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Column: Mountain towns lobby for funding to protect public lands

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By Devin Middlebrook

Californians, including the people of Lake Tahoe, love our public lands. We love the cold deep blue waters of Lake Tahoe, the rugged mountains, and the varied forests that are part of the nearly 100 million acres of land all Californians can claim ownership of. We love these public lands not just because of their natural beauty, but because they are central to our way of life. Many of us live here, or moved here, because of what they provide - culture, lifestyle, and livelihood. As a council member I understand how important investments in our public landscapes, many of which have been protected using the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), are for small businesses and outdoor retailers in Tahoe, the state, and across the West.

I just returned from Washington, D.C. where I met with some of the California congressional delegation. I thanked them for reauthorizing LWCF and asked them to protect our public lands by acting swiftly to fully and permanently fund LWCF. The Trump administration is abandoning the core values that have helped to maintain California's beauty and ecologically diversity.

In California, LWCF funds used to continue our conservation traditions are used for everything from acquiring and developing new public lands to building trails, parks, playgrounds and so much more. Since 1965, California has received close to **\$2.5 billion** for federal, state, and local public lands projects, which, among other things, has helped create or improve over **1,000 state parks**. These funds are critical for the continued protection and enhancement of California's extensive public lands system.

Across the country, LWCF is the nation's most successful land conservation program, providing critical investments for our lands and communities and supporting tens of thousands of parks and

outdoor recreation projects benefiting nearly every American across the country and fueling **\$887 billion outdoor recreation economy**. This growing economy supports over 7.6 million American jobs, including 691,000 in California. Jobs like these are essential to communities such as South Lake Tahoe where millions of visitors come each year to experience the world-class outdoor opportunities that we have to offer.

But right now, this vital fund that protects and sustains our livelihoods is at risk. Earlier this year Congress permanently reauthorized LWCF but did not permanently fund it, putting its capacity to enhance California's communities and economies at stake. The Trump administration is currently proposing to slash the LWCF's funding by 95 percent. If the Trump administration is successful, it means there will be fewer and fewer places available for public access and recreation.

But there is something we can do. We need to stand together to urge the full California congressional delegation to take the next step in protecting our public lands by permanently funding LWCF as part of the appropriations deal. I urge everyone to call or write their elected representatives and urge them to permanently fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

Once fully funded, the LWCF will continue to sustain the flourishing outdoor recreation economy that supports our town and the hundreds of others like it across the country. It will preserve the land upon which we live, work, and play for our children and our children's children.

*Devin Middlebrook
City of South Lake Tahoe Councilmember*