

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

November 6, 2013

The Honorable Sally Jewell
Secretary
Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20240

The Honorable Nancy Sutley
Chair
Council on Environmental Quality
730 Jackson Place, NW
Washington, DC 20503

Dear Secretary Jewell and Chairwoman Sutley:

Thank you so much for your strong voices on behalf of the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). We are working diligently in Congress to bring full and dedicated LWCF funding to reality and look forward to working with you to accomplish this important goal.

As you get to know more about the places where LWCF funds are making a difference to local communities, we want to make sure you are aware of the Valle de Oro National Wildlife Refuge project in the Albuquerque metropolitan region. This recently designated federal unit is the first urban wildlife refuge in the Southwest Region of the US Fish and Wildlife Service. As you address our nation's changing demographics, Valle de Oro NWR is a leading example of how the work of the Department of the Interior can reach urban constituencies in a meaningful way. It is located within an hour's drive of 60 percent of New Mexico's population and was highlighted as one of the 50-state America's Great Outdoors projects included in the Department of the Interior's report issued in November 2011.

For over ten years this low income, Hispanic industrialized neighborhood community in Bernalillo County, fought to protect a 570 acre undeveloped property called "Price's Dairy" since it had limited open space. In part, it was the America's Great Outdoors "ground-up" process that helped move this project along. The acquisition of Price's Dairy is now 75 percent complete, with the final \$5 million needed to complete it included in the Department of the Interior's Fiscal Year 2014 budget for US Fish and Wildlife Service land acquisition. In this time of constrained federal resources, this project is a model of a successful partnership that leverages federal dollars with other sources. Starting with an initial contribution of \$5 million from Bernalillo County, \$10.5 million in funds from local, state, private and non-LWCF sources have leveraged \$3.25 million in LWCF funding to date.

With the last installment of LWCF funds in place, the USFWS will retain full management and ownership of the refuge as well as 507 acre feet of senior water rights at less than half the cost. The Refuge staff, already assisted by a recently formed local Friend's group, is actively engaged with the local community, especially neighborhood schools, in bringing attention to the refuge's many resources while preparing for the formal opening to the public when the final land acquisition is completed.

The LWCF funding proposed in your Fiscal Year 2014 budget is critically needed to complete the refuge and ensure that the outdoor recreation, wildlife habitat protection and environmental education benefits of this 570-acre urban oasis can be enjoyed by all, without making an appointment. The Trust for Public Land has been facilitating this project and has an option agreement with the landowner that locks in the purchase price only through July 2014. Therefore, the urgency of securing FY 2014 funding to complete this outstanding urban project is quite real.

We are very pleased that the 2013 National Public Lands Day in New Mexico was celebrated at Valle de Oro NWR and that the refuge is now part of the Administration's Federal Urban Waters Partnership effort. The refuge will also protect a part of the culturally significant El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro National Historic Trail, which commemorates travel from the old Spanish capital of Mexico City to Texas and New Mexico. Additionally, the refuge's outreach efforts to date have led to partnerships with the high-school level NexGen Academy and Mountainview Elementary School to engage our next generation of conservationists.

We cannot emphasize enough the need to complete the acquisition of the remaining land and senior water rights that are still pending and that would be funded with the \$5 million proposed in your FY 2014 budget. Completion of this acquisition will finally allow the local community, residents of the larger Albuquerque metro area and visitors to our "Land of Enchantment" a greater connection to the outdoors. The completed refuge, which is a federal partner site involved in the Volpe Center/NOAA climate change scenario planning project, will also ensure that important wildlife habitat and precious water resources are protected for the future.

If we cannot complete this acquisition now we may never be able to finish this vital, urban project. We therefore urge you to prioritize this project as you determine how to spend LWCF dollars in FY 2014. We hope you will both be able to visit Valle de Oro NWR in the near future and see how it is making connections to young people and the broader community after just one year in existence.

Sincerely,


Tom Udall
United States Senator


Martin Heinrich
United States Senator


Michelle Lujan Grisham
United States Representative