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FEATURED

Senate passes bill to permanently fund Land and Water Conservation Fund

By THOMAS PLANK Idaho Press with supplemental reporting from the Teton Valley News
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This July 18, 2013 aerial file photo shows the mixed ownership of forests north of the Clearwater River, including Potlatch private forest, Idaho State Endowment Lands and Clearwater National Forest, in Idaho.

Rocky Barker/Idaho Statesman file

Driggs mayor was one of many to lobby for bill

On Wednesday morning, the U.S. Senate voted 73-25 to permanently fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund, a vote with major implications for Idaho public lands.

The Great American Outdoors Act, which would redirect more offshore oil and gas lease profits to the conservation fund and allow up to \$9.5 billion in other non-taxpayer funds to address repairs in national parks and on other public lands.

"It will be nice to see our western land and treasured national parks restored in coming years," said Driggs Mayor Hyrum Johnson. Driggs is a member of the Mountain Pact, a group of mountain towns that advocate for federal policy. Johnson traveled to D.C. several years ago to lobby for the Great American Outdoors Act.

Dollars from the Land and Water Conservation Fund can also go toward local and regional projects like pathways and stream restoration, similar to projects that Driggs and other Teton Valley governments have invested in in the past.

Idaho's two Republican senators, Mike Crapo and Jim Risch, voted "nay."

The bill has the backing of President Donald Trump.

Crapo, in a statement Wednesday afternoon, said he's "long supported responsible conservation programs at the federal level," and he voted last year to permanently authorize the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which "has produced a number of environmental success stories

"However," he continued, "each case should be weighed on its own merits, and the Great American Outdoors Act ... makes the funding mandatory, which removes Congress' oversight ability to determine how much money goes to this program each year. Instead of focusing primarily on acquiring more lands, federal conservation dollars should go toward maintaining the lands the federal government already owns. Many states like Idaho have existing large tracts of federal lands and state and local leaders deserve more of a say in the approval process for projects in their areas."

Risch's office released a statement through spokesman Marty Cozza on Wednesday afternoon.

“Senator Risch is strongly in favor of efforts to protect and maintain our public lands, however, he voted against the Great American Outdoors Act package due to concerns about creating a permanent program with mandatory spending and no annual oversight or requirement for local engagement,” Cozza said.

“He has frequently voiced these concerns in his role on the Energy and Natural Resources Committee with hopes of achieving a solution that takes conservation efforts, the needs of rural communities, and the federal deficit all into consideration. Rather than spending billions of taxpayer dollars to acquire more lands, the federal government should instead focus on responsibly caring for the land it already possesses,” Cozza continued. “The Senator will continue to lend his support to Land Water Conservation Fund projects in Idaho where there is buy-in for local communities.”

Idaho’s 2nd District Rep. Mike Simpson (R) is co-sponsoring the act in the House with a bipartisan group of representatives from all over the United States. Idaho has more than a half billion dollars’ worth of deferred maintenance in its national parks and forests, according to data collected by the Forest Service.

In a statement Wednesday, Simpson said he was glad to see the passage of the Great American Outdoors Act through the Senate with bipartisan support.

Mike Simpson

“Idaho needs this bill for our forests which have an enormous backlog of maintenance on trails and roads, National Parks like Yellowstone that provide jobs and access to gateway communities in the southeast part of the state, and the improved access LWCF provides to our public lands for hunters and anglers. President Trump supports this legislation and he stands ready to sign it into law which is why I am eager to begin working on the House process to get the bill to his desk,” Simpson said.

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.

To be “fully funded,” the LWCF has to hit a \$900 million mark annually, which the Great American Outdoors Act would allow. Since 2001, the fund has hit that mark once.

Recently, its annual funding has hovered around the \$500 million mark, about half of that \$900 million benchmark.

Crapo, in explaining his “no” vote, said Congress “missed a great opportunity to include permanent reauthorizations of the Secure Rural Schools and Payment In Lieu of Taxes programs that help meet the federal obligation to rural counties that house federal land.”

Jonathan Oppenheimer, the external relations director for the Idaho Conservation League, said his group was “very encouraged” by the passage of the bill in the Senate chambers.

“This bill will ensure Idahoans will continue to have access to our public lands, for people who hunt, fish, ride, bike, and will maintain special access to places we all love,” Oppenheimer said.

Brian Brooks, the executive director for the Idaho Wildlife Federation, felt similarly about the Senate’s vote on Wednesday.

“We think it’s wonderful,” Brooks said. “This is a once in a generation conservation bill and it’s going to have an impact on Idaho.”

Brooks pointed to the supermajority vote as he called the Great American Outdoors Act “an incredibly bipartisan of legislation.”

“We can see how powerful and important the outdoors are that a big spending bill can sail through,” Brooks said.