

## House passes major conservation bill, president expected to sign

By Perrin Stein Chronicle Staff Writer

July 22, 2020



Siblings Evangeline and Sebastian Delgado eat lunch in Lindley Park on Wednesday, July 22, 2020. Lindley Park was built with funds from the Land Water Conservation Fund in 1975. The House voted on Wednesday to extend funding for the LWCF through the Great American Outdoors Act. [Rachel Leathe/Chronicle](#)

Gubernatorial candidate Mike Cooney speaks at a press conference on Wednesday afternoon, July 22, 2020, at the Cherry River Fishing Access Site. Cooney chose the spot to illustrate a point about his competitor, Greg Gianforte's commitment to public lands. In 2009 Gianforte sued Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks to remove an easement that allows public access to a stretch of the East Gallatin River. [Rachel Leathe/Chronicle](#)

---



The bill is now headed to President Donald Trump who has said he will sign it into law. Trump tweeted his support for the act on Wednesday and thanked Montana Sen. Steve Daines, a Republican up for reelection, for his work on the bill.

The [Great American Outdoors Act](#) provides \$9.5 billion for the maintenance backlog on public lands and sets aside \$900 million annually for the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

Rep. Greg Gianforte, a Republican running for governor, voted for the bill and spoke in favor of it on the House floor.

“This is a tremendous bill for outdoor recreation and just our way of life in Montana,” Gianforte said in an interview on Tuesday.

Even though Gianforte has supported the bill since it [passed the Senate in June](#), he has declined to join dozens of Republicans and Democrats as a co-sponsor.

His opponent in the governor’s race, Lt. Gov. Mike Cooney, and the Montana Democratic Party repeatedly called on him to sponsor the bill and questioned his dedication to public lands.

“He had the opportunity to show real leadership and he chose not to do that,” Cooney said during a campaign event at the Cherry River Fishing Access Site in Bozeman on Wednesday. “I think that shows what little commitment he has to protect Montana’s public lands and our access to it.”

Gianforte said he decided not to sponsor the Great American Outdoors Act because he supported the version passed by the Senate but didn’t know if a “poison pill” would be added to the legislation in the Democrat-controlled House.

The House ultimately passed the Senate version of the bill, 310 to 107.

Cooney held his campaign event at the Cherry River site because Gianforte, through his family’s company [East Gallatin LLC, sued](#) Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks in 2009 to eliminate an easement that provided public access to the site. East Gallatin LLC and the state eventually reached a compromise.

The site has long been fodder for Democrats who use it to argue that Gianforte is a wealthy Montana transplant who doesn’t care about public lands.

Cooney reiterated this claim at Wednesday’s event.

“After moving here from New Jersey, Greg Gianforte sued Montana, meaning you and me, the true owners of our public lands, to block access to that spot right over there,” Cooney said pointing to a nearby stretch of land. “Gianforte, like so many outsiders before him, selfishly wanted to make sure who could enjoy our public lands.”

In response to Cooney’s criticism, Gianforte said he is committed to keeping public lands in public hands. He also said he is “proud of my conservation record” and cited his work to protect [East Rosebud Creek](#) and to [prevent new mining claims](#) on public lands north of Yellowstone National Park.

The Montana Republican Party said in a news release that while Gianforte was working to pass the Great American Outdoors Act, Cooney was holding “a political photo op to try to make his campaign for governor relevant.”

In 2019, Gianforte worked with Daines and Sen. Jon Tester, a Democrat, to permanently reauthorize LWCF after Congress let the program expire. During the following months, some lawmakers pushed for

the program to receive full funding — \$900 million annually — while others, like Gianforte, advocated for “robust funding.”

Gianforte said he was compelled to support the Great American Outdoors Act, which requires full funding for LWCF, after hearing from his constituents and because the legislation includes money to improve infrastructure on public lands.

Democrat Kathleen Williams and Republican Matt Rosendale who are running for Gianforte’s House seat have both said they support the Great American Outdoors Act.

The act received broad bipartisan support in the House.

However, some House members expressed concerns about the large price tag, especially because of the coronavirus pandemic. Others disagreed with the fact that LWCF provides money for projects that include federal land acquisitions. They said the federal government shouldn’t be taking on more land when it has trouble maintaining the land it already has.

The bill also had bipartisan support in the Senate, where Tester and Daines sponsored it.

“This is the most important conservation legislation in over 50 years, protecting our public lands, our national parks, it is what we are all about in Montana,” Daines said shortly after the House vote.

Tester celebrated the vote on Twitter, saying, “Looking forward to seeing this bill signed into law so we can get to work in putting these critical conservation tools to use for Montana.”

Gov. Steve Bullock, the Democrat who is challenging Daines for his seat, has also voiced support for the Great American Outdoors Act.

Conservation and outdoor recreation groups applauded the House’s action.

The Mountain Pact, a coalition of mountain towns — including Bozeman — called the vote an important investment in the outdoor recreation economy.

Bozeman Mayor Chris Mehl pointed out several local sites that have benefited from LWCF money, including Bogert, Cooper and Lindley parks.

“Today’s passage is a historic victory, which will continue this invaluable legacy in our community and across the country,” Mehl said.



[Perrin Stein](#)

Perrin Stein is the county, state and federal government reporter for the Chronicle.