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Federal Bill Could Mean Huge Investment In California National Parks And Improved Access For Communities Of Color

- Ezra David Romero

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Ezra David Romero / Capital Public Radio

Congress passed perhaps one of the largest conservation bills in the past 75 years last week. **The Great American Outdoors Act**, if signed into law, would help prop up national parks and repair deteriorating infrastructure.

For areas like Lake Tahoe this could mean upgrades for recreational facilities and more public access to the lake and trails.

“We want to make sure that no matter who you are, you can come to Tahoe and experience the same thing that everyone else does,” said South Lake Tahoe City Councilman Devin Middlebrook.

The federal legislation, which passed both the Senate and the House, has two major parts, and the president says he will most likely **sign** it into law.

Around \$900 million per year would go to permanently fund the **Land and Water Conservation Fund**, or **LWCF**, which supports the protection of things like federal parks, forests, wildlife refuges and recreation areas. The dollars can be used for expanding natural areas or for preserving habitat. It also could be used for cities to buy land for parks.

The second part, up to \$1.9 billion yearly until 2025, would go to much needed repairs to national parks.

But it's not just national parks that will benefit. Billions could be provided to entities like the Forest Service, Bureau of Indian Education and Bureau of Land Management.

"It's a critical tool that provides Latinos and underserved communities with access to the outdoors, it supports both outdoor recreation and tourism economies and helps protect cultural heritage," said Hispanic Access Foundation's President and CEO Maite Arce.

The LWCF has invested about \$2.5 billion in projects across California, says Middlebrook, and contributed to projects in the Tahoe area that improve campgrounds and parks. Once the bill becomes law groups like the Park Service have 90 days to give their proposals to Congress, and the funds could start moving in October. Middlebrook says leaders in the Tahoe region are putting together their requests now.

"Not only does this mean we can have money and support to upgrade access to our beautiful lake, it also means that during these covid times we'll have a stimulus and be able to put local people to work," he said.

"A Conservationist's Dream"

The bill means a ton for outdoor spaces in disrepair like national parks where about 40 million people visited in 2019. All those people spent around **\$21 billion** in gateway communities.

"With this passage of the Great American Outdoors Act, our parks' crumbling roads, decaying buildings and outdated water systems will be fixed, more than 100,000 people will have much-needed jobs, and every American, no matter where they live, will have more access to outdoor spaces. This bill is a conservationist's dream," said Theresa Pierno, President and CEO for the National Parks Conservation Association.

She says the National Park System is undergoing chronic underfunding, which includes reduced staffing and a backlog of around \$12 billion in needed repairs. California parks **need** \$1.9 billion and Nevada needs \$160.9 million to address deferred maintenance.

"This is the largest investment our country has made in our national parks and public lands in more than 50 years, and it comes not a moment too soon," she said.

Places like Joshua Tree National Park have around **\$73 million** in needed improvements and Yosemite National Park needs **\$923 million** for things like meadow rehabilitation and a new wastewater treatment plant. For a list of all the parks and monuments and what each needs click [here](#).

The backlog is compounded by record visitation in recent years and the fact the park system is over a century old. That's why the \$6.6 billion will provide a solid funding source, said Marcia Argust, who runs the Restore America's Parks program at the Pew Charitable trust.

"Our parks haven't seen an investment of that magnitude since World War II," she said. "Many park facilities and resources are aging and deteriorating."

She also says the funding will provide much needed jobs in wild spaces.

"Park visitation already supports 36,000 jobs in California," she said. "But the Park Service issued an analysis that indicated if this legislation is enacted an additional 100,000 jobs would be created."

She says the bill passing “is testament that our public lands can be a common ground for, you know, Democrats and Republicans.”

A Win For Communities Of Color

All this positive funding news isn’t just good for wild areas like Yosemite or Death Valley, says Juan Altamirano, associate director of public policy with Audubon California.

“Access to green spaces should be a right, not a privilege,” he said. “It’s good to see some good news coming out of Washington to create the spaces that we desperately need and in the times that we’re living in.”

He says increased access, potential new protected lands “improves equity in the outdoors for clean air, clean water, and for our climate.”

The funds also provide resources to communities to put in playgrounds, bike trails and soccer fields in both rural and urban settings. And the more outdoor space the better, he says, especially when it comes to the value of green spaces during the pandemic.

“COVID-19 has both revealed and exacerbated deep inequities in access to green space, making the need to fully fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund all the more urgent,” said Shanna Edberg, Director of Conservation Programs, Hispanic Access Foundation. “This historic bill will help create jobs, bolster health, and improve access to the outdoors for all Californians.”

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