

Water matters

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IN MY OWN WORDS

BY BRAD WYCHE

Only about an hour's drive from Greenville and Spartanburg are two extraordinary places – Jones Gap State Park and Caesar's Head State Park.

Consisting of over 10,000 acres and located in the heart of the extraordinary Blue Ridge Escarpment, the parks are spectacularly beautiful and afford an amazing array of nature-based opportunities for all of us to enjoy. Small wonder they are two of the most popular parks in South Carolina.

But most of us take these two parks – and all of our natural areas – for granted. We rarely think about the hard work, leadership, and funding that were required to make these special places a reality.

The fact is that without grants provided by the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), Jones Gap and Caesar's Head State Parks—and many other public parks, forests and natural areas in our state and across the country—would not exist.

This is why a bill now pending in Congress is so important. The LWCF was established in 1964, but it has been fully funded only two times in its entire history. This legislation would guarantee full funding for the LWCF at \$900 million a year beginning in fiscal year 2011. The bill was recently approved by the House and will be considered by the Senate after the August recess.

The law establishing the LWCF requires it to be funded by a small percentage of the revenues received by the United States from offshore oil and gas leases. The basic premise is sound: The depletion of these national, non-renewable resources is balanced by permanently protecting mountains, beaches, forests, rivers and other special places across the country. This policy makes all the more sense when you consider that as the Gulf Oil spill dramatically shows, oil and gas production itself can have severe impacts on our natural resources.

Yet Congress has not honored its commitment. Since 1964, more than \$17 billion of funds that should have been deposited in the LWCF have been diverted for other unrelated purposes. While there is no way to recover those funds now, Congress can and should keep its promise from now on.

Investing in the protection of our natural resources pays for itself many times over. According to the Outdoor Industry Foundation, hunting, fishing, camping, climbing, hiking, paddling, backcountry skiing, mountain biking, and wildlife viewing, which are prevalent activities on lands acquired by the LWCF, contribute \$730 billion annually to the national economy, support 6.5 million jobs (1 of every 20 jobs in the country) and stimulate 8 percent of all consumer spending.

Here in South Carolina, a recent study by the University of South Carolina Moore School of Business determined that natural resources provide nearly \$30 billion in direct economic benefits to the state each year and support 230,000 jobs.

South Carolina is one of the smallest states, yet our population is increasing at the astonishing rate of 127 people every day. By 2035, there will be another 1.1 million people living here.

This rapid growth poses a grave threat to the wonderful natural resources and scenic landscapes that have long distinguished our state. We need to protect them before it is too late, and state and local programs cannot do it alone.

Please contact Senators Graham and DeMint today and urge them to vote Yes on Senate Bill 3663 and support full funding of the LWCF.

Brad Wyche is executive director of Upstate Forever.

