

Bozeman mayor joins push for federal conservation dollars

[By Perrin Stein Chronicle Staff Writer](#)



A family sits on a bench facing the Bridger Mountains as their dog returns a ball at Gallatin County Regional Park in Bozeman. Some improvements to the park have been paid for with money from the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

[Ryan Berry/Chronicle](#)

Bozeman Mayor Chris Mehl is among the 112 elected officials who have signed a letter to Congress requesting that federal lawmakers include money for a popular conservation fund in an upcoming stimulus package aimed at addressing the coronavirus pandemic.

The officials asked for full and permanent funding — a guaranteed \$900 million annually — for the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which uses oil and gas royalties to pay for, among other things, some city parks, trailheads and fishing access sites in Montana.

“In the weeks and months to come, our parks, trails and outdoor spaces will be integral to both our national and local coping and recovery,” Mehl said. “Great parks and green spaces — at the local, state and national levels — make for stronger, healthier communities.”

Missoula County Commissioners Josh Slotnick, David Strohmaier and Juanita Vero were the only other officials from Montana to sign the letter, which was sent Wednesday.

Mountain Pact, a group that brings together mountain towns to address policies related to climate, public lands and outdoor recreation, gathered signatures for the letter with help from the Western Leaders Network, a conservation group.

The Outdoor Recreation Roundtable, a group of 29 national trade associations representing more than 100,000 businesses, also urged Congress this week to approve conservation funding.

The group asked federal lawmakers to pass the [Great American Outdoors Act](#), which includes full and permanent funding for LWCF and would allocate revenue from energy development to infrastructure projects on public lands. They would like the legislation passed either by itself or as part of a larger economic relief package.

“We are concerned about both access to public lands and the infrastructure necessary to maintain these places, which are the backbone of a huge part of our economy,” said Jessica Turner, executive director for the Outdoor Recreation Roundtable.

“Full and permanent funding for LWCF addresses the access piece because it allows for projects like new trails, while the other part of the bill — money for the infrastructure backlog — allows us to take care of these places.”

Turner added that addressing the backlog would create new jobs, which she said will be vital to economic recovery.

“An LWCF project can really help businesses by bringing people out in their communities,” she said. “It’s not just about conservation. There is a massive economic impact to a program like this.”

The Outdoor Recreation Roundtable recently conducted a survey of 20 trade associations, which represent about 23,700 businesses, and found that 79% of

outdoor businesses have had to layoff or furlough employees due to COVID-19 and 89% have lost revenue.

The Great American Outdoors Act is a combination of and modification to [two previous legislative attempts](#) at improving public lands — the [Land and Water Conservation Fund Permanent Funding Act](#) and the [Restore Our Parks Act](#).

Both Montana Sens. Steve Daines and Jon Tester worked on the two previous bills and are sponsors of the Great American Outdoors Act, which [President Donald Trump has said](#) he will sign if Congress passes it.

A spokesperson for Daines, a Republican, said the senator is working to get the Great American Outdoors Act to the Senate floor as quickly as possible, either as a standalone bill or as part of the next stimulus package.

Tester, a Democrat, said he has long supported full and permanent funding for LWCF and doesn't see why it can't become a reality.

“As we fight to protect the lands we recreate on, we have to make sure that we continue to provide desperately needed relief to the businesses and families that make up Montana's outdoor recreation economy who have been devastated by the pandemic,” he said in a statement.

Republican Rep. Greg Gianforte was part of [an effort in 2019](#) by Montana's entire federal delegation to make LWCF permanent after Congress let the program expire. However, he doesn't support requiring full funding for the program because he would like to see LWCF continue to be part of the regular congressional budget process.

On Thursday, a Gianforte spokesperson said in an email, “Greg remains focused on what's in front of us right now — getting our economy going again, getting our small businesses reopened, and getting Montanans back to work in good-paying jobs.”

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