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# Opinion: Under-investment in public lands hurts Coloradans and shortchanges all Americans

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## OPINION



**P.T. Wood**

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The Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), America's best conservation program, is crucial to supporting communities like ours in Colorado.

Our economy and culture depend on continued access to the outdoors, and since 1967, Salida has received nearly \$270,000 from LWCF that has supported projects ranging from the popular Milk Run Trail, a rails-to-trails effort that connects the existing Monarch Spur trail to Highway 50, to the updating and beautification of Centennial Park, Salida's largest town park.

But full funding for LWCF is in jeopardy. In late December Congress passed a [spending package](#) that will fund LWCF at \$495 million for Fiscal Year 2020.

However, this is still only almost half of the [\\$900 million](#) deposited into the LWCF each year, continuing the status quo of Congress raiding the funds for non-conservation purposes.

Over its 52-year existence, this has [amounted to](#) \$20 billion being diverted from the LWCF, and these inconsistent funding levels leave many multi-year conservation projects with uncertain futures. In Colorado, projects like the long-awaited connector for the Continental Divide Trail around Muddy Pass depend on funding from the program.

Despite the bipartisan support, President Donald Trump has repeatedly slashed funding for LWCF since he took office, preferring to prioritize the private interests of corporations over the public interests of the residents and visitors from across the nation.

Just this month, Trump unveiled his [budget for Fiscal Year 2021](#) which proposes massive cuts to the Interior Department, including the National Park Service and virtually eliminates LWCF's budget.

I recently had the opportunity to sit down with Sen. Cory Gardner and Sen. Michael Bennet's staff in Washington, D.C., to discuss just how important the LWCF is to Salida and communities like ours in Colorado.

Both senators have expressed their support for fully funding the Land and Water Conservation Fund — and both are co-sponsors of Senate legislation to do just that — but Sen. Gardner's record on this issue is mixed, and I hope he will stand with Colorado in fully supporting the LWCF.

All Colorado communities deserve better, and I am disappointed in the less-than-full LWCF funding.

LWCF funding doesn't just impact communities here in Colorado. LWCF has funded projects in every state and nearly every county in the United States and is important for public land access, acquisition and maintenance.

The continued under-investment in America's public lands system is harmful to western communities and shortchanges all Americans.

Make no mistake, LWCF contributes to our natural environment, which draws visitors and creates jobs for new and existing residents. As a 30-year resident and second-term mayor, I have seen the growth and enhancement of our town due to investments in our outdoors.

I believe in the strong community of Salida and know that our outdoor access and outdoor-minded community benefit dramatically from public lands and conservation funding.

It is important now more than ever that we maintain the momentum behind full funding for LWCF in early 2020.

Congress missed the boat on fully funding LWCF in 2019, but they must stand up for what is important to Salida and other Colorado communities by rejecting the president's proposal to slash LWCF funding and instead passing the Land and Water Conservation Fund Permanent Funding Act (S.1081 and H.R.3195) to protect the program from current and future attacks.

*P.T. Wood is the mayor of the City of Salida. Wood has lived in Salida for 30 years, and is founder and co-owner of Wood's High Mountain Distillery.*

