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top story

U.S. Sen. Cory Gardner's public lands bill passes the House, heads to the president

- [Joey Bunch, Colorado Politics](#)
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The Great American Outdoors Act, authored and driven by Coloradans, passed the U.S. House Wednesday by a vote of 310-107 and now heads to President Trump, who is expected to sign the most sweeping public lands legislation in a generation.

The bill, authored by Sen. Cory Gardner, a Republican from Yuma, fully funds the Land and Water Conservation Fund at \$900 million a year, and addresses a deferred maintenance list in national parks and other public lands that has reached \$20 billion. [Read the bill by clicking here.](#)

The bill is off to the White House now because there were no changes from the bill passed by the Senate 73-25 on June 17.

"It's the most historic conservation accomplishment in over 50 years," Gardner said in an interview with Colorado Politics on Wednesday. Gardner secured President Trump's support for the legislation early in the process.

Trump, however, put the fund in danger when he sought to empty out the LWCF, which is paid for with lease money from the oil and gas industry.

While conservation groups have applauded the legislation, they've sought to downplay Gardner's role, as he is one of the most endangered Republicans in the U.S. Senate this year.

[Acting BLM chief defends moving agency's HQ West, says D.C. managers out of touch](#)

Acting Bureau of Land Management Director William Perry Pendley, speaking at a conference in Colorado, insisted that moving his agency's headquarters to the state will make the staff more responsive to the public.

For Democrats to win the majority, they must retain their seats and displace three Republicans. With the president unpopular in Colorado, efforts on the left are aimed at recasting his

accomplishments and tying him to the president, who lost Colorado by 5 points to Hillary Clinton four years ago.

The legislation was co-sponsored in the House by all three other Colorado Democrats, as well: Reps. Joe Neguse of Boulder County, Diana DeGette of Denver, Ed Perlmutter of Arvada and Jason Crow of Aurora.

"They accepted what I wrote, and this historic bill is off to the president," Gardner said. "There's no room for politics in a historic accomplishment like this."

Asked about the charges against him that he's anti-conservation and anti-environment, Gardner cited a list of bills and efforts he's led dating back to his days as a state legislator, including protections for the Great Sand Dunes National Park and the purchase of the purchase the Baca National Wildlife Refuge.

Gardner, because he is a Republican who supports the oil and gas industry, is most often tied to Trump's regulatory rollbacks and use of public lands for private enterprise, as well as his picks to head agencies that environmental organizations contend are biased toward industries.

"Election or no election, people love our public lands," he said. "That's why this bill is passing, and it's exciting."

Gardner has declined to support his [Colorado Democratic colleagues' legislation](#) to set aside hundreds of thousands of acres as additional wilderness. He's characterized them as partisan efforts.

Reps. Diana DeGette of Denver and Joe Neguse of Boulder County both added amendments to the National Defense Authorization Act that passed the House Tuesday.

"While this legislation is crucial, we can't stop here," Neguse said. "We must take up the Colorado Outdoor Recreation and Economy Act — which has now passed the House on a bipartisan basis twice — to provide permanent protection for 400,000 acres of Colorado's public lands. The Senate's cooperation to work with our communities on public lands legislation can and should extend to the locally-crafted CORE Act, it's time we see a hearing and vote in the Senate on this bill.

"Preserving our public lands, investing in our outdoor recreation economy and ensuring future generations can continue enjoying Colorado's beautiful outdoors is an ongoing task, and we must continue to work to ensure the voices of our local communities are heard and our environment and lands are protected."

Colorado Sen. Michael Bennet, a Democrat, pointed to his support of the Land and Water Conservation Fund since he became a senator in 2010.

"Our public lands are essential to who we are in Colorado, and critical to our economy," Bennet stated. "Today is a great day for our state thanks to all of the Coloradans who have worked tirelessly over the last decade to make fully funding LWCF a reality. I look forward to the president signing this bill into law, so that we can finally begin making critical investments in our forests, parks, and public lands. At the same time, our work on public lands is not done. We must find a way to pass the CORE Act to protect recreation, wildlife and wilderness areas across Colorado."

