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Commissioners seek conservation funding in recovery package

Land and Water Conservation Fund has helped Blaine County

- Greg Moore



Atkinson Park in Ketchum was funded in part by federal Land and Water Conservation Fund.

Blaine County Commissioners Angenie McCleary and Jacob Greenberg are among 112 elected officials representing counties, cities and tribes throughout the West who have signed a letter asking Congress to fully fund the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund as part of the next economic recovery package.

The fund is intended to protect national parks, areas around rivers and lakes, national forests and national wildlife refuges from development, and to provide matching grants for state and local parks-and-recreation projects. Every year, it receives \$900 million from royalties paid by energy companies drilling for oil and gas on the Outer Continental Shelf, though only part of that actually gets appropriated each year for conservation projects.

Since 1970, the fund has provided \$958,000 for 13 projects in Blaine County. It helped create Atkinson Park in Ketchum, and in 2005, the city of Hailey was awarded \$40,000 to make improvements at Keefer Park and on the 2.5-mile Toe of the Hill Trail. Fund money was involved in purchasing 92 conservation easements on the Sawtooth National Recreation Area, totaling about 17,000 acres, for \$47 million.

Initially authorized in 1964 for a 25-year period, the fund was extended for another 25 years until 2015. It was temporarily extended for another three years until Sept. 30, 2018. In March 2019, legislation permanently reauthorized the fund.

“What LWCF needs now is dedicated funding, meaning that the entire \$900 million deposited in the LWCF account each year is actually spent on LWCF projects and grants, and can no longer be raided for other purposes,” the nonprofit Land and Water Conservation Fund Coalition states on its website.

In a letter dated May 6, the elected officials ask that Congress “[p]lease include full and permanent LWCF funding in the stimulus package.”

Madison Donzis with progressive consulting firm Unbendable Media said the campaign’s intent is to secure dedicated funding.

“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,” the letter states.

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