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# There's Finally Real Hope for Public Lands Funding

Despite President Trump's budget proposal that calls for slashing funding for national parks and the Land and Water Conservation Fund, a bipartisan group of senators is moving forward with critical legislation for both





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**A**fter a dizzying series of announcements in a 24-hour window, two critical, long-sought components of public lands funding are closer to becoming a reality.

On Tuesday, via Twitter, President Trump called for (<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1234949358644289541>) congress to send him a bill that would provide full and permanent funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which allocates money from offshore drilling leases to support public access, recreation, and ecosystem preservation on public lands. The president also called on Congress to support the National Park Service in the same tweet. After receiving the signal that the president would sign off on it, despite his administration's budget proposal calling for drastic cuts (<https://www.outsideonline.com/2409287/trump-white-house-2021-budget-environment>) to those programs, a bipartisan group of Senators announced Wednesday morning that they'll introduce legislation that includes bills for the full and permanent funding for the LWCF and the Restore Our Parks Act (<https://www.nationalparkstraveler.org/2019/11/senate-committee-passes-legislation-attack-parks-maintenance-backlog>), which will provide \$6.5 billion over five years to address the National Parks Service's maintenance backlog.

In a statement in response to this news, former Secretary of the Interior and interim CEO of the Nature Conservancy, Sally Jewell, said “addressing these important issues together makes sense, has bipartisan support, and will go a long way toward ensuring that one of America’s greatest legacies—our public lands and waters—are kept healthy and thriving for all to enjoy.”



According to the last update, the National Parks currently have a maintenance backlog close to \$12 billion. The president's budget, released in February, proposed a \$581 million cut to NPS funding with no substantial relief for upkeep.

The full \$900 million allocation for the LWCF would be a boon to conservation and recreation throughout the country. However, as the Democrats on the House Natural Resources Committee were quick to point out (<https://twitter.com/NRDems/status/1234973181749841923>) following the president's Tuesday tweet, his proposed 2021 budget called for a 97 percent cut to the program.

While the reason for the dramatic reversal isn't clear, it was driven in part by the urging of Senators Steve Daines (R-Montana) and Cory Gardner (R-Colorado), both of whom hail from states where voters support public lands conservation by a wide margin

(<https://www.coloradocollege.edu/other/stateoftherockies/documents/2019%20Powerpoint%20State%20of%20the%20> and who are both facing re-election bids in 2020. (Gardner's facing a difficult contest ([https://www.coloradopolitics.com/2020-election/colorado-senate-race-moves-to-leans-democratic/article\\_1543d100-5418-11ea-b141-33e76d5624cf.html](https://www.coloradopolitics.com/2020-election/colorado-senate-race-moves-to-leans-democratic/article_1543d100-5418-11ea-b141-33e76d5624cf.html)), and it was reported later on Wednesday that Montana's incumbent Democratic governor, Steve Bullock, will challenge Daines for his seat this fall.) The two met with the President (<https://twitter.com/caitlynkim/status/1235246245716860928>) last week to discuss the issue. Both Senators released a statement (<https://www.gardner.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/gardner-daines-secure-president-trumps-support-for-full-and-permanent-lwcf-funding>) following the president's tweet announcing that they had secured the president's support and calling it "a great day for public lands."

Putting aside the possible 2020 implications at play, some Democrats embraced the announcement. "I welcome the president's apparent newfound support," Senator Tom Udall (D-New Mexico) said in a press release (<https://www.tomudall.senate.gov/news/press-releases/udall-statement-on-trump-lwcf-tweet>). Udall then had the opportunity to question Department of the Interior Secretary David Bernhardt Wednesday morning. "Secretary Bernhardt, there is tremendous excitement in the conservation community today. Can you assure us that the whole administration is now supporting the president's call for permanent mandatory LWCF funding, and will you work with us in a bipartisan way to get this done as soon as possible?" Udall asked.

"The president made his comment and I'm pretty—100 percent—confident everybody's getting in line," Bernhardt responded.

Reached for comment on Wednesday, some Democrats were more cautious of Trump's stated intentions given his administration's proposed budget. In a statement to *Outside*, New Mexico Congresswoman Deb Haaland, Vice Chair of the House Natural Resources Committee, said "I'm always skeptical when the president announces via tweet his support for anything that would be good for people in New Mexico or anywhere else. Instead, my team and I check the receipts—his budget guts the Land and Water Conservation Fund by 97 percent. His tweets yesterday appear to be a move to bolster GOP candidates and that was reinforced with Senator McConnell's expected action today to move a combined LWCF-Restore Our Parks bill closer to the Senate floor. I'm grateful that Senators Udall and Heinrich played a role and I look forward to fully funding the LWCF and supporting our National Parks, while keeping the pressure on the Administration to get it across the finish line."

## A Conservation in the West Poll

([https://www.coloradocollege.edu/other/stateoftherockies/conservationinthewest/2020/2020-conservation-in-the-west-poll-data/CCPollRelease2020%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.coloradocollege.edu/other/stateoftherockies/conservationinthewest/2020/2020-conservation-in-the-west-poll-data/CCPollRelease2020%20(1).pdf)) from February shows that 70 percent of voters in Western states, with a strong majority in both parties, support full funding for the LWCF. “Fighting every year to figure out how much money the program will receive doesn’t provide the long-term planning certainty that our outdoor and conservation community deserves,” Gardner said in a press release.

The LWCF was established in 1964 by a bipartisan act of Congress. It was designed to set aside \$900 million from royalties on offshore oil and gas leases for public lands. After its first 50 years, the LCFW was only renewed for three years in 2015. It was allowed to briefly expire in 2018 (<https://www.outsideonline.com/2350166/lwcf-dead-congress-murkowski>), but in February 2019 congress passed a law to permanently re-authorize it. That law did not, however, ensure full funding (hence Trump’s proposed 97 percent cut).

In fact, complete LWCF funding has only been allocated in-full twice in the history of the program because congress regularly diverts much of that money elsewhere. Usually, it gets less than half (<https://www.nature.org/en-us/about-us/who-we-are/how-we-work/policy/time-to-fulfill-the-land-and-water-conservation-fund-s-promise/>) of its intended budget. Conservationists and a broad coalition of politicians have been pushing for full funding since permanent authorization was secured last year.

“As great as it is to finally have certainty for the program, there’s still more work to do,” said Tom Cors, Director of Lands for U.S. Government Relations at the Nature Conservancy, last week (<https://www.nature.org/en-us/about-us/who-we-are/how-we-work/policy/time-to-fulfill-the-land-and-water-conservation-fund-s-promise/>). “Now, Congress must finish the job by also providing full, dedicated funding to LWCF. It would be the greatest conservation win in generations.”

“We’ve been working on this for more than a decade with Congress, and we’ve gotten closer,” Cors told *Outside* on Wednesday. “We believe that with the president’s tweet, that ensures us a pathway. We’re very pleased and encouraged by it, and now we are working to figure out what the next steps look like.”

A bipartisan bill is said to be on the way and assured a vote on the floor—but, given the position changes in just the last day, this potentially historic victory for public lands won’t be assured until it’s signed into law.

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