



<https://missoulacurrent.com/outdoors/2020/07/house-passes-outdoors-act/>

## U.S. House passes Great American Outdoors Act; Trump prepared to sign

JULY 22, 2020



Groups like the Five Valleys Land Trust or the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation have one more funding tool when they're trying to help property owners who want their land to go into the public trust. (Five Valleys Land Trust)

A bill is on its way to the President's desk that will finally reduce the backlog of maintenance building up in national parks like Glacier and Yellowstone.

On Wednesday afternoon, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Great American Outdoors Act, which will provide up to \$9.5 billion for national park maintenance over the next five years and fully fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund with \$900 million annually.

Many in Montana reacted with relief and happiness after waiting a month since the companion bill passed easily in the Senate. The House bill was expected to pass, but the Senate's amendments had to be incorporated first to avoid further Congressional back-and-forth. That took place Wednesday morning.

The Land and Water Conservation Fund portion of the bill means that Congress can't shunt portions of the \$900 million annual payment from offshore oil royalties into other programs.

Now, groups like the Five Valleys Land Trust or the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation have one more funding tool when they're trying to help property owners who want their land to go into the public trust.

"This measure provides permanent and dedicated funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which ensures public access to outdoor recreation resources. It also provides money to federal, state and local government entities to purchase land, water and wetlands as a benefit for wildlife and all Americans, as well as much-needed resources to address maintenance and infrastructure issues on federal lands," said Kyle Weaver, RMEF president and CEO.

Missoula County Commissioner Juanita Vero said Missoula County wouldn't be the same place without all the parks and open space that has been purchased with LWCF money.

"We are so thankful to Congress for passing the Great American Outdoors Act to help ensure that we continue to have these important public places today – and many more – for future generations," Vero said.

The vote was 310 to 107 with two Democrats voting against and 81 out of 185 Republicans voting in favor. Montana's Rep. Greg Gianforte was one of those Republicans.

The Great American Outdoors Act now goes to President Donald Trump, who has said he would sign it. Sen. Steve Daines claimed some of the credit for bringing Trump onboard.

"The good news is I secured an agreement from President Trump a few months ago to sign this bill once it's on his desk. This is a great day for Montana. This is a great day for America," Daines said in a statement.

Kayje Booke, Montana Wilderness Association Policy and Advocacy director, praised Montana's united delegation.

"Montana families, communities, and businesses depend on public lands, and it's essential that our elected officials act in their best interests. Passing GAOA and fully funding LWCF is an important step in ensuring that future generations will be able to enjoy the same public lands and access that we do today, and we're pleased that Montana's entire congressional delegation voted in favor of the bill," Booke said.

While many Congressmen and women touted the bipartisan bill as the "greatest conservation effort of this generation," the opposition was also bipartisan as demonstrated by the early debate on the House Floor prior to the vote.

Nineteen Democrats led by Rep. Raul Grijalva, D-Arizona, and 16 Republicans led by Rep. Rob Bishop, R-Utah, participated in the debate on accepting the Senate amendments. All those who rose in support rattled off a litany of recreation areas and open land in their districts that benefitted from the LWCF.

Rep. Cedric Richmond of Louisiana was the lone Democrat that argued against the bill, saying the intent was good but the method was wrong. Giving \$900 million to the LWCF took money away from the people of Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana near where the offshore drilling

rigs stand. Those three states rank last in education and healthcare so the money would be better spent there to provide equity, Richmond said.

Richmond was backed by a fiery Rep. Garret Graves, R-Louisiana, who rose twice to argue against the bill, saying sequestering money to buy land didn't make sense during a pandemic. He also questioned why Republicans weren't being allowed to propose amendments to the bill.

Rep. Steny Hoyer, D-Maryland, acknowledged Graves' concerns about the pandemic but said they must not be important because the Republicans in the Senate have stalled some crucial bills for the past 60 days.

"The leader of the Senate said the states can go bankrupt," Hoyer said. "If this legislation displaced any of those priorities, I would perhaps share his opinion. But there are so many subjects pending silently in the U.S. Senate. So, the wringing of hands about this legislation pressing out other priorities I think is not accurate. It is accurate that this is an important piece of legislation that will do much good."

One of the more poignant moments came when Rep. Debbie Dingle, D-Mich., rose in support of the bill. Dingle's late husband, John Dingle, was a sportsman and conservation champion who helped pass the Land and Water Conservation Fund in 1964 and earned the respect of his colleagues. After Congress passed last year's Conservation, Management and Recreation Act, which made the LWCF permanent, among other things, they named it after him.

"This is an emotional moment for me," Dingle said. "The permanent full funding in this legislation is the culmination of decades of work by the conservation community and my late husband and our wonderful current dean, Don Young, who first advocated for this funding in the Conservation and Reinvestment Act in 1999."

Many sportsmen's groups have gotten behind the Dingles in the past and pushed for passage of the act. The Montana Wildlife Federation and Backcountry Hunters and Anglers were just a few who celebrated on Wednesday.

"Our nation's federal public lands were a gift to all Americans that began through the vision of Theodore Roosevelt, the founder of the Boone and Crockett Club. The Great American Outdoors Act continues this conservation vision providing the commitment not just to conserve important habitat and natural areas, but also to conduct critical maintenance actions on our existing network of lands," said Boone and Crockett Club President Tim Brady.

Rep. Rob Bishop, a public lands opponent, had to stand by while a few Republicans stood to support the bill, which he called the "Not So Great American Outdoors Act." But he was happy to give time to Reps. Russ Fulcher of Idaho and Dan Newhouse of Washington, who said they refused to support the bill because it allows the federal government to decide where the LWCF money goes, rather than putting it under local control.

"The federal government doesn't have the resources to manage the land and are often prevented from allowing local involvement. Translation? More federal land equals less land being intelligently managed and often more wildfire," Fulcher said.

Some Republicans questioned why they couldn't include an amendment that would have required more of the LWCF money to be spent in the east half of the U.S., arguing there was too much federal land in the West.

But in the end, Grijalva pointed to the strong support for the bill in the Senate and said it wasn't necessary to continue debating the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

"This is not about robbing Peter to pay Paul, it's not about taking money from the east to give to the west, it's not about denying coastal states their share," Grivalja said.

Contact Laura Lundquist at [lundquist@missoulacurrent.com](mailto:lundquist@missoulacurrent.com).