"The Great American Outdoors Act will play a critical role in Colorado's path to economic recovery by protecting our public lands, open spaces and parks during now and for decades to come," Conservation Colorado deputy director Jessica Goad said in a statement. "The president should sign this bill as soon as possible.

Of Congress, she said, "Their work is not done, and we hope they will act in this legislative session to pass bold climate policies, protect the budget and enforcement powers of the Environmental Protection Agency, ensure public lands protections through legislation like the CORE Act, and stand up against Trump administration nominees like (new Bureau of Land Management director) William Perry Pendley, who are attacking the public lands we love."

Ivanka Trump, the president's daughter and White House adviser, is expected to come to Rocky Mountain National Park on Thursday with Interior Secretary David Bernhardt, who grew up in Rifle and used to practice law in Denver.

"I am looking forward to visiting the great state of Colorado and learning how this administration's policies are helping citizens across the state. Working with Senator Gardner on the Great American Outdoors Act, we are securing funding for the next 100 years to preserve our National parks and public lands," she said in a statement Wednesday, before veering into election year politics about her father's policies.

Bernhardt, too, lauded Trump and Gardner.

"President Trump put forth a bold proposal and called on Congress to fix the aging infrastructure at our national parks and permanently fund conservation projects," the interior secretary stated Wednesday.

A [Boston University analysis](#) of conservation spending in May indicated that every \$1 million invested in LWCF supports as many as 30.8 jobs and \$4 in economic value.

"Conservation of land and water is generally an area with broad support, as nature appeals not only to lovers of natural beauty but also recreational enthusiasts, including hikers, park-goers, hunters, and anglers," wrote Heidi Peltier, who is an expert on environmental economics. "Further, conservation creates jobs."

The Durango-based Mountain Pact advocacy organization provided quotes from local leaders across the West thanking Congress, including five leaders from Colorado.

Frisco Mayor Hunter Mortensen: "For over five decades, the Land and Water Conservation Fund has invested approximately \$278.6 million in the state of Colorado, protecting some of the state's most special places and helping to ensure recreational access for hunting, fishing, and other outdoor activities."

Steamboat Springs City Council member Sonja Macys: "In Steamboat Springs LWCF has provided funding for many popular local attractions such as our iconic ski area, Howelsen Hill and the Yampa River Core Trail. Throughout Colorado, I can only imagine the good it has done for outdoor recreation. This bipartisan effort is truly a win-win for the public and our public lands."

Eagle County County Commission chair Kathy Chandler-Henry: "Since 1967, Eagle County has received more than \$1.7 million in LWCF funding for more than 15 local projects including the

new Eagle River Park, boat ramps on the Colorado River, and the Rio Grande Trail, which connects the city of Glenwood Springs to the City of Aspen through the Roaring Fork Valley. It's likely we could never have done these fantastic projects without LWCF funding."

Salida Mayor P.T. Wood: "We are excited Congress has passed the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA). The GAOA will enhance our environment, public spaces, economy and fully funds the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which pays for projects like Salida's Milk Run Trail."

Avon Mayor Sarah Smith-Hymes: "As the mayor of a mountain community, I've seen how Land and Water Conservation Fund dollars have flowed back into Avon and improved our public parks and trails. These funds have greatly benefited our community and the White River National Forest, our country's busiest. We are thrilled that Congress has finally passed the Great American Outdoors Act, which will fully and permanently fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund."

The American Petroleum Institute's Colorado office also welcomed the news about how the industry's money would be used on public lands.

"LWCF is the funding backbone for many of the outdoor activities that Coloradans enjoy daily and would not exist without the funding from safe offshore oil and natural gas development," API Colorado executive director Lynn Granger said in a statement. "Since 1965, the LWCF has grown to include grants that protect working forests, wildlife habitats, drinking water supplies and other critical environmental assets. Colorado's national and state parks, recreation areas and conservation programs rely on the continued support of safe offshore energy production, this underscores the importance of maintaining access to offshore resources."