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Great American Outdoors Act heads to Trump's desk

- By THOMAS PLANK Idaho Press
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The Banks-Lowman Road, also known as the Wildlife Canyon Scenic Byway, carves along the South Fork of the Payette River through the Boise National Forest. Pictured here, the sunset casts a colorful glow onto clouds on July 12, 2020.

Jake King/Idaho Press

Bipartisan bill co-sponsored by Idaho Rep. Mike Simpson

The Great American Outdoor Act, the biggest change to American public lands in decades, is heading to President Trump's desk.

The bipartisan bill, sponsored by U.S. Rep. Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, dedicates billions of dollars toward conservation projects and maintenance of public lands.

The U.S. House of Representatives passed the bill Wednesday 310-107. The Senate passed the bill last month.

The act would double current funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund to roughly \$900 million a year, and put another \$1.9 billion per year toward improvements at national parks, forests, wildlife refuges and rangelands, the Associated Press reports. The bill authorizes \$9.5 billion for maintenance over five years.

Idaho has more than a half billion dollars' worth of deferred maintenance in its national parks and forests, according to the U.S. Forest Service.

Idaho ranks third in the nation in Forest Service deferred maintenance project cost, with the Idaho Panhandle and Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forests having \$143 million and \$140 million, respectively, in deferred maintenance costs.

Mike Simpson

"I am thrilled to see this legislation on its way to President Trump's desk where he will sign the bill into law," Simpson said in a press release. "Not only does this bill support hundreds of thousands of jobs, but it protects and maintains our public lands for generations that aren't even born yet."

Simpson was the [only member of Idaho's congressional delegation to support the bill](#). Sen. Mike Crapo (R) said the act removes Congress' oversight ability to determine how much money goes to the fund each year. Sen Jim. Risch (R) said he has "concerns about creating a permanent program with mandatory spending and no annual oversight or requirement for local engagement."

Supporters say the bill will create at least 100,000 jobs, while restoring national parks and repairing trails and forest systems.

Mayor Hyrum Johnson of Driggs said in a press release, "The Great American Outdoors Act will sustain the outdoor recreation industry that helps so many of our towns and businesses thrive. Equally important, it will preserve the cultural heritage of public lands for generations to come. Thank you to Congress for passing it now - so

our public lands can help us recover from COVID-19. A special thanks to Congressman Mike Simpson for his sponsorship and support for this important legislation.”

The Land and Water Conservation Fund was established in 1964 to use earnings from the federal government's offshore oil and gas leases to buy land, pay for maintenance at national parks and provide money to states to help meet demands for outdoor recreation.