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Senate passes bill to permanently fund Land and Water Conservation Fund, address park maintenance

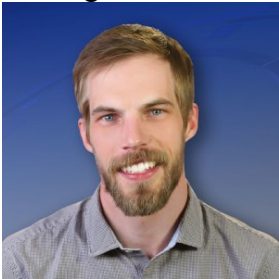
Sen. Gardner sponsored Great American Outdoors Act, Bennet cosponsored



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Photo by: ED ANDRIESKI/ASSOCIATED PRESS

A swollen Uncompahgre River snakes its way through farmland near Ridgway, Colo., Tuesday, May 24, 2005. The snow-capped San Juan Mountain can be seen in the distance. Runoff from melting snow has swollen rivers and streams throughout Colorado. (AP Photo/Ed Andrieski)



By: [Blair Miller](#)

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DENVER – The U.S. Senate voted Wednesday to pass the [Great American Outdoors Act](#), which will fully fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund, a priority of most of Colorado’s congressional delegation, and work toward ending a maintenance backlog at federal parks.

The bill passed the Senate in a [73-25 vote](#); it now heads to the House of Representatives. Sen. Cory Gardner, R-Colo., who is the sponsor of the measure, and Sen. Michael Bennet, D-Colo., who is a cosponsor, both voted in favor of its passage.

“Today the Senate passed not only the single greatest conservation achievement in generations, but also a lifeline to mountain towns and recreation communities hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic,” Gardner said about the bill’s passage, and calling on the House “to pass this bill without delay.”

“Public lands are part of our legacy, our culture, and our history in Colorado. After a decade of leading this effort, I’m thrilled the Senate has finally passed full funding for LWCF,” Bennet said.

The main components of the public lands bill are the full funding for the LWCF and addressing what has become a \$20 billion national parks maintenance backlog.

Colorado officials and environmental groups [have pushed for years](#) for the LWCF to be permanently funded after winning the battle for permanent authorization in 2019, when President Trump signed the measure passed by the House and Senate.

The measure was originally authorized by Congress for two 25-year periods, reauthorized for a two-year period between 2016 and 2018, and reauthorized again permanently with the president’s decision. But calls for the program to be fully funded as well began again not long afterward.

Colorado has received more than \$265 million from the fund since the mid-1960s that has gone toward public land projects, acquiring land for conservation and building and restoring outdoor recreation facilities.

Under the Great American Outdoors Act, the president will have to report to Congress details about how the funds are allocated each year to Congress. Gardner’s office said the LWCF will receive \$900 million every year under the bill.

The measure also would establish a National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund which would be put toward the backlog. For the next five fiscal years, the government would have to put into the fund 50% of federal revenues received from oil and gas, coal, or renewable resource energy development on federal lands and waters – capped at \$1.9 billion per year.

The money would go toward maintenance projects in the National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, the Bureau of Land Management and the Bureau of Indian Education.

Colorado Gov. Jared Polis, who also pushed for LWCF funding and authorization while he was in Congress prior to becoming governor in 2019, applauded the Senate's passage of the bill.

“Our great outdoors are incredibly fun and healthy, and the outdoor industry supports good jobs across our state. As our economy bounces back, access to our great outdoor areas, which allow for strong social distancing, are critical to our recovery and safety,” Polis said in a statement. “I thank our Senators for their bipartisan effort and urge my former colleagues in the House to pass this important legislation.”

Bennet's office issued a news release featuring quotes from an array of conservation and outdoors groups, along with mountain-town mayors and others, also supporting the permanent funding of the LWCF.

“This critical legislation will play a significant role in Colorado's path to economic recovery while ensuring that we have more public lands, open space, and parks during this time of a pandemic when so many people are finding solace in the outdoors,” said Conservation Colorado Deputy Director Jessica Goad. “...Now, we're anxious to see Congress and our Congressional delegation take action to continue to protect Colorado's environment, such as passing bold climate policies, protecting the budget and enforcement powers of the Environmental Protection Agency, passing public lands protections like the CORE Act, and standing up against Trump administration nominees who are attacking bedrock environmental protections.”

But some of them and Bennet continue to push another public lands bill – [the CORE Act](#) – that would protect around 400,000 acres of public land in Colorado and passed the House last year.

Gardner [won approval](#) from Trump and Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., to bring the measure to a Senate vote earlier this year as he faces re-election in November. In [a debate](#) on Tuesday night, his possible opponents in November, John Hickenlooper and Andrew Romanoff, both said the Great American Outdoors Act was good legislation but both also questioned why Gardner hadn't stepped up to Trump on moves by the EPA regarding public lands and waterways that Colorado state officials have widely opposed. Hickenlooper also took part in a town hall with Bennet and Rep. Joe Neguse recently to push for passage of the CORE Act.

The bill now heads to the House. Rep. Diana DeGette, D-Colo., tweeted Wednesday that she was glad to see the measure moving forward but that Congress also needed to pass the CORE Act and Protecting America's Wilderness Act to protect more public land in Colorado.

The Great American Outdoors Act is also seen as having bipartisan support in the House.