

U.S. Congress approves conservation bill

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Congress has passed sweeping legislation allocating \$900 million a year for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), and an additional \$9.5 billion over five years to address an urgent backlog of maintenance projects at the nation's parks and other public lands.

The [legislation](#), S.3422, is a once-in-a-generation gift to the future, expected to more than double the money available under the program every year for parks and outdoor recreation of all sorts in Washington state. The work of many hands on both sides of the aisle in both houses of Congress, the legislation would for the first time guarantee the full \$900 million originally authorized for the fund be allocated every year.

The legislation was passed on Wednesday by the House in a 310-107 vote and has already passed the Senate. It now goes to President Donald Trump, who has said he will sign it.

"The program had been chronically underfunded, even though it is paid for entirely by revenues from offshore oil and gas leases.

Since its creation in 1964—led by U.S. Sen. Henry M. "Scoop" Jackson of Washington—the program has funded a conservation, recreation or access project in every county in the country. The program has benefited every type of outdoor enthusiast seeking access to [public lands](#) for hunting, fishing, recreational shooting, hiking, biking, birding, wildlife watching and other pleasures of the outdoors.

In Washington state alone, the Land and Water Conservation Fund has paid for more than 700 state projects, investing more than \$725 million in everything from [urban parks](#), such as Gas Works Park in Seattle, and recent upgrades to the boat house at Green Lake Park, to trails all over the state and more.

The \$900 million includes both spending for the federal LWCF program (which mainly purchases land from willing sellers to add to the nation's public lands) and the state LWCF programs (mainly cost-shared dollars that go to states and municipalities to invest in urban green spaces). The grants are selected by a competitive process.

The \$900 million a year Congressional allocation mandated under S.3422 will raise by two to three times how much was typically spent on the program in the past, ending the nearly annual underfunding that has since the program's inception diverted an estimated \$22 billion from the fund to other purposes.

In Washington state, the bill is expected to raise the annual allocation from the fund from about \$15 million to about \$35 million.

The legislation also is a boost to small towns all over Washington and the rest of the country that depend heavily on outdoor recreation for their economy. People are turning to the outdoors more than ever for recreation, respite and rejuvenation as the COVID-19 pandemic closes off many other options for vacations, recreation and family fun.

Addressing daunting deferred maintenance needs in the [national parks](#) and other public lands also is long overdue. From crumbling trails and roads to outdated water systems and flood damage at campgrounds, the billions provided by the legislation over the next five years will help reopen miles of trails and other public amenities.

In Washington state, more than \$427 million in deferred maintenance projects are waiting for work at national parks, historical reserves, recreation areas and historical parks. The legislation is expected to address about half the maintenance backlog nationally, with an estimated \$250 million coming to Washington state alone over the next five years.

From upgrading a nearly 50-year-old water treatment system at Olympic National Park, building new sidewalks at Mount Rainier's Paradise visitor center, and upgrading campgrounds at Mount Rainier, there is no lack of work to be done.

A total of \$6.65 billion is allocated for the National Parks Service, \$1.4

billion for the U.S. Forest Service, and \$475 million each for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management and Bureau of Indian Education, for schools.

The economic value of the outdoor economy helped generate the bipartisan support needed for the legislation, especially among lawmakers who already have large amounts of public land in their districts, or who had favored energy development and other land uses over open space and outdoor recreation, Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., said in an interview Tuesday.

"Truth be told, we turned the focus to the economic value of land and open space," said Cantwell, citing a recent study that estimated the outdoor economy in Washington state alone at \$26 billion in consumer spending, 200,000 jobs, and \$7.6 billion in wages and salaries. But that's just the start of what the outdoors means to many Washingtonians, Cantwell said. "We know the value of it is in our hearts and souls."

Cantwell in March helped negotiate what came to be called the Great American Outdoors Act, which ultimately combined several legislative approaches to both permanently and fully fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund and pay down a big chunk of the country's deferred maintenance backlog on public lands.

U.S. Rep. Derek Kilmer, D-Wash., spoke in support of the bill Wednesday as the House undertook final debate on the legislation, which brings to fruition his work to find a solution to the maintenance backlog.

"Growing up on the Olympic Peninsula, I learned how important protecting and supporting our parks and our public lands is to driving tourism, growing jobs, and supporting local communities," Kilmer said in a prepared statement.

Cantwell said in an interview Tuesday she was thrilled to see the legislation on the brink of passage.

"The bottom line is I am just so grateful, deep down in my soul," Cantwell said. " ... This is so important ... to the next generation of people, and their children, being able to have the same experiences their parents did because we did the right thing."

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