

Opinion

Stand up for Colorado's outdoor spaces

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In Colorado, we love our public lands. Wide open spaces, rugged mountains and glittering streams make up more than 23 million acres of land that belong to all of us. These incredible spaces don't just feed our souls; they are critical to our economic vitality. Our livelihoods depend on visitors from all over the country — and the world — who come to experience Colorado's great outdoors.

As elected officials of mountain towns, we are tasked with nurturing and protecting the public landscapes that are central to our way of life. Funding provided by the Land and Water Conservation Fund has been an essential component of this work for more than 50 years, but now its mission is threatened by the actions taken by President Donald Trump's administration.

We just returned from meetings in Washington, D.C., with many western congressional members. We urged Colorado Sens. Michael Bennet and Cory Gardner, as well as Reps. Joe Neguse, Scott Tipton, Diana DeGette, Jason Crow and Ed Perlmutter to act immediately to fully and permanently fund LWCF. We made the case that without this critical funding, the Trump administration's reckless assault on our public lands will get even worse. By gutting basic environmental protections and leasing millions of acres of public lands to the oil and gas industry, the Trump administration has abandoned the core values that have made Colorado and America the place it is today.

In Colorado, LWCF funds are matched by state dollars to support conservation and outdoor recreation. Since 1965, nearly 1,000 grants totaling more than \$58 million have funded acquisition of new public lands and construction of trails, parks and playgrounds statewide.

The rest of the country has benefited from LWCF as well. It is the nation's most successful land conservation program, supporting tens of thousands of parks and outdoor recreation projects, benefiting every state and fueling the growing \$887

billion dollar annual outdoor recreation economy. This economy supports 7.6 million American jobs, including 229,000 in Colorado, which are the lifeblood for mountain towns like ours.

Now this vital source of funding is at risk. Earlier this year, Congress permanently reauthorized LWCF, but did not permanently fund it and the Trump administration has proposed slashing its budget by 95 percent. This virtually will eliminate investments in protection of our public lands, a heritage shared by all Americans.

If the Trump administration is successful, there will be fewer places available for public access and recreation, which will mean fewer visitors to Colorado and tourist-based communities will suffer. The threat is real. Between 2001 and 2017, it is estimated that every 30 seconds, a football field's worth of natural area was lost to development in the American West. That is 24 million acres of formerly public lands placed in the hands of industry. This is land that could have been protected to strengthen our outdoor economy. If the president gets his way, these losses will only accelerate.

Something must be done. The entire Colorado congressional delegation needs to stand up for Colorado and vote to protect our public lands by permanently and fully funding LWCF as part of the appropriations deal. This will prevent its coffers from being raided for unrelated projects and will help sustain the outdoor recreation that helps so many of our small towns and businesses thrive. And just as important, it will also preserve the cultural heritage of public lands for generations to come.

Sarah Smith Hymes is the mayor of Avon, Hunter Mortensen is the mayor pro tem of Frisco, Ward Hauenstein is the mayor pro tem of Aspen and Sonja Macys is a city council member in Steamboat Springs.