment, USDA
Randy Moore, Chief, US Forest Service
Chris French, Deputy Chief, National Forest System, US Forest Service