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Western mayors call for land and water conservation funding

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The Snake River is seen from Delbert Winterfeld's property during a tour to showcase the achievements made possible by the the Land and Water Conservation Fund in this 2018 le photo.

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A group of mayors from several Intermountain West cities, including Driggs, on Tuesday called on Congress to fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund at the maximum amount of \$900 million a year.

“With the Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks in our backyard, millions of visitors from around the globe are the linchpin of our local and

state economies,” Driggs Mayor Hyrum Johnson said on a conference call with reporters organized by The Mountain Pact, a conservation group affiliated with the Sierra Business Council.

The five mayors on the call from Idaho, Utah and Colorado were among 151 local officials from 46 communities across the West who [signed a letter to Congress in June urging them](#) to fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund at a higher level.

All five mayors were from communities whose economies depend on tourism and outdoor recreation, and they talked about LWCF projects that have helped their towns.

“I can’t emphasize enough on this call that gateway communities like Moab benefit from increased infrastructure, and the Land and Water Conservation Fund is one critical funding mechanism,” said Moab, Utah, Mayor Emily Niehaus.

The fund, which Congress created in 1964, is bankrolled with money from offshore oil and gas drilling. It has paid for many projects in Idaho over the years, both rural ones such as protecting the South Fork of the Snake River and urban ones such as the River Walk and parks in Idaho Falls and the Greenbelt in Boise.

A public lands bill President Donald Trump signed in March made the LWCF permanent, ending previous periodic fears that the program could lapse entirely. However, this doesn’t resolve the funding question. While the level legally authorized is \$900 million yearly, Congress usually only appropriates a portion of this. Trump’s proposed 2020 budget recommended [no new LWCF funding](#). The Interior appropriations bill that passed the House earlier this year would fund it at \$525 million next year, while the Senate version would fund it at \$465 million.

The continuing resolution that is funding the federal government now is set to expire Dec. 20. Between Congress looking to adjourn for the year on Friday and Trump’s impeachment overshadowing much other business in Washington, it is very much in the air how things will play out. The Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee voted 13-7 in November to [advance a bill sponsored](#) by Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., to make the fund’s funding automatic. U.S. Sen. Jim Risch, R-Idaho, who is on the committee, was one of the “No” votes.

“He has opposed permanent dedicated funding of LWCF multiple times over the years,” Risch spokeswoman Marty Cozza said in an email. “Senator

Risch opposes permanent, dedicated funding of programs in general, as he does not believe that Congress should give up its oversight and appropriations role. He has supported various LWCF projects in Idaho over his time in Congress when it has support from the local community and locally elected officials.”

A couple of the Colorado mayors mentioned U.S. Sen. Cory Gardner, R-Colo., who has [backed legislation](#) this year to permanently [fund the LWCF](#), urging him to put pressure on the leadership in the Republican-majority Senate to pass legislation like Manchin’s authorizing funding at \$900 million a year.

“Republican senators need to deliver full funding and stop the LWCF from ending up in the legislative graveyard,” said Glenwood, Colo., Mayor Jonathan Godes.

Johnson said he has spoken to Idaho Sens. Risch and Mike Crapo and U.S. Rep. Mike Simpson, and they have all been supportive of the fund. In February, Simpson [sponsored a bill](#) that would have mandated half of that \$900 million go to the LWCF while the other half would go to a new fund for deferred public land maintenance; this didn’t pass, although the provision making the LWCF permanent was part of the public lands bill Trump signed in March.

“As they say, the proof is in the pudding, and until the vote comes down and we see that full and permanent funding, it’s just words,” Johnson said.

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