

Coconino Voices: Plea for funding of Land and Water Conservation Fund

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In northern Arizona, our magnificent public lands are woven into our fabric of life. During the COVID-19 crisis with stay-at-home orders in place and the public encouraged to recreate locally, seeking refuge in nature has taken on a whole new meaning. In these challenging times, we're reminded daily that recreation opportunities on our public lands close to home, where social distancing is easy, has never been more important.

Because of the pandemic, our typically vibrant tourism and outdoor recreation economies are suffering, with river trips through the Grand Canyon and tours to our beautiful natural attractions cancelled. During a typical spring season, Flagstaff's historic downtown would be bustling with tourists and locals enjoying our local restaurants and bars, shops, and entertainment. Instead, it's eerily quiet. Worst of all, many of the employees of these businesses are out of work.

As Congress continues to craft more economic stimulus measures to address the devastation caused by the coronavirus pandemic, our federal elected leaders can provide much needed help to Flagstaff, northern Arizona, and many other gateway communities by including full and permanent funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) as part of an economic investment strategy to restart our economy in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.

LWCF, which has been a bipartisan effort for over 55 years, was created for land conservation and outdoor recreation projects like local parks, ball fields, and trail networks. Some of the projects that LWCF funded may be among places you enjoy - including several projects in Flagstaff such as the Thorpe Park Softball Field Lighting, Bushmaster Park Improvements, Cheshire Park Tennis Courts, Ft. Tuthill Bike Park, and the Foxglenn Recreation Complex. In total, LWCF funding has paid for 33 projects in Coconino County alone.

What's brilliant about LWCF is that the revenue in the fund doesn't come from the taxpayers. Instead, it comes from royalties from energy companies already drilling for oil and gas on the Outer Continental Shelf. The fund is authorized to receive \$900 million per year, yet only once in its history has Congress actually appropriated the full amount. Unfortunately, in every other year Congress has diverted money for other non-conservation and outdoor recreation purposes.

Congress' refusal to afford full funding to the Land and Water Conservation Fund in the past has had a negative impact on Arizona's economy, where the outdoor recreation industry is a powerful economic engine. Arizona's outdoor economy generates \$21.2 billion in annual consumer spending, supporting 201,000 direct jobs across our state. This means real dollars in our pockets - as the outdoor recreation industry paid \$5.7 billion in wages and salaries to Arizonans, and contributed \$1.4 billion in state and local tax revenues.

According to a report by the Trust for Public Land, every dollar spent on LWCF returns \$4 in economic value from natural resource goods and services alone. This means if Congress invests \$900 million in our public lands each year, the country gets back \$3.6 billion - a great return on investment.

Here in Arizona we have had more jobs in the outdoor recreation industry than in the aerospace, defense, and tech sectors combined. LWCF funding, which directly supports the outdoor recreation industry, will be critical to our economic recovery.

Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, full and permanent funding for LWCF earned bipartisan support, including support from President Trump, and it was moving forward in the Senate via the the Great American Outdoors Act, S. 3422. Now, LWCF funding doesn't just make good sense, it is critical for our nation's economic recovery. It will provide funding for jobs in the fast growing outdoor recreation industry, and protect our public lands for generations to come - an outcome we can all embrace.

Celia Barotz served on the Flagstaff City Council from 2010-2018.