



SIERRA CLUB

LONE STAR CHAPTER

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Comments of the Lone Star Sierra Club on TPWD: Our Burgeoning and Diverse Population Needs Parks and Wildlife more than ever!

The Lone Star Chapter of the Sierra Club is pleased to offer these very brief comments on the Legislative Appropriations Request of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. With some 30,000 members, the state chapter of the Sierra Club has long had members who enjoy the natural beauty and recreational opportunities offered by state parks, wilderness areas, as well as local parks supported through local park grants. The local volunteer-led groups of the Sierra Club frequently volunteer at local and state parks and wilderness areas, and lead activities there working closely with TPWD staff. Finally, as an organization, we have long advocated for the need to increase access to parks and the amount of parkland available for recreational activities, from camping, to hiking, to hunting, fishing, birding, rock climbing and kayaking. We were supporters of the constitutional measures that assured that sporting goods taxes flowed to the Parks and Wildlife Department. We were happy to do so as we recognize not only the recreational opportunities that our members enjoy, but also the fact that the TPWD also plays a key role in ensuring clean water and rivers, wildlife habitat and managing important populations of endangered and threatened habitats and species, as well as game species.

The Sierra Club is very supportive of the LAR submitted by the TPWD, and associated Exceptional Item Requests. In particular, we would agree that inflationary pressures and low wages present a unique challenge to the agency. Success in recruitment and retention of qualified staff is often further complicated by factors such as the remote location of many TPWD sites, which present a limited labor pool, and/or the availability of higher paying private sector jobs. Simply put the state must pay more to maintain qualified TPWD staff. While TPWD has not asked for additional funding for state employee retention, we would suggest additional money will be needed to retain and attract staff, as turnover has been a major issue.

Deferred Maintenance

While significant improvements have been made in recent years to increase funding to address a backlog of maintenance and capital issues facing dozens of parks and wilderness areas, much more is needed. Climate extremes and our changing climate have also impacted parks, from fires in East Texas, to hurricanes, to droughts and even freezes. **Thus, we are very**

supportive of Exceptional Item No. 1 to provide \$32.1 million over the biennium to address priority capital construction and a backlog of repair needs.

Oysters and their Fisherman need attention

We are similarly supportive of efforts to work toward a balance of the need to protect oyster fishing areas, while allowing some harvesting and are supporting the exceptional item of \$3 million for the buyback of the oyster harvest rights.

Mountain Lions need protection

Recently, an effort to petition the agency to require mountain lions to be managed as a game species was led by a wide coalition of groups and individuals. While the agency declined to move forward with the rule, they have begun a stakeholder process. The Sierra Club has been an advocate for better protections for mountain lions since at least the late 1980s, and it is well past time for the TPWD to be directed to better manage this unique, but threatened predator.

Local Park Grants continue to be important

We are appreciative of the proposed \$19.9 million per year proposed in local park grants, which is a slight increase from the current year budget but maintains important support to both rural and urban Texas for local park projects.

Land acquisition still underfunded

Last legislative session, the Legislature finally allowed more latitude for the Department to respond to narrow “windows of opportunity” to acquire inholdings/strategic tracts adjacent to state parks. This state funding has enabled the department to be more proactive about identifying land acquisition priorities & identifying willing sellers. Indeed, several new acquisitions have already occurred this fiscal year. However, greater authority for use of Sporting Goods Sales Tax revenue for park-related acquisitions would help address other pressing & strategic state recreational needs as they emerge. However, in this base budget only \$27.8 million is being allocated for land acquisition, a tiny amount for a state the size of Texas.

Thus, we are extremely supportive of Exceptional Item No. 4, which would provide \$10 million over the biennium for acquisition of migratory game bird habitat from willing sellers for expansion of/ addition to Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs).

Similarly, the Sierra Club also supports Exceptional Item Request No. 5, which seeks an additional appropriation of \$8.0 million in FY2024 to increase grants awarded for the purchase of long-term conservation easements through the Texas Farms and Ranchlands Conservation Program.

In addition, the sunset legislation that continued the agency requires the agency to update its Land and Water Conservation Plan, which was last fully updated in 2015. However, the public is still waiting for a final version which should set out the agency's long-term goal for land acquisition, but clearly with a state that is 95 percent in private lands, much more funding is needed to keep up with our population growth. A 2001 Texas Tech study said we need to add 1.4 million acres by 2030, which would cost some \$6 billion dollars.. A Texas 2036 poll found 68% of Texans support spending one billion over the next two years to help move toward such a goal.

The Sierra Club believes that the Legislature should consider a long-term investment strategy for land acquisition. While \$27 million in the base budget, plus an additional \$18 million in exceptional items is better than nothing, it falls well short of the kind of strategic investment to meet our needs as a state. ***Instead, the Legislature should consider a multi-year investment of hundreds of millions or either billions of dollars. With estimates of a balance of more than \$27 billion in the Rainy Day Fund, now may be the perfect time to put a down payment of \$1 billion toward land acquisition and development.***

Texas should take advantage of federal funding to help bridge the gap

There are several opportunities to take advantage of federal funding which could help address these needs. First under the Recovering America's Wilderness Act, Texas could be eligible for more than \$50 million per year for programs focused on Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) listed in the Texas Conservation Action Plan. If passed, additional state matching funds would need to be identified in order to most effectively utilize Texas' anticipated sha

Second, there are hundreds of miles of roads and bridges in need of repair, but present budgetary limits only allow \$20 million per biennium from TXDOT to assist. With the passage of the IIJA in 2021, there are billions of extra dollars flowing to Texas, and some of these could be used to address transportation infrastructure.

Similarly, Texas could utilize funding from the IIJA and potentially the IRA to make state parks and recreational facilities friendly to electric vehicles, while also providing funds for the department to purchase their own electric vehicles.

Finally, we believe there may be opportunities in the IIJA and IRA to actually put money into land acquisition and development of recreational areas.

The Sierra Club appreciates the opportunity to make these brief comments in support of the TPWD's LAR request for 24-25, including exceptional items, but believes even more investment is needed to protect and expand our state's natural heritage and resources.