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Interior appropriations: Tester exhorts Zinke to be advocate for Western public lands

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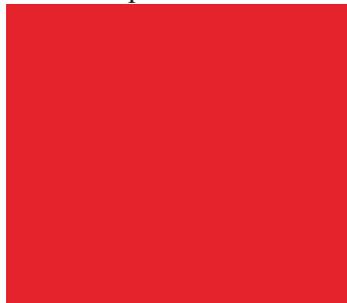
Montana Sen. Jon Tester took the state's former House member to task Thursday for proposing a budget that gives the Land and Water Conservation Fund not the allowed \$900 million, but rather \$8.1 million.

"Here is the problem," Tester told Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke, who was Montana's sole member of the U.S. House before being appointed to President Donald Trump's Cabinet in 2017.

"We all come from different parts of the world," Tester said. "Public lands is a Western thing, it truly is. And for people to really understand here how important this is, we've got to have an advocate in the administration – that's you. To be able to say, you know what, \$8.1 million when it should be funded at \$900 million, because I know in your heart that's where you think it should be funded – at \$900 million.

"And don't let me put that in your heart unless it really is in your heart. We've got to have a person who stands up and says, whoa, come on, \$8.1 million? I mean, let's just be honest. What is the justification for that? Are there no projects nationwide? Because these ecosystems are not going to be around in 10 or 20 years."

Appearing before the Senate Interior Appropriations Subcommittee, Zinke insisted that he has been an advocate for the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which is authorized to receive up to \$900 million per year in federal receipts from offshore oil drilling and is used to expand public access to public lands.



In Montana, LWCF appropriations have been used to create numerous public fishing access sites and to expand public access to hiking trails and hunting areas statewide. They've also been used to purchase conservation easements that help provide further public access to and through areas.

Two months ago, Tester joined with other Senate Democrats and Republicans to secure \$425 million for the Land and Water Conservation Fund as part of a government funding bill. But Zinke's proposed Interior Department budget would cut that funding down to \$8.1 million.

Just twice since its establishment in 1978 has LWCF been fully funded, Tester said during Thursday's hearing, but never has it received such limited funds as proposed by the Trump administration.

"It's important that the Secretary of Interior understands that it's not all on us, some of it is, but a good portion of it is on you," Tester told Zinke.

"I agree," Zinke said, "it takes working together on it. And I've been an advocate for the Land and Water Conservation Fund. But I am also an advocate, we need to address the \$11.7 billion backlog in our national parks and then the \$1.2 billion in our wildlife refuges.

"And, oh by the way, even though in the West we think that all the public land is out West, it's really not. We have great public land, battlefields, on the East Coast that also need to be maintained. So the priority of this budget is infrastructure repair, the backlog, and to bring a discussion between the two groups."

There comes another problem, Tester countered. Zinke's plan for funding the maintenance backlog in national parks and refuges is to create another pool of money similar to the Land and Water Conservation Fund, this one financed by oil and gas revenues.

But if LWCF cannot tap into even 10 percent of its allowable \$900 million, "why should we think this new proposal is going to be any different?" Tester asked.

The funding mechanism is bipartisan and came as a recommendation from numerous commission studies, Zinke replied. "The idea is this: It is a sound and prudent policy."

"It's fine," Tester said, "if it's actually done. Look at the Land and Water Conservation Fund. We're funding it, what, 1 percent of what it should be. Why should we think this proposal will be any different if it is going to be similar to LWCF?"

"This is why there are two different branches of government," Zinke said, "and I'm committed to working with you on it."

Yellowstone National Park has a deferred maintenance backlog of \$515 million, while Glacier National Park has a \$153 million backlog.

Zinke initially proposed funding the maintenance work by sharply increasing entrance fees at the 17 most popular national parks, including Glacier and Yellowstone. That proposal was rescinded after a massive public outcry this spring.

Zinke's proposed cuts to the Land and Water Conservation Fund also drew criticism Thursday from leaders of mountain communities across the West that depend on public lands for their economic vigor.

Connected through a group called the Mountain Pact, the Westerners asked why Zinke proposed such a significant cutback, then called himself an LWCF supporter during the subcommittee hearing.

The fund is set to expire in September, unless it is reauthorized by Congress.

Anna Peterson, executive director of the Mountain Pact, emphasized that outdoor recreation and proximity to wild, open spaces and public lands provide "significant economic support and a distinct way of life" to the Mountain West.

"Without Secretary Zinke's support for funding and reauthorization of LWCF, the economic success and cultural vitality of mountain communities may be at risk," she said.

Richard Hildner, a member of the Whitefish City Council and Mountain Pact member, echoed her sentiments.

"Our community has seen the benefits of the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) as recently as last week, with \$2 million coming into our community via a LWCF grant to complete the next phase of the Whitefish Lake Watershed Project in northwest Montana," he said.

"Reauthorizing and fully funding LWCF should be a priority for this administration and Congress."