

Report IDs nation's 101 top conservation projects

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FILE - This Oct. 14, 2003 file photo shows a great blue heron wandering at the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, southwest of Brigham City, Utah. A new Interior Department report identifies 101 high-priority conservation projects, including the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, across the nation as part of America's Great Outdoors Initiative. (AP Photo/Douglas C. Pizac, File)

(AP) -- An Interior Department report released Thursday identifies 101 high-priority conservation projects across the nation as part of President Barack Obama's initiative to protect public lands, but it says most will have to find funding somewhere besides the U.S. government.

The report outlines two projects in each state and one in the District of Columbia in various stages of development, ranging from the creation of an all-season trail system in Alaska's Denali State Park to the completion of a 32-mile trail through urban areas in central Florida.

Representatives from all 50 states who were asked to identify specific projects in which the federal government could form partnerships as part of the America's Great Outdoors Initiative.

Some could be completed within in a few years, while others would take several decades, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar said.

Salazar said he didn't know the total cost, and the report says the federal agency won't be able to fund most of them, "given the fiscal constraints facing the federal government."

"We could do more if we had more funding," Salazar said. "I'm hopeful that as Congress considers appropriations for the future, they will recognize [conservation](#) is important for very important reasons, such as jobs."

Many of the projects have already launched, and the [Interior Department](#) will be able to help the state and local groups leading them by reallocating existing revenue within the agency and by providing technical assistance, he said.

The agency could also help the groups by acquiring conservation easements and grants, according to the report.

The report is part of the Obama administration's conservation initiative meant to protect public land, encourage more people to enjoy the outdoors and bolster employment in tourism and recreation.

When Obama announced the initiative earlier in February, it aimed to double federal spending on land and water conservation to \$900 million to buy private land for public use and provide grants to states.

The Obama administration came under fire last year for an internal memo that identified several areas in the West as potential national monuments. Critics had pointed to that as a sign the administration aimed to unilaterally lock up land from development.

Bob Ekey, spokesman for the Wilderness Society, said the new report shows the Interior Department has decided upon a more collaborative approach. The agency is focused on community-based conservation, which makes the projects slower to develop but means more people are involved, he said.

"It's gone more slowly than a lot of us would like to see, but it has great promise in helping people connect to the land and to nature," Ekey said.

Salazar, conscious of the concerns raised by the national monument memo, said it's important to protect rural landscapes but in a way that maintains private ownership.

"The reality is, all these projects have very strong local, county and state support," Salazar said. "The days of the federal government buying up large stretches of land ... are over. We aren't going to do that anymore."

U.S. Rep Denny Rehberg, the Montana Republican who has been vocal following the national monuments memo in his criticism of the department's conservation plans, said in a statement Thursday that he hopes the administration has turned a corner.

"After two years of leaked secret memos and top-down wilderness plans, I'm hopeful the Obama administration is finally beginning to realize the

importance of public input. It's critical that land initiatives be based on consensus and not just collaboration" Rehberg said.

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