

Guest column: Congress needs to reauthorize conservation fund

BY NATHAN BODDIE

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(Andy Tullis/Bulletin photo)

Recently, I had the opportunity to carry our voices from the edge of the Cascades in Bend to the U.S. Capitol. I joined other local officials from throughout the West urging Congress to save the Land and Wildlife Conservation Fund (LWCF), one of our nation's premier conservation programs and the lifeblood of local economies.

From the Everglades and Great Smoky Mountains to Sawyer Park here in Bend, the LWCF has protected the landscapes and waterways we love for five decades. We have the LWCF to thank for our national parks, forests, monuments, wildlife refuges and local park projects in every county across the U.S. But the fund is set to expire in less than six months, and the economic stakes for Bend and communities around Oregon are high as Congress considers whether or not to save this vital conservation and recreation program.

Each year more than 1.8 million people take advantage of Oregon's great outdoors, hunting, fishing and exploring. Oregon's outdoor recreation economy generates a staggering \$16.4 billion in consumer spending and protects more than 170,000 jobs that keep food on the tables of families in my community and across the state.

In Bend, we welcome visitors throughout the year making memories skiing on the slopes of Mount Bachelor, taking in world-class views along the Cascade Lakes Scenic Byway and

enjoying all the natural splendors our home has to offer. Outdoor recreation is a bedrock of our community. If Congress fails to make good on its commitment to reauthorize the LWCF, some of our most treasured outdoor spaces would lose protection, and our local economy would be dealt a serious blow.

Congress should also consider how failing to protect our outdoor spaces impacts the health of millions of Americans. As a physician, I understand the valuable health benefits attributed to time spent in the outdoors. Studies show that being outside reduces stress, eliminates fatigue and even helps with depression and anxiety. Exercise and outdoor activities reduce cardiac and other chronic disease risks. In the age of smartphones, social media and streaming content online, Congress should be exploring ways to promote access to the outdoors — not threatening it.

In addition to promoting public health and local economies, we have a moral obligation to ensure that future generations have the same opportunities we had to explore the wild places we love.

Generations of Oregonians grew up fly fishing on the banks of the Deschutes River, hiking along the Oregon National Historic Trail and doing a host of other outdoor activities that defined our childhood. If Congress fails to reauthorize the LWCF this fall, our children and grandchildren could lose these opportunities, and our unique way of life will be forever changed.

We need more public lands in and around Bend, not less. Our elected officials represent our voices, and over the coming months we are counting on them to stand up for local communities like Bend that rely on the LWCF to sustain our local economies, promote public health and protect our unique outdoor heritage.

— Nathan Boddie is an internal medicine physician and Bend city councilor. He is a Democratic candidate for House District 54. The city of Bend is a member of The Mountain Pact, a coalition committed to the environmental and economic resilience of Western mountain communities.