

LWCF, abandoned mine cleanup could be part of next COVID-19 stimulus bill

Leaders in La Plata, San Miguel counties call for healthier communities, job creation

By Emily Hayes Herald Staff Writer
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Metal-laden water flows from the Red and Bonita Mine north of Silverton, leaving behind a wake of lifelessness in its path. Jerry McBride/Durango Herald

As Colorado works to rebuild its economy from the novel coronavirus, elected officials in Southwest Colorado, lawmakers in Congress and Western advocacy groups say permanent funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund, as well as funding for abandoned mine cleanup, will create jobs and improve public health.

Almost 70 elected officials in Colorado joined counterparts across the West in signing a letter to U.S. Congress, urging legislators to fully fund the Land and Water Conservation

Fund in the next COVID-19 stimulus bill, including La Plata County Commissioner Gwen Lachelt.

“I view LWCF as a critical tool for economic recovery,” Lachelt said in a phone interview. “It puts contractors to work and the people who work for those contractors to work.”

The letter was also signed by Telluride Mayor DeLanie Young, who said in a news release that “investing now in full funding for LWCF will help with a strong long-term recovery for gateway communities and states that rely on visitors to public lands.”

Currently, America’s outdoor recreation economy supports more than 7.6 million jobs and contributes more than \$887 billion in annual economic output.

Sen. Cory Gardner, R-Colo., spoke about permanently funding the Land and Water Conservation Fund this week on the Senate floor, explaining that outdoor recreation is one of the largest drivers of Colorado’s economy.



The LWCF would “create immediate jobs building roads and maintaining trails – creating the kind of job opportunities that many of our high-mountain towns desperately need as a result of this health emergency and now economic emergency,” Gardner said.

The push to include permanent funding for public lands in Colorado in the next economic stimulus bill has support on both sides of the aisle in Congress, including Sen.



Michael Bennet, D-Colo.

“As we look to the future, significant investments in our public lands would help the outdoor economy, a critically important sector in Colorado, get back on its feet,” Bennet said in a statement.

Permanent funding for the LWCF would support projects that protect clean water for La Plata County and prevent disasters such as the 2015 Gold King Mine spill into the Animas River, Lachelt said.

Abandoned mine cleanup

A number of Western environmental advocacy groups, including the Western Colorado Alliance, also sent a letter to Congress this week, asking for funding for abandoned mine reclamation and cleanup in the next trillion-dollar stimulus bill.

“Those kinds of projects put people to work,” Lachelt said, and economic recovery from COVID-19 is “going to take everything.”

Lauren Pagel, policy director of the environmental organization Earthworks, said stimulus funds could put people in places like Western Colorado to work immediately, cleaning up the approximately 23,000 abandoned mines across the state.

Almost 3.2 million more Americans filed for unemployment last week, according to data from the Department of Labor, and more than 33 million Americans have filed for unemployment benefits since mid-March.

“An influx of hard rock AML (Abandoned Mine Lands) funds will not only create jobs, it will also help restore polluted landscapes, putting degraded lands into productive use and granting relief to communities currently shackled with excessive costs for water treatment of pollution from abandoned mines,” the letter from Earthworks said.

Under a 148-year-old law still in place – the General Mining Act of 1872 – hard rock mines for materials like gold and silver don’t have to pay reclamation fees or royalties, unlike coal mines. That puts the expense of their cleanup on taxpayers.

In states like Colorado, there is a discrepancy between “the mines they want to clean up versus how much money they have,” Pagel said.

Cleanup for abandoned hard rock mines is part of creating a restoration economy with cleaner water and safer conditions, Pagel said.

Bennet also said Congress should prioritize investments in conservation because it is “good for the economy.”

“An infusion of federal funding could help clean up thousands of abandoned mines across the country, create new jobs and improve water quality for downstream communities,” Bennet said in an email to *The Durango Herald*.

Kelly Fuller, energy and mining campaign director at the Western Watersheds Project, said rebuilding from COVID-19 raises the possibility of fixing long-standing pollution issues in rural mining communities.

“It doesn’t look like the U.S. is going to go back to the way it was before,” Fuller said in a phone interview.

Rural communities that didn’t have the money or enough people to make a difference now have “an opportunity to rebuild healthier, vibrant communities,” Fuller said.

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