



A **SMART INVESTMENT** FOR AMERICA'S HEALTH



THE LAND AND WATER CONSERVATION FUND



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COVER PHOTO OF SWIMMERS AT CONFLUENCE PARK BY: KENT KANOUSE / FLICKR

INTRODUCTION

Today, more than 80 percent of Americans live in urban areas.¹ The need for parks and close-to-home recreation has never been greater. Extensive research shows parks play a critical role in making cities healthier places: they provide opportunities for outdoor activity, alleviate the psychological stress of urban life, and help clean the air and water. Parks have also shown to be a smart public investment, and are a tool in reducing medical expenses and saving cities money.

Nearly half of all adults in the U.S. have chronic health conditions such as heart disease, diabetes and obesity.² Increasing physical activity can help prevent and manage these conditions. Being active has also been shown to improve mental health by reducing stress levels and alleviating symptoms of depression.

Unfortunately, 60 percent of U.S. adults do not get the minimum recommended amount of physical activity needed to achieve health benefits each day.³ The figures are even worse for children—only one out of every three children is physically active.⁴

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), one way to increase physical activity is to “improve access to outdoor recreational facilities such as parks and green spaces.”⁵ Rates of exercise

increase among people who have access to parks and other safe outdoor places.⁶

Parks create healthier environments by reducing pollution, protecting water resources and keeping our cities cooler.

The Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) is an important resource for creating these parks.

In 1964, Congress established LWCF as a bipartisan commitment to use a portion of fees paid by companies drilling for offshore oil to safeguard natural areas and provide recreation opportunities to all Americans. A portion of LWCF money is allocated to the states to develop quality outdoor recreation opportunities that are close to home, open to the public and accessible to all. State and local governments in almost every U.S. county have used LWCF matching grants to build or renovate playgrounds, bike paths, soccer fields, and other facilities.

Each year \$900 million in royalties are paid into this fund by energy companies drilling for oil and gas offshore, but Congress diverts the majority of this money to other purposes.

This report highlights the important role that LWCF plays in supporting strong, healthy communities across America by creating parks and open space.

The Surgeon General of the United States has called on Americans to be more physically active through walking. One of the office’s recommendations is to create “places for physical activity, combined with information to encourage use of these places,” including public parks.⁷



PHYSICAL HEALTH BENEFITS OF PARKS

Across this country, city leaders are working to reduce rates of serious health conditions, including obesity, diabetes and heart disease. **Physical activity can help prevent and manage these conditions, but less than half of all adults in this country meet the national guidelines.**⁸ Research has shown that creating places such as parks, trails and other safe, accessible outdoor spaces for people to be physically active can improve community health.⁹



CHILDREN'S HEALTH

Approximately one out of every three children in the U.S. is either **obese or overweight**.¹⁰ Getting enough exercise is critical for children to maintain a healthy weight, yet they are spending more and more time indoors. Close to 75 percent of children between the ages of five and 10 do not meet minimum physical activity guidelines.¹¹ Many different studies have found that children who have access to parks and other outdoor recreational facilities are more active and are less likely to be overweight or obese.^{12, 13, 14}



MINORITY HEALTH

Minorities often struggle with higher rates of chronic health conditions than the rest of the population, including obesity, diabetes and heart disease.¹⁵ People in predominately low-income and minority neighborhoods tend to have less access to park space than people in predominately higher-income, white neighborhoods which leads to lower rates of physical activity.^{16, 17, 18}



SENIOR HEALTH

Seniors account for more than 13 percent of the U.S. population and will make up at least 20 percent of the population by 2060.¹⁹ This segment of the population must find ways to manage chronic health conditions such as arthritis, obesity and heart disease. Physical activity is critical to maintaining good health in later years, but close to 90 percent of seniors do not exercise enough to meet national recommendations.²⁰ Several studies have shown that parks can increase the physical and mental health of seniors who live near them.²¹

The vitality of America depends on the vitality of its people. **LWCF is a smart investment for keeping Americans active**, saving lives, reducing costs and contributing to a strong, healthy country.

