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The Great American Outdoors Act passes, could mean big things for Oregon

By ERIN ROSS • JULY 23, 2020

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The crew sets off around Crater Lake by ski. Wizard Island is visible in the background.

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The U.S. House gave final congressional approval Wednesday to the Great American Outdoors Act. The bill, which is being hailed as one of the most important environmental bills to pass in decades, secures permanent funding for the Land Water Conservation Fund. The act now moves to President Trump's desk, and he's stated previously that he plans to sign it.

Most people haven't heard of the Land Water Conservation Fund, but they've almost certainly benefited from it. Since 1964, it's used revenue from the oil and gas industry to finance national parks and federal historic sites. A substantial portion of the fund is also allocated to local and state parks and playgrounds.

"This is a historic victory over 50 years in the making for communities across the country that benefit from the economic, cultural and recreational value of America's public lands and close-to-home recreation," said the LWCF coalition, an organization that advocates for the fund, in a statement.

In the past, billions of dollars from the Land Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) were diverted to other projects. In 2020, only \$495 million was appropriated for the LWCF, far below what's needed. That means trails and park facilities have gone unmaintained. Oregon, for example, needs over \$127 million to address the maintenance backlog that's built up at national park sites as projects were deferred.

Lawmakers say passing this act goes a long way towards supporting and improving outdoor recreation. They hope the act will help boost rural economies near natural sites, create jobs, and accelerate economic recovery during the pandemic.

"This watershed conservation legislation will protect Oregon's treasured places for generations to come. And it couldn't come at a better time with the economic impact of the COVID-19 emergency hitting our rural communities like a wrecking ball," said Oregon Democratic Sen. Ron Wyden in June statement, after the bill passed in the Senate. "The LWCF not only helps to get people outdoors and expand access to public lands, it has a

proven track record of boosting the economies of the communities near those lands.”

He called it “the ultimate game plan for economic success in rural Oregon.”

"We Oregonians cherish our public lands. Programs like the Land and Water Conservation Fund are critically important for protecting those lands. We are thrilled to finally see permanent funding thanks to today’s House passage of the Great American Outdoors Act," said Bend city council member Barb Campbell in a statement.

According to the Oregon Outdoor Industry Association, outdoor recreation in Oregon [generates \\$16.4 billion in consumer spending annually and creates 172,000 jobs](#). The LWCF funds over 50 federal sites in Oregon, including national forests, lighthouses, national scenic areas, BLM lands, historic sites and wildlife refuges. The funding can be spent on trail maintenance, facilities, staffing, and conservation, among other things.

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