

February 3, 2010

The Honorable Regina Benjamin
Office of the Surgeon General
5600 Fishers Lane, Room 18-66
Rockville, MD 20857

Re: Petition for a Surgeon General “Call to Action” on the Health Benefits of Daily Outdoor Play for Children and Families

Dear Surgeon General Regina Benjamin:

Congratulations on your recent confirmation as Surgeon General of the United States and on the release of your *Vision for a Healthy and Fit Nation*. On behalf of the 215 undersigned national and state organizations and more than 16,500 individuals who signed the attached petition, we are writing to ask for your help in addressing a critical aspect of children’s health and well-being. **We ask that you, as the Surgeon General, recommend that all American children and their families take time every day for unstructured outdoor play and interaction with the natural world.**

Over the last 20 years, American childhood has increasingly moved indoors, and the amount of time children spend playing outdoors has declined by 50 percent. Today’s children spend approximately 55 hours per week plugged into some type of electronic media. The rest of their time has become so overscheduled that many children have little downtime. Meanwhile, rates of childhood overweight and obesity have tripled. As a result, approximately one in three children and adolescents are at an unhealthy weight which is increasing their risk for certain chronic diseases as children and later in life. Low income children, who are at greatest risk for chronic diseases, have the least access to safe natural spaces.

There is compelling research in the fields of public health, psychology, planning, medicine, and others documenting the physical, mental, and social health benefits that children reap when they are encouraged to interact with nature in an outdoor setting. Among these health benefits are lower stress levels, healthy weights, stronger immune systems, reduced incidence of anxiety-related disorders, better cognitive development, and respect for themselves, others, and the environment. The benefits of play are so compelling that the American Academy of Pediatrics considers, “...free play as a healthy essential part of childhood...” and recommends ample time for daily, unstructured play for children’s health.

Complementing the AAP recommendations to promote and improve children’s health are the first-ever national guidelines for physical activity issued on October 7, 2008. The 2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans recommends that children and adolescents 6 to 17 years old should accumulate one hour or more of physical activity daily that is mostly aerobic and leads to stronger bones and muscles. Unfortunately, the health benefits of outdoor play are bypassing many of today’s children and their parents.

The scale and depth of this children's health issue has given rise to the phrase "nature deficit disorder," coined by author Richard Louv.

We strongly believe, however, that there is a way forward on this children's health issue. As with other Surgeon General activities promoting children's health, including the current "*Healthy Youth for a Healthy Future*" initiative, you can also help address the problem of nature deficit. We ask that you officially recommend that all American children and their families take time every day for unstructured outdoor play and interaction with the natural world. This behavior—a green hour—can be easily accomplished in backyards, gardens, school grounds, parks, woods, or other outdoor green spaces found in neighborhoods and the larger community. Depending on a child's age, interests, and parental involvement, a green hour could occur as time alone, as with past generations of children. Or a child could enjoy their green hour with parents, grandparents, other family members, and friends.

Developing a recommendation based on the health benefits of unstructured outdoor play and interaction with the natural world would complement two related Surgeon General recommendations. Together, all three recommendations comprise a bedrock foundation necessary for a life free of chronic disease and disability. Imagine a day where all young people are meeting the Office of the Surgeon General's recommendations for 1) physical activity (as outlined in the *2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans*), 2) nutrition (eating in accordance with the *2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans and My Food Pyramid*), and 3) getting their daily dose of unstructured outdoor play and interaction with the natural world. Again, these three behaviors constitute a powerful prevention-based approach for protecting and promoting the health of all Americans.

As America's chief health educator, we are requesting that you take the following specific actions:

- 1) Issue a Surgeon General "Call to Action" promoting the physical, mental, and social health benefits available to children and their families when children engage in active time outdoors and unstructured play in outdoor, natural settings.
- 2) Strengthen the *Healthy Youth for a Healthy Future* initiative by adding a green hour to your "Surgeon General's Pledge to Help Prevent Childhood Overweight and Obesity" and associated checklists for parents, caregivers, and communities.
- 3) Convene a National Summit among public health officials, the medical community including pediatricians and mental health professionals, and other experts on unstructured play in outdoor, natural settings as a means of promoting and protecting children's physical, mental, and social health. Additional research needs and barriers preventing unstructured outdoor play in natural settings in all communities should be considered and integrated into summit findings.

