

Clarify County Authority Over Conservation Futures Levy (CFL)

Support HB 1672

Conservation Futures WA

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SUMMARY

2021 marked the 50th anniversary of the state's landmark Conservation Futures Program. Enacted by the Washington Legislature in 1971, 14 counties rely on the program to generate funds needed to permanently protect and maintain open space, farms, forests, parks, and trails. These funds are used by counties, cities, and non-profits, and are a critical source of match for state and federal grants.

Unfortunately, the utility of this program has eroded in recent years. The CFL was originally authorized with a ceiling of 6.25 cents per \$1,000 in assessed value. But in most counties, the effective rate declines over time because of the 1% limit on annual levy growth. Also known as the 101% limit, there are different legal opinions as to whether this limit was intended to apply to the Conservation Futures program.

SOLUTION

HB 1672 resolves the question by clarifying that the Conservation Futures Levy is one of the levies outside of the 101% limit factor.

The bill restores the authority of elected county boards and commissions to establish their local rate for the CFL up to the existing 6.25 cents / \$1,000 cap already established by the Legislature. This legislation does not itself increase the CFL rate or the amount of county tax revenue, but empowers county councils to utilize this conservation tool as intended when the program was first enacted.

Washington counties participating in Conservation Futures Program



FOR MORE INFORMATION AND A LIST OF ACTIVE MEMBERS

ConservationFuturesWA.org

BACKGROUND

Our parks, trails, natural lands, farms, urban greenspaces, and forests make our communities stronger, healthier, more livable, and more attractive as economic development investments.

- According to U.S. Department of Agriculture projections released in 2018, urban areas are expected to cover nearly 10% of Washington's land by 2060, an increase from 3.6% in 2010. ([Crosscut](#))
- The CFL is critical to future land protection and recreation around Puget Sound – all but one Puget Sound county has created a Conservation Futures program.
- In Washington state, the proportion of residents living in a nature-deprived area by census tract ranges from 21% for white residents to 69% for people of color. ([American Progress](#))
- Each year, Washington's public lands provide between \$216 billion and \$264 billion in environmental benefits and support a \$20 billion outdoor recreation economy. ([WA RCO](#))
- Exercising outdoors, in and around nature, results in added mental health benefits, stress relief, and reduced mortality over the course of life as compared to exercising indoors. ([Journal of Sport and Health Medicine](#) via [UC Berkeley Parks Stewardship Forum](#))

Under current state policy interpretation, revenue generated by the CFL does not keep pace with inflation or the rising cost of land acquisition, stewardship, and operations in many counties. Thus it cannot fully address community-driven open space goals, close documented gaps in access, help sustain the region's robust growth, and contribute to improved health outcomes. Funds from Conservation Futures are a critical source of local matching funds for state and federal programs that require local match.

Without addressing the decline in CFL collections, it will be very difficult to realize the full potential of parks and open space planning, improve resilience against climate change impacts, or address environmental justice concerns. Recent and projected future population growth adds to the stress on our open spaces and the environment. The goals envisioned fifty years ago, when the state originally authorized Conservation Futures levies, have only grown more urgent.

This bill would restore local legislative control over the Conservation Futures Levy to a level up to but not exceeding the existing statutory rate of 6.25 cents / \$1,000 assessed value, regardless of whether resulting revenues increased by more than 1% over the prior year. Local governments would be able to customize their CFL collections to be responsive to locally determined needs and priorities.

