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Sen. Cory Gardner's public lands bill passes the House, heads to Trump

- [Joey Bunch](#)
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Colorado U.S. Sen. Cory Gardner talks about a bill to restore funding to the Land and Water Conservation Fund, about \$900 million in oil and gas lease money that supports national parks, as well as other public lands and waters, during a press conference on Wednesday, March 4, 2020.

- Photo courtesy of Sen. Cory Gardner's office



A view of the Book Cliffs near Grand Junction, an area administered by the Interior Department's Bureau of Land Management. (iStock)

- Adventure_Photo

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 Donald Trump, who is expected to sign the most sweeping public lands legislation in a generation.

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

The Senate approved the bill 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 Trump's support for the legislation early in the process, but Trump put the fund in danger when he sought to empty out the conservation fund, 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 Senate this year.

For Democrats to win a Senate majority, they must keep their seats and unseat three Republicans. With the president unpopular in Colorado, efforts on the left are aimed at recasting Gardner's accomplishments and tying him to the president, who lost Colorado by five points to Hillary Clinton four years ago.

The legislation was co-sponsored in the House by all four Colorado Democrats: 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 criticism 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 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.

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

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 Commission chairwoman 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.”



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Joey Bunch is the senior correspondent and deputy managing editor of Colorado Politics. His 32-year career includes the last 16 in Colorado. He was part of the Denver Post team that won the Pulitzer Prize in 2013 and he is a two-time finalist.