

Federal funding for land and water doesn't quiet Gardner critics

- Joey Bunch, Colorado Politics
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Sens. Cory Gardner and Michael Bennet talk to reporters at the Outdoor Retailer trade show in Denver in January 2018. Photo by Joey Bunch/Colorado Politics

The Land and Water Conservation Fund will get \$495 million next year for public lands and waters, partly thanks to Colorado's U.S. senators, who sponsored the bill, but it wasn't enough to assuage political criticism in the aftermath.

Royalties paid by offshore drillers, however, has the potential to provide up to \$900 million, proponents of the plan contend.

Democrats sent out a statement criticizing one of the bill's co-sponsors, Republican incumbent Sen. Cory Gardner, for failing to deliver full funding.

Colorado's other U.S. senator, Democrat Michael Bennet, meanwhile, sent out a statement counting the same bill as one of his accomplishments in the budget.

Bennet's office characterized the funding as "more than was allocated in fiscal year 2019 and the highest level in more than 15 years."

The Democratic-led House of Representatives finalized its appropriations package on Tuesday, also proposing \$495 million for the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

The LWCF received just \$57 million in the current budget year, as the Trump administration sought to trim costs.

Bennet's press release said he "has long-championed full funding for LWCF and will continue to push Congress for full and permanent funding."

Left-leaning organizations and local residents singled out Gardner, however, because his party is in the majority in the Senate. He's also up for re-election this year (while Bennet runs for president), and the left is heavily invested in unseating him, in hopes of giving Democrats a majority in the Senate.

"Sen. Cory Gardner sits in the majority in the Senate, puts himself out as a leader in his party, so we were cautiously optimistic that he would assert himself and call on Senate Leadership to get full funding completed by the end of this year," Emily Gedeon, conservation program director for the Colorado Sierra Club, said in a statement. "But Sen. Gardner disappointed and was nowhere to be found in the negotiations. He did nothing whatsoever to keep his promise to accomplish full LWCF funding."

Anna Peterson, executive director with The Mountain Pact coalition, said the West Slope organizations were "dismayed and frustrated."

"The funding level lawmakers are seeking in the budget appropriations deal is dramatically under the \$900 million funding level LWCF should receive," she said in a statement.

Glenwood Springs Mayor Jonathan Godes added in the same joint press release, "Congress's failure to fully fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund in this budget deal is a huge disappointment for communities across Colorado and has put our public lands and the economic vitality of Glenwood Springs at risk."

Since the LWCF program began in 1965, Colorado has received almost 1,000 grants totaling more than \$61 million, which was leveraged into more than \$147 million in local and state money, as well, according to the state parks and wildlife department.

"Mountain communities like Avon depend on public lands and water for our sustainable outdoor recreation economy," Mayor Sarah Smith-Hymes said.

The Boulder-based Outdoor Industry Association applauded several appropriations that benefit the outdoors, calling the moment a "rare bipartisan budget agreement (that) includes positive measures and funding to protect our public lands, support the outdoor recreation economy and increase access to the outdoors."

"By delivering nearly \$500 million for the Land and Water Conservation Fund, funding outdoor recreation research and supporting greater outdoor access for youth, this agreement delivers big benefits for millions of Americans across the country," Patricia Rojas-Ungar, the association's vice president of government affairs, said in a statement. "We look forward to expanding on these wins in 2020."