In closing, we stand ready to work with you and your staff on reversing the threat that nature deficit poses to the health of America's children and their families. Please have

your staff contact Kevin Coyle, Vice President of Education with the National Wildlife Federation, so that we may begin working with you. Kevin can be reached at coylek@nwf.org or 703-438-6416. Thank you.

**FINAL LIST OF SIGN-ON'S TO SURGEON GENERAL LETTER
ON THE HEALTH BENEFITS OF DAILY OUTDOOR PLAY
FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**

Public Health, Medical, Children's Well-being

Alliance for Childhood
American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
American Counseling Association
American Public Health Association
American School Health Association
Center for Screen Time Awareness
Children & Nature Network
Children's Way Foundation
Dimensions Educational Research Foundation
Docs for Tots
Early Years Institute
Health Professionals for Clean Air
National Assembly on School-Based Health Care
National Association of Chronic Disease Directors
National Association of School Nurses
National Coalition for Promoting Physical Activity
National Easter Seal
National Forum on Children and Nature/Conservation Fund
Trust For America's Health

Youth

Big Brothers Big Sisters
Boys and Girls Clubs of America
Camp Fire USA
Jane Goodall's Roots and Shoots
National 4 H Council
National Collaboration for Youth
Student Conservation Association
The Corps Network
YMCA of the USA

Education

Association of Children's Museums
Association of Nature Center Administrators
Campaign for Environmental Literacy
Council for Environmental Education

Leopold Education Project
National Association for Interpretation
National Association for Sport and Physical Education
National Education Association
National Environmental Education Foundation
North American Association for Environmental Education
Project Wet International
Second Nature
The Society of State Directors of Health, Physical Education and Recreation
World Forum Foundation

Parks, Recreation, Built Environment

American Association for Physical Activity and Recreation
American Community Gardening Association
American Planning Association
American Public Gardens Association
American Recreation Coalition
American Trails
Future Fisherman Foundation
International Mountain Bicycling Association
National Association of State Park Directors
National Park Hospitality Association
National Parks Conservation Association
National Recreation and Park Association

Conservation, Environmental

African American Environmentalist Association
American Horse Council
American Rivers
Arbor Day Foundation
Chesapeake Bay Foundation
Clean Water Action
Defenders of Wildlife
Environmental American
Green For All
Hooked on Nature
Izaak Walton League of America
League of Conservation Voters
National Audubon Society
National Junior Master Gardener Program
National Wildlife Federation
Pheasants Forever
Quail Forever
Rails to Trails Conservancy
Sierra Club
The Center for a New American Dream

The Wilderness Society
Trout Unlimited
The Trust for Public Land

State Groups

Alabama Wildlife Federation (AL)
American Fisheries Society (MN)
Ann Lake Sportsmens Club (MN)
Arizona Wildlife Federation (AZ)
Arkansas Recreation Parks Association (AR)
Arkansas Trappers Association (AR)
Arkansas Wildlife Federation (AR)
Association of Northwest Steelheaders (OR)
Becker County Sportsmens Club (MN)
Belle Plaine Sportsmens Club (MN)
Bradford Sportsmens Club (MN)
Briarpatch Conservation Club (AR)
Byron Sportsmens Club (MN)
Cannon Falls Sportsmens Club (MN)
Colorado Alliance for Environmental Education (CO)
Colorado Wildlife Federation (CO)
Comprehensive School Health Coordinators' Association (MI)
Connecticut Forest & Park Association (CT)
Connecticut Nurses' Association (CT)
Conservation Council for Hawaii (HI)
Conservation Federation of Missouri (MO)
Deer River Sportsmens Club (MN)
Delano Sportsmens Club (MN)
Delaware Nature Society (DE)
Earth Conservation Corps (DC)
ECHO (AR)
Environment Council of Rhode Island Education Fund (RI)
Environment Texas (TX)
Environmental League of Massachusetts (MA)
Fertile Community Conservation Club (MN)
Fish Lake Sportsmens Club (MN)
Flensburg Sportsmens Club (MN)
Florida Wildlife Federation (FL)
Fox Lake Conservation Club (MN)
Frontenac Sportsmens Club (MN)
Gateway Cooperative Weed Management Area (MO)
Georgia Wildlife Federation (GA)
Gopher State Sportsmens Club (MN)
Grand Prairie Chapter of the Arkansas Wildlife Federation (AR)
Great Lakes Environmental Law Center (MI)
Holloway Rod and Gun Club (MN)

