

health care funds to make up for the Administration's bogus budget proposals. Democrats in this House have been arguing for months that the Administration is shortchanging VA health care, and we should restore that funding in the proper legislation under regular order. A nation at war must take care of its veterans, and I will vote for this bill to provide this critical funding for veterans health care.

Mr. HOLT. Mr. Speaker, I rise to express my disappointment with the Interior Appropriations bill that we are considering today. Although I will reluctantly vote for this legislation, I am concerned with the reduction in funding for many important domestic programs.

While I am pleased that this conference bill does not completely eliminate the Land and Water Conservation Fund, (LWCF), as in the House-passed version, I am still disappointed that this program only received \$30 million, which is one-third of what it received last year.

The Land and Water Conservation Fund has been instrumental in assisting local and State governments preserve vital open spaces. This program was established in 1965 to address rapid overdevelopment by increasing the number of high quality recreation areas and facilities and by increasing the local involvement in land preservation. To achieve this goal, the fund was separated into two components, one portion of the fund serves as an account from which the Federal government draws from to acquire land and the other portion is distributed to states in a matching grant program.

New Jersey has been active in seeking grants from this program and has received funds from the LWCF that were used to preserve treasures such as the Pinelands National Reserve and the Delaware National Scenic River. In addition, LWCF has provided more than \$111 million in state and local grants to build softball fields, rehabilitate playgrounds and to expand state parks.

Urban and highly developed regions, such as the region that I represent, will suffer the most from the elimination of the LWCF state grant program. The LWCF matching-grant program has proven to be a successful way to overcome the high cost of living that makes land acquisition and renewal projects costly in these regions. The steep reduction in funding for this program will leave local leaders without the capital necessary to enhance the quality of life in their communities.

This bill also cuts other domestic programs that benefit all Americans and future generations. This legislation only provides \$900 million for the Clean Water State Revolving Fund—a reduction of \$200 million from last year. This is vitally important to keeping drinking water clean and safe by supporting wastewater treatment, nonpoint source pollution and watershed and estuary management. Additionally, this bill cuts Federal land acquisition funding by 25 percent and reduces funding for construction projects in our national parks, refuges and forests by 10 percent.

Despite my reservations with cuts to important Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, and the Department of Interior, DOI, programs, I am pleased that this bill does the right thing and finally provides the VA the funds it needs to continue the delivery of care to our veterans through the end of the current fiscal year. This month, our Nation marked the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Veterans' Administration, the forerunner of today's

Department of Veterans Affairs. Even as we celebrate the VA's many achievements, particularly in the field of medical research, we should use this opportunity to ask if we, as a country, are truly putting our money where our mouth is regarding VA funding. Every day, VA doctors, nurses, technicians and other staff across our country work to try to deliver the best possible health care to our veterans. They face one critical and continuing obstacle—a VA medical system that is chronically, and needlessly, underfunded.

I hope that the Congress will learn from this experience and pass mandatory funding legislation for the VA health care system. It's long past time for Congress to cease its band-aid approach to funding for veteran's health care, and I urge my colleagues to honor the request of the leaders of our Nation's veterans organizations to deal once and for all with this shameful and avoidable situation.

Another positive provision in this bill is the modest increase in funding for the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Although the final funding levels fall slightly short of the amount approved by the House in May, the additional money will allow the NEA and NEH to build programs that use the strength of the arts and our Nation's cultural life to enhance communities in every State and every county around America.

It is clear that increasing funding for the arts and humanities are among the best investments that we as a society can make. They help our children learn. They give the elderly intellectual sustenance. They power economic development in regions that are down and out. They tie our diverse society and country together. I thank the conferees for recognizing the importance of this investment and giving the NEA and NEH the funds they need to advance our Nation's artistic and cultural life.

Even though I strongly oppose cuts to certain programs in this appropriations bill, I will vote in favor of this legislation. I hope in the future we can provide sufficient funding to these programs that enhance our communities, provide the Nation with clean water, and protect our precious natural wonders.

Mr. GENE GREEN of Texas. Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of this conference report to provide funding for the Department of the Interior and the Environmental Protection Agency for fiscal year 2006. Despite a tight allocation, the Chairman and Ranking Member of the Interior subcommittee performed an admirable task in providing the necessary funding for the continued management of federal lands and the operation of our country's environmental programs. I was disappointed to learn, however, that the bill does not provide much needed funding for a project I requested for the City of Houston and the University of Texas, Houston to conduct a risk assessment of air toxics in the Greater Houston area.

The Houston Chronicle recently completed a five-part series titled "In Harm's Way" that investigated air toxics in the "fence-line" communities near industrial facilities in Houston's East End. In particular, the series noted that the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality found that folks residing in some of these neighborhoods experience higher levels of potentially carcinogenic compounds than other areas.

For many years, residents have had concerns and questions about the quality of the

air in Houston's East End, the potential relationship to local industry, and the potential health effects on their families. The City of Houston, partnering with the University of Texas School of Public Health, is already working to characterize the science and weigh the evidence on health effects. Federal funding would allow us to broaden the scope of these efforts to ensure that we include the full range of risk assessment activities in our effort to improve the air in Houston.

While I remain disappointed that the Appropriations Committee did not include a line-item appropriation for this project, I am pleased that my colleague from Washington, the Interior Subcommittee Ranking Member, recognized the need for this air toxics assessment and has agreed to work with me to encourage the EPA to include this assessment as part of its fiscal year 2006 operations.

I thank my friend, Mr. DICKS, for his willingness to work with me on this effort. The folks in these fence-line communities—my constituents—are often the workers who produce many of the essential energy and petrochemical products we all use everyday, and they deserve accurate information about their environment.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I encourage my colleagues to support this bill.

Ms. WOOLSEY. Mr. Speaker, there is an old saying that, "You can put a dress on a pig, but it's still a pig." While I am happy that the FY06 Interior Appropriations Conference Report includes \$1.5 billion to make up for the funding shortfall for the Veterans' Administration, VA, it does not mask the horrible choices that were made in the rest of this bill. It's still a pig. This legislation includes cuts to the Clean Water State Revolving Fund, decreases in the number of STAG grants, and completely eliminates many conservation grants.

Ensuring that the VA has the funding it needs is one of my highest priorities, which is why I am so disappointed that this money was included in a bill that undermines our environment. It is sad that veterans' have been shortchanged by President Bush who was all too eager to send troops off to war, but failed to account for the cost of their care after they had dutifully served their country. The underestimation by the White House of \$1.5 billion for this year is only the tip of the iceberg with the shortfall for next year already projected to be \$2.6 billion. Unfortunately, the shortsightedness of the Republican majority failed to include this spending where it should be, in the Military Quality of Life Appropriations bill.

However, Mr. Speaker, in spite of the shortcomings for the environment, I will vote for this bill to support our troops.

Mr. SALAZAR. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to express my strong support for the conference report on H.R. 2361, the Interior Appropriations bill. This important piece of legislation provides \$1.5 billion to remedy the shortfall in veterans' health care for this year. Earlier this month, I stood here urging this body to step up to the plate when it comes to veterans. Our veterans must be our number one priority. By passing this measure, we take the first step in fulfilling our obligation to the men and women who have served our country with honor and dignity.

Passage of this bill is a necessity—I will never turn my back to our Nation's veterans. However, I do want to take this opportunity to discuss my concerns with the larger measure