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TOP STORY

U.S. Senate passes major public lands bill

- [By Perrin Stein Chronicle Staff Writer](#)



Birds perch on the reeds during a rainy day at Cherry River Fishing Access on Wednesday in Bozeman. [Zach Meyer/Chronicle](#)



Rain puddles form on a trail at Cherry River Fishing Access Wednesday, June 17, 2020 in Bozeman. [Zach Meyer/Chronicle](#)

The U.S. Senate passed a [landmark conservation bill](#) on Wednesday. The [Great American Outdoors Act](#) provides \$9.5 billion to address deferred maintenance on public lands and puts \$900 million annually from oil and gas royalties into the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

Montana Sens. Steve Daines and Jon Tester, both bill sponsors, celebrated its success on Wednesday.

“Today, this is about protecting our Montanan outdoor way of life for future generations and it increases public access to our public lands in addition to supporting our national parks and really preserving and protecting our western heritage,” said Daines, a Bozeman Republican who’s running for reelection.

Tester said he and dozens of conservation groups and businesses have worked for years on the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which provides grants for places like fishing access sites, swimming pools and parks.

“It helps ensure Montana is the last best place and that it stays the last best place,” Tester, a Big Sandy Democrat, said. “Today, the Senate passed legislation making a significant and long-overdue investment in those special places.”

The Senate conducted a series of procedural votes over the last week on the bill before passing the bill 73-25 on Wednesday. The broad support in the Senate indicates the bill had bipartisan appeal, and President Donald Trump has said he’ll sign it. But there are pockets of opposition.

The Land and Water Conservation Fund provides money for projects that include federal land acquisitions, a sticking point for some lawmakers. Others were worried about the large price tag. A handful said LWCF is biased against coastal areas and unsuccessfully tried to push through an amendment that would have allocated additional LWCF money to restoring the Gulf Coast.

Some political and conservation groups are criticizing Daines’ work on the act, calling it a blatant attempt to win over voters as he faces a tough reelection contest against Democratic Gov. Steve Bullock.

The Montana Democratic Party sent out several news releases listing instances when Daines failed to wholeheartedly support environmental causes and has launched a website and digital advertising campaign that calls out Daines’ record on public lands issues.

Whitney Tawney, deputy director of Montana Conservation Voters, which has [long criticized](#) Daines’ actions on LWCF, said in the group hopes “this is the beginning of a real trend, not a one-off election-year lift.”

Bullock’s campaign released a statement saying he’s glad to see the bill pass the Senate but that it shouldn’t have taken so long.

“While I also applaud Steve Daines’ efforts in helping get this across the finish line, Montanans deserve leadership that stands up for public lands and the best interests of the people of our state every day — not just in election years,” Bullock said.

In response to the criticism, Daines pointed to his record in the U.S. House and Senate and highlighted several conservation initiatives he has worked on, including [a ban on](#) new mining claims on public lands north of Yellowstone National Park and [the permanent reauthorization](#) of LWCF after Congress allowed the program to expire.

“It’s a lot of sour grapes politics in Montana, some of these critiques,” Daines said. “It’s not about politics for me. ... I’m very proud of the conservation legacy that I’ve been able to leave behind already both in my years in the U.S. House and now in the U.S. Senate, and I think the record speaks for itself.”

In a news release, the Montana Republican Party credited Daines’ leadership for the bill’s passage.

The Great American Outdoors Act will next be discussed in the U.S. House. Tuesday night, Rep. Greg Gianforte, a Bozeman Republican, announced his support for the bill.

“Senator Steve Daines has done what no other senator, Republican or Democrat, has been able to do — advance meaningful legislation that invests in our existing public lands, increases public access, boosts our recreation economy, creates Montana jobs, promotes energy development and provides much-needed maintenances to our national parks,” Gianforte said.

Gianforte, who is running for governor, has previously voiced concerns about making funding for LWCF mandatory, which is required by the Great American Outdoors Act.

Spokesperson Travis Hall said Gianforte’s concerns about providing \$900 million to LWCF annually have been alleviated by revisions to the program that are included in the Great American Outdoors Act, such as providing money to more state and local recreation projects.

Democrat Kathleen Williams and Republican Matt Rosendale, candidates running for Gianforte’s U.S. House seat in November, said Wednesday they support the bill.

Conservation and outdoor recreation groups voiced support for the Senate's actions and called on the U.S. House to consider the bill soon.

The Mountain Pact, an organization that brings together mountain towns — including Bozeman — to address environmental policies, has advocated for the Land and Water Conservation Fund and applauded Wednesday's vote.

“Our public lands generate economic revenue and bring us peace of mind — both are critically important to recover from the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak,” said Chris Mehl, Bozeman's mayor and a Mountain Pact member.

The Center for Western Priorities said the bill would help protect ecosystems, bolster access to the outdoors and promote outdoor recreation economies.

“In a time when there is so much division in our country, public lands have the ability to unite us,” said executive director Jennifer Rokala. “We celebrate this important bipartisan conservation effort and hope that it can be the beginning of an ongoing conversation about how our public lands must play a role in our country's economic recovery.”

The bill would also provide \$1.9 billion annually over five years to address the maintenance backlog on public lands. Much of the money would go to the National Park Service, which estimates a maintenance backlog of \$12 billion.

The National Park Foundation, a nonprofit that supports the parks, said the Great American Outdoors Act would go a long way toward addressing the disrepair.