

## PUBLIC LANDS

# Could outdoors bills get an inside track in stimulus?

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Sen. Steve Daines (R-Mont.) on Capitol Hill earlier this year. He's looking to add natural resources legislation to future stimulus or infrastructure legislation. Francis Chung/E&E News

Advocacy groups are pushing Congress to incorporate a variety of public lands bills into the next iteration of stimulus funds aimed at curbing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A host of state and local officials, along with industry groups and environmental advocates, fired off public pleas to congressional leaders yesterday, hoping to roll legislation addressing issues including public lands maintenance and outdoor access into stimulus legislation.

Several of the missives targeted [S. 3422](#), the main conservation package that has been sidelined by the public health crisis.

The "Great American Outdoors Act," sponsored by Sen. Cory Gardner (R-Colo) and Energy and Natural Resources ranking member Joe Manchin (D-W.Va.), would fully fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund and address the maintenance backlog at national parks and on public lands.

Among those pushing is a group of more than 100 local elected officials organized by the Mountain Pact. The organization focuses on economic and environmental issues in Western communities.

"In the weeks and months to come, our nation's parks, trails, and outdoor spaces will be integral to our nation's coping and recovery. Great parks and green spaces make stronger, healthier communities," the mayors and other officials wrote in their [letter](#).

"Everyone deserves access to the outdoors and the countless benefits parks provide. America's public lands bring us peace of mind and generate economic revenue — both will be critically needed to recover from the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak," they continued.

The Outdoor Recreation Roundtable, which represents the outdoor recreation industry, authored a similar letter, asserting that the bill's adoption would help keep small businesses afloat and benefit rural communities that serve as gateways to many public lands units ([E&E Daily](#), May 6).

The Outdoor Alliance for Kids, an umbrella organization that includes the Sierra Club, the Trust for Public Land and the North Face among its membership, said the legislation could also help to alleviate potential crowding on public lands as quarantine restrictions are loosened across the nation.

"We urge you to prioritize federal programs that connect children, youth and families with the outdoors and provide relief to state and local governments to enable them to provide essential services like access to nature and the outdoors," OAK's membership wrote in its [appeal](#).

The umbrella group also endorsed [H.R. 4273](#), the "Transit to Trails Act," to improve outdoor access, and ["H.R. 4512](#), the "Outdoors for All Act."

A spokeswoman for Montana Sen. Steve Daines (R), who co-sponsored the Gardner-Manchin package, said the lawmaker is working to include the measure in the next round of stimulus, or will attempt to move it as a stand-alone bill.

"Senator Daines is pushing to get his bipartisan bill, the 'Great American Outdoors Act,' on the Senate floor as stand-alone or part of phase four — whatever avenue opens and moves the fastest," said Daines spokeswoman Katie Schoettler.

In remarks on the Senate floor yesterday, Gardner likewise called for the passage of the legislation as a way to address fallout from the coronavirus pandemic.

"We should fully and permanently fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund and put funding toward our deferred maintenance projects across our federal lands that we all cherish so much," Gardner said.

"That would create immediate jobs, building roads and maintaining trails, and 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."

Both Republicans and Democrats had talked about infrastructure provisions in the next stimulus, but leaders then talked down that idea, leaving it for down the road. House Democrats also appear to be setting aside their green wish list for more pressing priorities, like aid to states ([E&E Daily](#), May 6).

But a flurry of letters from numerous companies, trade groups and advocates this week alone shows everything may be in play.

House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) said yesterday that there have been "numerous discussions" among leaders, Democratic committee chairs and outside interest groups about policies for inclusion in a recovery package under assembly.

"We've been hard at work on this for a number of weeks," he told reporters on a conference call. Pressed on timing, Hoyer said, "It could be as early as next week."

*Reporter Geof Koss contributed.*

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