

# THE CONSERVATION FUNDING CRISIS



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Pressures on public lands are rapidly increasing, while funding for their conservation has rapidly decreased. Even public lands that have experienced stagnant or even very small increases in conservation funding, are still unable to keep up with ever-growing visitation and use levels. Years of neglect, in the form of too little funding for land protection and recreation management, are snowballing and are severely compromising the ecological integrity and recreational enjoyment of U.S. public lands.

Conservation Economics Institute examined trends in funding for three primary federal land management agencies: the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). Funding levels for land management activities were aggregated to broad programs such as Protection/Restoration, Recreation, Extraction, and Grazing at the national level and at the California BLM state-level, and were examined from Fiscal Years 2010 to 2021. USFS FY 2021 budget data are not included in our analyses due to budget restructuring that rendered the data incomparable to previous years. An examination of federal funding levels for land management and related outputs provides valuable information for understanding which programs need greater funding and how changes in categorical funding can affect conservation.

There are several findings of significant concern from our analysis. Federal funding for conservation activities on public lands, including protection and restoration of landscapes and support for outdoor recreation, has not kept up with environmental stressors and rapidly increasing visitation. If these funding trends continue, public lands are at risk of dramatic declines in recreational opportunities and environmental quality.

The federal funding trends are indicative of a conservation crisis, in which it becomes impossible for conservation funds to keep pace with the increased usage of federal lands, much less address the ever-growing backlog of conservation and maintenance needs. Increased funding is needed for greater conservation, protection of cultural and ecological resources, enforcement of regulations, ecological restoration, deferred maintenance, and recreational infrastructure.

**Our investigation of federal land management budget trends in real dollars (adjusted for inflation) revealed the following troubling trends:**

- Due to exceptional drought, **funding for wildfire management** has increased, but often in lieu of funding for conservation and recreation programs that can prevent wildfires and increase wildfire resilience. This concern is most prominent for the USFS but also for California BLM budgets.
- **Conservation funding for the USFS has dropped precipitously.** USFS appropriations for Protection/Restoration activities declined 37% between 2010 and 2020. When land acquisition funds (coming from the LWCF) are removed, Protection/Restoration funding decreased 43% during this time. USFS appropriations for Recreation programs decreased 11% between 2010 and 2020.
- Over the last decade, **rapidly increasing visitation and recreational use of public lands has vastly outpaced recreation funding** for the BLM, USFS, and USFWS. Per-visit recreation appropriations on these federal lands have dropped dramatically. The USFS averaged almost \$4.50 of Recreation funding per visit in 2010, for example. By 2022, that amount had dropped by 25% to \$3.37 per visit.
- **Large recreation budget deficits have developed for all federal agencies.** While previous recreation funding levels for federal agencies were already insufficient to fully protect and facilitate sustainable recreation, the current funding levels are much worse.
- **Funding for grazing and oil and gas extraction on BLM lands has increased at a higher rate than funding for conservation activities.** Despite that increase, however, rangeland health has declined and the backlog of restoration work needed to offset the ef-

fects of oil and gas development has expanded.

- **While oil production on BLM lands has rapidly increased, the staffing and resources necessary to mitigate negative impacts have not kept pace.** Since 2017, oil production on BLM lands has increased by 117% yet the number of full-time equivalent BLM employees working in the oil and gas arena declined 2% during the study years.
- **Recreation funding is experiencing an increase in dependence on recreation user fees.** User fees are a helpful form of conservation funding, but they have increased while general appropriations have decreased, resulting in a net overall decrease in recreation funding. Moreover, increasing recreation funding by relying more on user fees undermines equitable access by placing a greater proportional burden on lower income Americans.
- **The vast majority of new funding created by the Great American Outdoors Act in 2020 (the Legacy Restoration Fund) is allocated to the National Park Service.** While good for national parks it is insufficient to address the overarching problem.

### Recommendations:

Given that outdoor recreation is more sustainable than traditional extractive industries, it makes sense to promote increased funding for public land recreation, conservation, and restoration. In this context, we recommend the following:

- Broadly, federal funding for conservation must increase to keep pace with increasing conservation and recreation demands.
- Conservation funding and capacity resulting from recreation fees, agency partners, and volunteer groups must be an augmentation—not a substitute—for sufficient congressional appropriations.
- To drive key changes in funding, members of the public and their elected leaders need to be made more aware of the damaging funding trends affecting public lands. Actions that could help include:
  - **Further independent auditing** of damaging conservation funding trends impacting public lands, such as analyses conducted by the Government Accountability Office or the Congressional Research Service.
- Federal land management agencies should include **consistent and comparable budgeting** criteria across agencies (BLM, NPS, USFS, USFWS) and provide greater transparency in budgeting for public lands. Having a dedicated budgeting office and liaisons to help the public access data and understand funding trends would be a significant improvement. Annual public reporting of expenditures and accomplishments by state (BLM) or Region (USFS / USFWS) could further increase accountability.
- Consistent inclusion of summary tables in Budget Justification documents that clearly and easily illustrate comparisons over years is needed to increase understanding of funding trends. In particular, the USFS should provide a bridge that makes budget data starting in FY 2021 (restructured due to Budget Modernization) comparable to previous years.
- More broadly, consistent budgeting practices and presentation of budget documents across agencies would increase Congressional and public understanding of agency needs and opportunities.
- Finally, national Budget Justification data and trends should be provided in usable spreadsheet formats to augment the PDF documents that are currently the primary means of conveying budget information.