The Need for Access. Access to quality places to hunt and fish is a primary concern of sportsmen and sportswomen. A survey by Southwick Associates in 2012 found that 23 percent of hunters lost access to land they hunted, and 20 percent of anglers reported losing access to certain waters. Places to pursue game and fish are a cornerstone of hunting and fishing in America and part of our nation’s culture.

The Land and Water Conservation Fund History. The Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) is one of the country’s most important tools for conserving fish and wildlife habitat. Established through a bipartisan act of Congress in 1964, the fund uses royalties paid by energy companies to drill for oil and gas on the Outer Continental Shelf. Through this fund, millions of dollars are directed annually into safeguarding native habitat, water resources, cultural heritage sites, and outdoor recreation opportunities for all Americans—including 46 million hunters and anglers.

Since its inception, the LWCF has been used to invest over $16 billion in conservation and outdoor recreation, including the establishment of public hunting and fishing areas, access into landlocked public lands, and easement acquisitions that benefit fish, wildlife, and the sporting public. However, the full potential of the LWCF remains unrealized because expenditures from the fund are subject to annual appropriations. Congress has only fully funded LWCF at $900 million once in its 50-year history. Over the life of the program, Congress has diverted more than $19 billion from the fund for other uses.

A broad spectrum of sportsmen and sportswomen’s groups strongly support the following recommendations:

1. The LWCF should be modernized and permanently authorized by Congress and fully funded with permanent, dedicated funds (not subject to appropriations) directed to the purposes of the LWCF.

2. Amend the LWCF to include the provision known as “Making Public Lands Public,” which specifies that a portion of LWCF dollars (not less than 1.5 percent of the requested amount or $10 million, whichever is greater), must be used to secure recreational public access to existing public lands that currently have significantly restricted access for hunting, fishing, and other outdoor recreational uses.

3. Fish and wildlife conservation should be a stated primary purpose of the LWCF, both at the state and federal levels, to allow expenditure of funds to conserve fish and wildlife habitat.

Turn the Debate on Transferring Public Lands in a Positive Direction. The origins of the public land system and the rise of proposals to transfer these lands to the states are heavy with historical detail and legalities but boil...
down to a few simple facts: These lands were retained after decades of the Homestead Acts and other policies that distributed land for settlement. The purpose of public lands was envisioned as providing multiple shared benefits for conservation, jobs, and recreation; according to the USFWS, 72 percent of western hunters depend on public land for access. Hard-fought disagreements over the use of these lands are creating high levels of conflict.

The solution also involves a few simple ideas: Agencies must keep existing legal authorities for land swaps and transfers that allow them to clarify boundary issues around in-holding properties and nearby lands of conservation value. Decisions on the use of public lands and the implementation of these decisions must occur in a more timely fashion, at lower cost, and with more collaborative deliberation among all interests and stakeholders. The future of our public lands must be secured to extend an American heritage that defines this country and promotes conservation worldwide.

We support legislation that authorizes the sale of targeted public lands without high conservation value to generate funds for the acquisition of high priority conservation public lands, particularly those that improve opportunities for hunting, fishing, recreational shooting, and other recreational access, and to protect significant wildlife habitat. This includes the Federal Land Transaction Facilitation Act (FLTFA), Small Tracts Act amendment, U.S. Forest Service (USFS) land adjustment legislation, and other appropriate legislation that provides land management tools and generates revenue for conservation.

3. Support the "Making Public Lands Public" provision to dedicate not less than 1.5 percent or $10 million of the LWCF to providing and enhancing access for hunting, fishing and other outdoor recreation.

4. Amend LWCF to make fish and wildlife conservation a statutory purpose.

5. Ensure continued ownership of public lands by the federal government under improved statutes, regulations, and policies that guarantee a balanced use for wildlife conservation, recreation access, environmental services, and compatible development. We do not support large-scale divestiture of public lands.

6. Support legislation that allows targeted "land for land" approaches that improve recreation opportunities and protect fish and wildlife habitat such as FLTFA, the Small Tracts Act amendment, and USFS land adjustment legislation.