

Public Comment by Earl Conway to the Economic and Rural Development Committee, 10/31/2018

Madam Chair and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak on behalf of public users of our state's parks. I am Earl Conway, volunteer conservation director of New Mexico BASS Nation, Citizen Advisory Committee member on the NM Game and fish Habitat Stamp Program, advocate for the Southwest Tribal Fisheries Committee, Leader of the Elephant Butte Adapt-a-Cove project, and an avid hunter and angler in my spare time.

I came to speak about our State Parks but I can't help but comment on the previous discussion about legalizing recreational marijuana. I have children that are now 23 to 30 years old and I still have to help them out financially from time to time to make ends meet. But when I give them money, it irritates me to see them spend it on cigarettes or alcohol. If 42% of our citizens receive some form of public assistance, I don't see why we should be concerned how they will be treated if they use recreational marijuana. They shouldn't be spending my tax dollars on recreational marijuana. Likewise, if a student is on a lottery scholarship or otherwise subsidized through free tuition or scholarships, I want them hitting the books, not hitting the pot parties. I used to recruit for a national lab. One of the things that kicks applicants out of the system is marijuana use. It is still against Federal law and they have to pass the drug tests. Please consider the impact you will have on the workforce pool and our biggest employers.

Now back to State Parks. The State Parks annual day pass is the best deal I can get in the state at least until I am old enough to get the senior annual camping permit. My fellow sportsmen appreciate the services available but we see untapped opportunities to extend the visitor season at many of the parks. Specifically there are hunting, fishing, off-road vehicle, bird watching and kayaking opportunities that could bring in more out-of-state visitors. For instance the Duck Dynasty guys came to Elephant Butte twice because the hunting is that good. It was kept quiet because our local hunters didn't want others to find out about "their" secret spot. Unfortunately, because State Parks has not promoted hunting, there are some world class hunting destinations that are off limits including Santa Rosa and Lake Sumner.

Infrastructure at our parks compares well to other states but it could be better. Each park has some deficiencies that need attention. Conchas Lake is a disaster that needs a lot of attention. New Mexico BASS Nation had tournaments the last two years at Conchas but will not return this year due to the rapid decline in services. A marina, boat slips and a fueling station are needed at a minimum. The asbestos abatement and a decision on the North Dock concession is needed for the community to move on. The uncertainty of whether a concession will be restored has the local community holding off on starting any more private enterprises such as a restaurant or lodging. One urgent need is a handicapped fishing pier and boat

dock that is designed for handicapped access and loading. I have spoken with State Parks about the issues at Conchas.

On the other hand I see Elephant Butte surviving some tough times and being loved to death. It is the “cash cow” but we aren’t taking care of it. Lack of funding and law enforcement staff seriously limits the opportunity to tap into other opportunities. The north end of the reservoir would be a world-class riparian park destination in any state. But NM State Parks withdrew from the area because they lacked resources. It was a big mistake. That northern area has more to offer than almost any other non-reservoir park. Please reconsider the opportunities in that area even if it is a new concession run by the private sector. But don’t lock it away!

It appears to me that State Parks has been beaten into submission on budgets over the years and that they won’t ask for the needed infrastructure resources.

The people I represent and I invest a lot of volunteer time and dollars to these parks. I have personally brought in over \$250,000 in grants to Elephant Butte and other New Mexico fishing destinations for fish and wildlife habitat improvement. We always have ideas on how to improve these parks. Please let us help you in your decisions and support our volunteer efforts.

Thank you and I’m glad to be able to tell my children that today I actually saw government working the way it is supposed to work. Great job.