THE HIGH COSTS OF CHRONIC DISEASES EACH YEAR IN THE U.S.



OBESITY

\$147 billion³¹



DIABETES

\$245 billion³²



HEART DISEASE

\$108 billion³³

OBESITY & PARKS

It is no secret that obesity is one of the biggest public health challenges facing America. Since the early 1960s, the number of obese adults has more than doubled—and today, one out of every three adults in the U.S. is obese.²² Obesity is linked to many other chronic health conditions such as heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes and certain types of cancer. It also costs the U.S. an estimated \$147 billion in medical expenses each year.²³

One major contributor to the obesity epidemic in this country is a lack of physical activity. CDC research shows that there is a connection between accessible green spaces and the likelihood of exercise.²⁴

DIABETES & PARKS

Almost 30 million children and adults in the U.S. have diabetes, and it kills more Americans every year than AIDS and breast cancer combined. Every year, diabetes costs the U.S. an estimated \$245 billion in medical and other expenses.²⁵

The American Diabetes Association recommends regular physical activity as a key part of managing diabetes.²⁶ A 2015 study found that people in neighborhoods with easy access to safe places to exercise reduced their risk of getting type 2 diabetes by more than 20 percent.²⁷

HEART DISEASE & PARKS

Heart disease is the leading cause of death for both men and women in the U.S. Each year, it costs the U.S. approximately \$108 billion in medical and other expenses.²⁸ Research has shown that physical activity can lower the risk of developing heart disease and that adults who meet the minimum requirements for physical activity are 40 percent less likely to die from this disease.²⁹

“Modifying neighborhoods in ways that promote healthier behavior, in particular ensuring the availability of physical activity resources, may help prevent the development of type 2 diabetes.”

— Paul Christine, University of Michigan School of Public Health³⁰



LWCF'S CONTRIBUTION TO AMERICAN CITIES

FORT WORTH, TEXAS

“It is critical that we encourage families to increase physical activity to address the childhood obesity epidemic in our cities. LWCF is an essential tool for Fort Worth and other cities to use to create new and revitalized parks, green spaces and recreation opportunities.”

— Fort Worth Mayor Betsy Price

DENVER, COLORADO

“In Denver, we are committed to creating parks, trails and open spaces because physical activity is integral to keeping our residents healthy. The Land and Water Conservation Fund is an important tool to help us keep this commitment.”

— Denver Mayor Michael B. Hancock

OKLAHOMA CITY, OKLAHOMA

“Urban parks nudge residents toward healthier and more active lifestyles. They also create a healthier environment by improving air and water quality. There are few investments a city can make with a better return than an urban park. LWCF is a critical tool for helping us make these investments.”

— Oklahoma City Mayor Mick Cornett



FORT WORTH, TEXAS

LWCF's Role in Fighting Childhood Obesity

In 2012, Fort Worth Mayor Betsy Price realized that her city was facing an obesity crisis. More than half of the city's children were overweight or obese.³⁴ Around a quarter of the city's residents were not physically active on a daily basis.³⁵

To address this crisis, Mayor Price launched a citywide initiative to encourage Fort Worth families to increase their physical activity. However, nearly half of the city's population did not live within a walking distance of a park.³⁶ Mayor Price realized that building more parks was critical to her city's health.

