



KUFM RADIO COMMENTARY

November 3, 2011

Super Committee

Dave Dittloff

Regional Representative for North and South Dakota

National Wildlife Federation

Northern Rockies & Prairies Regional Center

Missoula, Montana

America has a problem. The federal government is spending more money than it is taking in and up until now Congress has used the issue for short-term, political battles instead of a constructive dialogue about how we fix this problem with common-sense, long-term solutions.

Fortunately, out of this summer's debt ceiling mess, a potentially productive process to address the issue has been set up. The Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction (or Super Committee as it is usually called) has been charged with identifying at least \$1.2 trillion in deficit reduction over the next 10 years. The 12-person Super Committee consists of six Republicans and six Democrats evenly divided between the Senate and the House of Representatives. Montana Senator Max Baucus is one of the committee members. On its surface, the Super Committee seems like just another venue for partisan bickering. But there's a catch. If the committee doesn't reach agreement on how to meet its goals, an automatic "sequestration" process kicks in, forcing across-the-board cuts to discretionary spending and some mandatory spending programs for the required \$1.2 trillion.

With the Super Committee in mind, the National Wildlife Federation recently released a report entitled Conservation Works: How Congress Can Lower the Deficit and Protect Wildlife and Public Health. The main thrust of the report is that conservation programs are an investment that all Americans benefit from every day. Clean water, clean air, healthy landscapes, and abundant wildlife help protect our health, enhance agricultural productivity, provide recreational opportunities, and are critical to our economic vitality. Because of this importance, conservation programs shouldn't take an inordinate share of the brunt of funding cuts as Congress moves ahead addressing the budget deficit.

In the past 30 years, funding for conservation as a percentage of the federal budget has already been cut by two-thirds. Only 0.6% of the federal budget is now spent on conservation programs. Large cuts to it again in the debt reduction process would be a drop in the bucket in the big picture. It would

do little to solve the debt problem and would threaten our outdoor heritage and the money and jobs associated with it. Here in Montana, the quality of our outdoors is the economic gift that keeps on giving. Outdoor recreation alone supports 34,000 jobs and roughly \$2 billion in retail sales and services each year in the state.

That being said, nowhere in the country are federal conservation programs more important than in Montana. The Farm Bill's Conservation Titles provide some great examples. Its Conservation Reserve Program financially rewards willing farmers and ranchers for setting aside marginal lands to preserve the soil, protect water quality, and enhance wildlife habitat. Its Environmental Quality Incentives Program provides technical assistance, incentive payments, and cost-sharing to willing farmers and ranchers to implement certain conservation practices such as improving irrigation efficiency. Its Open Fields provision provides funding for state-run, voluntary, public hunting and fishing access programs such as Montana's successful Block Management Program. These Farm Bill Conservation Title programs are win/win/wins. Farmers' and ranchers' income is diversified, the quality of our outdoors is improved, and sportsmen's hunting and fishing opportunities are increased. This is not the place to drastically cut funding.

The Land and Water Conservation Fund is another conservation program vital to Montana. It is a grants program funded by oil and gas revenues that allows agencies and municipalities to improve outdoor recreational activities by preserving large important landscapes and watersheds. A great example of the benefits of the Land and Water Conservation Fund involves the remarkable work of the Blackfoot Challenge—a community-based coalition of ranchers, timber companies, land trusts, and government agencies of all political stripes dedicated to building trust and forging partnerships that conserve the Blackfoot Valley's natural resources and rural way of life. The Land and Water Conservation Fund provided almost \$40 million for a project put forth by the Blackfoot Challenge that consolidates checker boarded lands in the watershed, conserves wildlife habitat, and helps ensure the Blackfoot's rural character and agricultural heritage.

Funding regulating agencies is also critically important to Montana. The Clean Air Act provides a good example. It has brought us all significant public health and conservation benefits. For every dollar invested in air pollution reduction, Montanans and Americans receive the equivalent of \$30 in benefits.

The recently proposed federal mercury standards for power plants are projected to bring between \$75 and \$190 million in health benefits to the state alone.

Senator Baucus and the rest of the Super Committee have a real challenge in front of them. Reducing the budget deficit will involve hard choices. Deep cuts in conservation spending are not the answer, though. Conservation programs are an important investment in our future and are vital to our quality of life and economy here in Montana. It would be better to eliminate some lose/lose programs like wasteful tax loopholes for record profit earning oil companies.

We've got a good thing going here in our beautiful state. Investing in our great outdoors will help keep it that way.

This is Dave Dittloff for the National Wildlife Federation.