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## Opinion

*Guest Column*

# Act Now to Help Preserve Our American Public Lands Legacy

The LWCF is too important for public lands, waters, and recreation to let it expire

BY RICHARD HILDNER // SEP 12, 2018

Western mountain communities are among the most directly impacted by the growing outdoor recreation industry, as well as public lands management, funding, and infrastructure. These communities experience waves of visitors from all over the world who come to enjoy nearby public lands. These same public lands provide a distinct and desired way of life that attracts families, business owners, recreationalists, entrepreneurs, and others to mountain communities. As residents of some of these communities and advocates for many more, we at The Mountain Pact understand the importance of public lands to the economic and cultural vitality of our mountain communities. However, a crucial conservation program that has been at the center of protecting and preserving lands in every state, and nearly every county in the United States for the last 52 years, is at risk. If Congress does not act by Sept. 30, the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) will expire and remove a significant funding source from public lands and water protection and enhancement programs.

The LWCF is a federal fund that is set up to invest in the conservation and preservation of public lands and waters. It helps secure and enhance public access, conservation, ecosystem preservation, and outdoor recreation infrastructure. This bipartisan legislation uses zero tax dollars and instead uses royalty payments from offshore oil and gas reserves to protect important land and water resources nationwide including national wildlife refuges, national forests, rivers and lakes, community parks, trails, and ball fields. These funds provide grants for conservation

and enhancement of outdoor spaces that support diverse opportunities for outdoor recreation and tourism. This investment ensures that visitors, ecosystems, and nearby communities can benefit.

The LWCF has helped create supportive infrastructure and an extensive network of public lands for all Americans to enjoy. In the 11 western states alone, the LWCF has provided \$17.6 billion in funding for the protection and enhancement of 368 sites including national treasures. The LWCF has provided approximately \$578 million in grants for the protection of 34 sites in Montana over the last 50 years. These sites include state treasures such as Flathead and Gallatin national forests, Glacier National Park, Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, and Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail. The outdoor recreation industry supported by these lands generates \$7.1 billion annually as well as 71,000 jobs. These jobs generate \$2.2 billion in wages and salaries.

Outdoor recreation and the health of the Whitefish community are directly connected to projects funded by LWCF. For example, LWCF was instrumental in ensuring the security of Whitefish's domestic water supply through the purchase of the Haskill Basin Watershed Conservation Easement. Similarly, LWCF has played a key role in securing the Swift Creek Conservation Easement, which protects water quality in Whitefish Lake. Permanent funding of LWCF is essential not only for Whitefish but other communities similarly situated.

Specifically, outdoor recreation and proximity to open spaces – many of which have been enhanced through use of the LWCF – draw residents and tourists to mountain communities which provides significant economic support. In fact, counties in close proximity to public lands have been found to perform better in several key economic factors than counties without nearby public lands. Outdoor recreation such as hiking, biking, kayaking, hunting, and fishing contributed an incredible 2 percent to the United States Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2016 and is growing faster than the overall United States economy at a rate of 3.8 compared to 2.8 percent. Further, the Outdoor Industry Association found that the outdoor recreation economy contributes \$887 billion to the United States economy, and supports 7.6 million jobs.

Without funding for the further protection and enhancement of America's public lands and waters, the economic success and cultural vitality of mountain communities may be at risk. The continued health, cultural well-being, and economic success of our communities are inextricably linked to the American public land system and outdoor recreation. The LWCF is too important for public lands, waters, and recreation to let it expire. Congress must act now to help preserve our American public lands legacy.

*Richard Hildner is a Whitefish city councilor and a member of The Mountain Pact, which is an effort to educate, mobilize, and empower mountain towns with outdoor recreation-based economies in the American West around federal policy.*