Fort Worth has received about \$2.7 million from LWCF since 1965. These grants have helped fund multiple walking paths, bike trails and parks, including the Trinity Trails, Heritage Park, Handley Park, Lake Como Park and Gateway Park.^{37, 38}



DENVER, COLORADO

LWCF Contributes to High Rates of Physical Activity

The city of Denver has one of the highest physical activity rates of any city in the country.³⁹ One contributing factor is that Denver residents have access to a wide range of outdoor recreation areas—more than 85 percent of Denver residents live within a 10-minute walk to a park.⁴⁰

LWCF has played a critical role in creating these parks. Denver has received more than \$3.7 million in LWCF grants. These funds have supported more than 75 projects, including Confluence Park, Summit Lake Park, Washington Park, Lincoln Park and Vanderbilt Park.^{41, 42}



OKLAHOMA CITY, OKLAHOMA

LWCF's Role in "This City Is Going On A Diet"

When Oklahoma City appeared on a list of the nation's most obese cities, Mayor Mick Cornett decided to put the entire city on a diet.

Cornett created "This City is Going on A Diet," a public awareness campaign challenging the citizens of Oklahoma City to lose one million pounds. More than 48,000 residents participated in the challenge and lost a cumulative one million pounds. More importantly, the campaign started a citywide conversation on health and wellness and how the built environment—better urban design including streetscapes, trails and sidewalks, wellness centers and public parks—could nudge residents toward a healthier and more active lifestyle.

Over the years, Oklahoma City has received more than \$4 million in LWCF grants. These funds have helped create Stars and Stripes Park on the shores of Lake Hefner, Schilling Park and Oklahoma City Youth Park, a former gravel mine that now offers hiking, biking, swimming, playgrounds, soccer, softball and baseball.^{43, 44}



MENTAL HEALTH BENEFITS OF PARKS

ACCORDING TO THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH,

mental illness affects approximately 13 million American adults each year.⁴⁵ The costs associated with serious mental illness in the U.S. add up to more than \$300 billion per year.⁴⁶

Engaging in physical activity is one way to help improve mental health. Exercise reduces anxiety and depression, and can help alleviate symptoms of a variety of mental health conditions, including dementia and Alzheimer's.^{47, 48}

ALLEVIATING SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION & PARKS

An estimated one in 10 American adults struggles with depression.⁴⁹ Physical activity can play a role in

helping to relieve the symptoms of depression. Researchers have found that an exercise program can be just as effective as antidepressants in reducing the symptoms of major depression disorders. Exercise can have an even greater impact on depression when it takes place outside in green areas. In one study, more than 70 percent of participants had fewer symptoms of depression after going on an outdoor walk.⁵⁰

RELIEVING STRESS & PARKS

Research has shown that urban residents tend to have higher levels of stress than those people living in rural or suburban areas.⁵¹ These

increased stress levels can contribute to mental health conditions, such as depression, anxiety and fatigue syndromes. Physical activity has been proven to decrease stress levels, especially when it takes place in parks and other outdoor green areas.⁵²

Engaging in physical activity outside—playing, running, walking, biking—is also an important contributor to positive mental health in children. These outdoor experiences can encourage imagination and creativity, cognitive and intellectual development, and positive social relationships. They can also reduce symptoms of attention deficit disorder (ADD) and rates of aggression in children.^{53, 54, 55}

LWCF is a smart investment in creating healthy, thriving communities across America.

A 2014 study found that people who lived in neighborhoods with more green space had fewer symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress.⁵⁶





ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH BENEFITS OF PARKS

Communities across the U.S. struggle with environmental health issues, such as poor air quality, polluted water, flooding and storm water management, and temperature extremes. Parks and other green outdoor recreation areas can help address these challenges and create a healthier environment for all people.

CLEAN AIR & PARKS

The leaves on trees in urban parks remove toxins from the air, such as carbon monoxide, that can pose serious health risks to people. These pollutants have been linked to respiratory problems in children, the elderly, and people suffering from asthma and heart problems. Air pollution can also increase the risk of certain cancers.