Houston Arboretum & Nature Center (TX)
Houston Audubon Society (TX)
Houston Zoo (TX)
Idaho Wildlife Federation (ID)
Indiana Wildlife Federation (IN)
Iowa Wildlife Federation (IA)
Izaak Walton League, Johnson County, Iowa Chapter (IA)
Jackson County Conservation Club (MN)
Jackson County Wildlife Federation (AR)
Kansas Wildlife Federation (KS)
Keep Kansas City Beautiful (MO)
Kenyon Sportsmens Club (MN)
Key Cities Conservation Club (MN)
Lake City Sportsmens Club (MN)
League of Kentucky Sportsmen (KY)
League of Ohio Sportsmen (OH)
Lewiston Sportsmens Club (MN)
Louisiana Wildlife Federation (LA)
Martin County Conservation Club (MN)
Maryland Project Learning Tree (MD)
Michigan United Conservation Clubs (MI)
Minnesota Chapter, The Wildlife Society (MN)
Minnesota Conservation Federation (MN)
Minnesota Fish and Wildlife Employees Association (MN)
Minnewawa Sportsmens Club (MN)
Mississippi Wildlife Federation (MS)
Missouri Coalition for the Environment (MO)
Missouri Smallmouth Alliance (MO)
Missouri Stream Team 882 (MO)
Montana Wildlife Federation (MT)
Montgomery Sportsmens Club (MN)
Natural Resources Council of Maine (ME)
Nebraska Wildlife Federation (NE)
Nevada Wildlife Federation (NV)
New Brighton Sportsmens Club (MN)
New Market Sportsmens Club (MN)
New Mexico Wildlife Federation (NM)
New Prague Sportsmens Club (MN)
Norman County Rod and Gun Club (MN)
North Carolina Wildlife Federation (NC)
North Country Bow Hunters SCI (MN)
North Dakota Wildlife Federation (ND)
Oklahoma Recreation and Park Society (OK)
Oregon Recreation and Park Association (OR)
Osseo Conservation Club (MN)
PennFuture (PA)

Pennsylvania Association of Environmental Educators (PA)
Planning and Conservation League (CA)
Plymouth Gun Club (MN)
Prairie Rivers Network (IL)
Prior Lake Sportsmens Club (MN)
Quality Forest Management LLC (MO)
Rainbow Sportsmens Club (MN)
Red Wing Wildlife League (MN)
Remington Arms Wildlife (AR)
Renewable Resources Coalition (AK)
River Bottoms Chapter of AWF (AR)
River Valley Wildlife Federation (AR)
Sauk Centre Conservation Club (MN)
Save Our Streams (Cherokee Village, AR)
Save Our Streams (Greenwood, AR)
Scott County Pheasants Forever (MN)
Shaw Nature Reserve (MO)
Snake River Valley Conservation Club (MN)
South Carolina Recreation and Parks Association (SC)
South Carolina Wildlife Federation (SC)
South Dakota Wildlife Federation (SD)
South Grand River Watershed Alliance (MO)
Southland Sportsmens Club (MN)
Southwest Metro NWTf (MN)
St. Joseph Rod and Gun Club (MN)
St. Louis Audubon Society (MO)
Stream Team 2991 Labarque Watershed (MO)
Tennessee Wildlife Federation (TN)
Texas Conservation Alliance (TX)
Texas League of Conservation Voters Educational Fund (TX)
The Green Center (MO)
The Open Space Council for the St. Louis Region (MO)
The Providential Gardener (RI)
Tri Lakes Sportsmens Club (MN)
United Northern Sportsmens Club (MN)
Vermont Natural Resources Council (VT)
Virgin Island Conservation Society (VI)
Virginia Conservation Network (VA)
Wagner Conservation Coalition (IA)
Washington Wildlife Federation (WA)
Wattensaw Bowhunters Association (AR)
Westark Wildlife (AR)
Wheatland Twin Lakes Sportsmens Club (MN)
White River Conservancy (AR)
Willmar Sportsmens Club (MN)
Wisconsin Wildlife Federation (WI)

Woodlands Trail and Park (LA)
Wright County Federation of Sportsmens Clubs (MN)
Wyoming Wildlife Federation (WY)
Yell County Wildlife Federation (AR)

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