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Amid battle over outdoor conservation, Routt County commissioners support federal funds for public lands

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Tiffany Gebhardt and her daughter, Waverly, make their way along the Yampa River Core Trail, which received a $130,000 grant in 2002 from the Land and Water Conservation Fund. Amid uncertainties over the fund's future, the Routt County Board of Commissioners signed a letter to Colorado senators urging their support to maintain the conservation program.

File photo/John F. Russell

STEAMBOAT SPRINGS — The Routt County Board of Commissioners signed a letter to Colorado's two senators Tuesday, April 23, voicing their support for the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

This comes about a month after the White House proposed its 2020 budget, which included a 95% cut to the conservation program.

Congress established the Land and Water Conservation Fund in 1965. It allocates offshore drilling lease fees to develop parks, wildlife refuges and recreational facilities on federal, state and local lands. The conservation program also provides expansions and upgrades to national parks, forests and other public lands, including projects in Routt County.

According to a compilation of data from InvestigateWest, a nonprofit journalism organization, the fund has awarded 18 grants to projects in Routt County from 1965 to 2011, the most recent year data was available. That includes a $130,000 grant to extend the Yampa River Core Trail through Steamboat Springs.
In their letter to Sens. Michael Bennet and Cory Gardner, commissioners emphasized the importance of the conservation program to the local economy and culture.

"Outdoor recreation and proximity to open spaces — many of which have been enhanced through the use of the (Land and Water Conservation Fund) — draw residents and tourists to mountain communities, which provides significant economic support as well as a distinct and desirable way of life," they wrote in the letter.

Colorado relies heavily on revenue from the millions of people who utilize its public lands each year.
A report from the Outdoor Industry Association found that outdoor recreation provides 229,000 jobs across the state and generates $2 billion annually in state and local tax revenue.

Commissioner Tim Corrigan has seen how the conservation fund has benefitted Routt County. He used to live in Phippsburg, which won about $19,000 from the program to build a community park.

At a glance

Land and Water Conservation Fund projects in Routt County:

1966: Lester Creek Recreation Area, $8,836
1967: Lester Creek Recreation Area, $8,600
1967: Oak Creek Community Park, $1,500
1967: Hayden City Park, $2,000
1969: Steamboat Springs School District tennis courts, $1,914
1971: Elkhead Lake, $71,250
1971: Elkhead Lake, $238,000
1971: Steamboat Lake State Park, $62,500
1974: Howelsen Hill tennis courts, $10,000
1974: Elkhead Lake, $24,381
1975: Howelsen Hill ballfields, $20,000
1975: Steamboat Lake State Park, $57,805
1975: Howelsen Hill ski jumps, $212,370
1980: Hayden City Park, $12,944
1982: Phippsburg Community Park, $18,854
1994: Steamboat Lake State Park, $570,624
2002: Yampa River Core Trail extension, $130,000
2002: Dry Creek Trail, $68,000

"That little park in Phippsburg was a great place that my kids grew up around," he said.

But in recent years, the existence of the Land and Water Conservation Fund has become increasingly tenuous.

Congress failed to renew the fund in September, which has deprived projects to develop and protect public lands of more than $350 million.

In March, Congress passed a bill to permanently authorize the conservation program, which supporters saw as a major victory. But in a twist, the White House announced the next day its 2020 budget proposal to slash the fund by 95%.

In response, Bennet recently spearheaded legislation with bipartisan support to permanently fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund. The bill would guarantee an annual allotment of $900 million for the program.

"Consistent full funding will ensure (the Land and Water Conservation Fund) reaches its potential to protect and promote access to America's parks, rivers, forests and public lands," Bennet said in a statement about the bill. "That includes the hundreds of projects in Colorado that span every county and benefit our statewide economy."

Since the White House's announcement to cut funding to the program, conservation groups have voiced concerns over how the proposed cuts would affect current and future projects.

The ongoing construction on the Continental Divide Trail relies on grants from the program, including a local effort to improve a section of the trail near Rabbit Ears Pass.

In a news release, the Continental Divide Trail Coalition condemned the Trump Administration for slashing the conservation fund, which the coalition said "undermined White House claims of support for the program."

Seeing the benefits of the Land and Water Conservation Fund both locally and nationally, Corrigan sees only advantages in maintaining it.

"It's been a really successful program," he said. "Why in the world would we stop doing it?"

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