

PUBLIC LANDS

Over 200 bipartisan lawmakers seek to protect LWCF

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Published: Tuesday, March 28, 2017

More than 200 House Democrats and Republicans are urging "robust" funding for a major land and water conservation program set to expire in fiscal 2018.

The lawmakers, including 36 Republicans, are asking appropriators to ensure that all the programs under the Land and Water Conservation Fund "receive strong and consistent support in FY 2018 in order to maintain our commitment to conservation and recreation, as well as to states and local communities."

Their [letter](#) went today to Republican Rep. Ken Calvert of California and Democratic Rep. Betty McCollum of Minnesota, the respective chairman and ranking member of the Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee.

LWCF uses non-taxpayer money to preserve and maintain the nation's parks, forests, recreation areas and cultural sites. Proceeds from offshore oil and gas drilling primarily pay for LWCF.

The letter, which Reps. Pat Meehan (R-Pa.) and Mike Thompson (D-Calif.) coordinated, includes "more Republican support than we've seen in recent years," said Lynn Scarlett, managing director of public policy at the Nature Conservancy.

"This strong, bipartisan show of support for LWCF is especially notable at a time where we've also seen proposals to cut conservation funding," Scarlett wrote in an email. "Members of Congress are most in tune with what their constituents want and what is good for their communities."

President Trump's fiscal 2018 proposal seeks to cut the Interior Department's budget by 12 percent, including reducing land acquisition funding by more than \$120 million.

The administration said it would use the department's budget to maintain existing parks, refuges and public lands as well as leverage "taxpayer investment with public and private resources through wildlife conservation, historic preservation, and recreation grants" ([Greenwire](#), March 16).

Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke has repeatedly called for full and complete funding for LWCF. The program briefly expired in late 2015 before Congress agreed to reauthorize it for three years as part of a \$1.15 trillion omnibus spending package for fiscal 2016.

In 2015, House Natural Resources Chairman Rob Bishop (R-Utah) introduced a bill to reform LWCF, which would have maintained the fund for seven years, created a grant program for localities to build recreational facilities, and limited water and land acquisition, among several other provisions.

Bishop did not sign on to today's letter. The panel's ranking member, Raúl Grijalva (D-Ariz.), was among the signers.

"The chairman is supportive of the original intent of LWCF, but the program has strayed way beyond its statutory mandate," Molly Block, spokeswoman for committee Republicans, said today.

"The act is in desperate need of updates so that it addresses conservation and public recreational access challenges, is not used for unfettered federal land acquisition, and provides states and local communities with adequate resources to implement and properly maintain parks and recreational facilities," a [one-page summary](#) of Bishop's 2015 reform bill said.

The LWCF's funding target was established at \$900 million per year, but its annual appropriations typically have been about half that.

The program's funding woes have "created a substantial backlog of conservation and recreation needs; has caused state, local, and federal land management agencies to postpone or cancel many important projects; and has created undue hardship for many property owners," the lawmakers wrote.

The LWCF Coalition, an umbrella group of small businesses, ranchers, sportsmen and outdoor recreationists, praised the lawmakers who pledged support for LWCF.

"In the face of President Trump's extreme budget proposal that threatens America's public lands, this show of support makes abundantly clear that Congress must invest in this program as it crafts their FY 2018 budget this year," the group said in a statement.

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