Research shows that even a small increase in the number of parks in an urban area can have a major impact in reducing air pollution and municipal expenditures. For example, in Atlanta, trees remove 19 million pounds of pollutants each year, saving the city \$47 million.^{57,58}

CLEAN WATER & PARKS

Grasses, shrubs and trees absorb water better than concrete and asphalt. Parks with green areas can help to reduce water pollution, protect drinking water and decrease rates of waterborne illnesses, thereby improving environmental health conditions and saving communities money.⁵⁹

For example, the green areas in Philadelphia's Wissahickon Park and Washington, D.C.'s Rock Creek Park help keep their adjacent waterways

clean by absorbing the polluted runoff from the pavement and other impervious surfaces.⁶⁰

HEALTHY TEMPERATURES & PARKS

The flat, dark asphalt and concrete surfaces of rooftops, roadways and parking lots in urban areas absorb the day's heat and radiate it at night. This is called the "urban heat island effect," which negatively impacts air quality and can increase the number of heat-related deaths.

This heat effect can be eliminated by increasing unpaved, green park space and the number of trees in a community.⁶¹ According to the University of Washington's Center for Urban Horticulture, a mature tree canopy can reduce air temperature by up to 10 degrees.⁶²

LWCF is a smart investment in the well-being of urban residents because it helps create natural infrastructure that improves environmental health.

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

Echo Park Lake

Echo Park Lake is an example of the city making specific improvements and investments to battle environmental pollution and promote healthy neighborhoods. This 13-acre urban lake is surrounded by 16 acres of recreational open space. The lake helps improve water quality by serving as a flood control basin for the city's storm drain system. It also provides waterfowl habitat and recreational opportunities for residents. The lake and the environmental health benefits that it provides were made possible in part through funding from LWCF.⁶³

“Many people use Echo Park Lake to get outside and be more active—but it also plays a valuable role in keeping our water clean and safe during storms. LWCF helps cities create the natural spaces that are needed for healthy communities.”

— Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti





CONCLUSION **LWCF IS A SMART INVESTMENT**

To create healthy, vibrant communities for generations to come, it is critical for cities to continue to be able to create places such as parks, trails and other safe, accessible outdoor areas for people to be physically active. **LWCF is a smart investment that will help communities achieve this goal.**

Parks and other outdoor spaces provide a range of health benefits for people who live in urban communities across America. Parks offer places for people of all ages to exercise outside. This increased physical activity can help prevent and manage serious health conditions. Being active outside can also reduce stress, which improves mental health. The trees and grass in parks can help protect clean air and water and create a healthier environment.

Unfortunately, many people who live in urban areas do not have

access to parks or other outdoor recreational facilities. Only about one in five homes is located within a half-mile of a park.⁶⁴ LWCF can help address this national health challenge.

Congress must secure permanent reauthorization for LWCF and fully fund it to the original congressionally authorized level of \$900 million per year. Congress should also increase the amount of LWCF funding that is allocated for urban parks to keep America's cities healthy and vibrant.

**CITY PARKS ALLIANCE SUPPORTS
PERMANENT REAUTHORIZATION
OF LWCF AT ITS FULL LEVEL OF
\$900 MILLION ANNUALLY.**

“Over its 50 year history, the Land and Water Conservation Fund has helped fund over 40,000 local conservation and outdoor recreation projects by re-investing a small portion of revenue from offshore oil and gas development in waters owned by the American people...These local projects—parks, ball fields, open spaces—play an important role in improving the health and vitality of urban areas, and protecting natural areas for future generations of Americans to enjoy. Congress needs to fulfill the promise made to the American people by enacting full and permanent funding of the Land and Water Conservation Fund.”⁶⁵

— Department of Interior Secretary Sally Jewell



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City Parks Alliance is the only independent, nationwide membership organization solely dedicated to urban parks. Its mission is to engage, educate and nurture a broad-based constituency to support the creation, revitalization and sustainability of parks and green spaces that contribute to dynamic cities.

The Mayors for Parks Coalition, a project of City Parks Alliance, is a national bipartisan coalition of mayors that advocates for reauthorization and full funding of the Land and Water Conservation Fund.