

## Frank Lancaster: Protect mountain communities: reauthorize LWCF

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Estes Park is located 70 miles northwest of Denver at the eastern entrance to the world-renowned Rocky Mountain National Park. RMNP is one of the most visited National Parks in the nation and receives over 4.5 million visitors each year. Surrounded by some of the most spectacular scenery in the Rocky Mountains, Estes Park is a popular choice for vacationers throughout the year. The area is known for its diverse variety of watchable wildlife, including elk, deer, moose and bighorn sheep.

However, the only way to access RMNP from Estes Park is by road. The Town has long been working on a project that would fully connect the Fall River Road entrance of RMNP to Estes Park by trail, and now with the help of the Land and Water Conservation Fund, that vision will become a reality. The LWCF has been helping communities across the country for over 50 years and is a bipartisan conservation program funded by royalty payments from offshore oil and gas reserves, not taxpayers. But, if Congress lets the LWCF expire at the end of September, projects like the Fall River Trail will never be completed.

As town administrator and a long-time Larimer County resident, seeing the funding for this project come through is an exciting step in the right direction. Rocky Mountain National Park draws visitors from all over the world, and provides an excellent backyard for our residents. Now, following the 2019 completion of the Fall River Trail, visitors and residents will have easier access between the town and the national park.

The final phase of the Fall River Trail project will cost approximately \$1.2 million and with a \$400,000 grant from the LWCF, the town can finally finish the remaining 1.1 miles of trail.

The LWCF funds allow us to leverage Colorado Lottery funds and other local funds to complete the project. This is just one example of how the LWCF has helped our community.

In fact, since the passage of the Land and Water Conservation Fund in 1964 there have been \$8.7 million worth of projects focused on access, conservation, preservation and enhancement of Rocky Mountain National Park and the gateway community of Estes Park. These projects have ensured continued ecosystem function in RMNP as well as ensuring the last private inholding would not be sold to private developers.

Projects such as these and the Fall River Trail on public lands near our mountain towns are essential to the economic and cultural vitality of our communities. Mountain towns such as Estes Park are surrounded by public lands, and if these are not healthy and well-managed, our communities suffer in a variety of ways. But, thanks to the long history of the LWCF investing in America's public lands and waters, communities such as Estes Park can continue to thrive. However, the expiration date of the LWCF is quickly approaching unless Congress acts now.

The LWCF is one of America's most important conservation programs. Contributions to federal, state and local projects for preservation, conservation, enhancement, and access to public lands and waters in every state and nearly every county in the United States is what has made the LWCF so successful. Without continued contributions from this fund, mountain communities such as Estes Park may be at risk. By permanently reauthorizing and fully funding the LWCF Congress will ensure the preservation of America's public lands legacy.

*Frank Lancaster has been the town administrator for Estes Park since May 2012.*