

LAND AND WATER CONSERVATION FUND

Sen. Daines lauds action on conservation, park maintenance

By COLIN GAISER | November 20, 2019

Sen. Steve Daines, R-Mont., called Tuesday an “exciting day for Montana” as a key U.S. Senate panel approved a bill [[S. 1081](#) & companion bill [H.R. 3195](#)] to fully and permanently fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund. Daines is Montana’s representative on the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, which advanced the bill to the Senate floor. Daines said the Conservation Fund “protects our very Montana way of life” during a call with the Montana press on Tuesday morning.

The Land and Water Conservation Fund was established in 1964, and takes revenues from offshore oil and gas drilling to protect other natural areas from development.

Energy companies put \$900 million in royalties into the fund, but the Senate Appropriations Committee has rarely allocated the full \$900 million to the fund. Funding for the Conservation Fund has crept up since 2011 – from \$301 million to \$435 million in fiscal year 2019 – but Daines said he and the bill’s other cosponsors will fight for the entire \$900 million.

Daines was especially enthusiastic about the support on both sides of the aisle for conservation funding. But he still called full funding “the next peak we need to summit” as the bill goes to the Senate floor.



“It’s really good to see bipartisan support,” he said, especially “in a city that’s really polarized right now.”

“It takes public lands to bring a divided government together,” he added. Daines said that there has been “strong grassroots support” for the Conservation Fund in Montana, especially as the fund has helped open over 70% of the state’s fishing access sites.

The House and Senate permanently reauthorized the Conservation Fund with overwhelming support on March 12 as part of a public lands package. Daines said he fought hard for the permanent reauthorization, and it was “a huge step” in getting to Tuesday’s result.

“Keep in mind it was President Trump’s signature” that got the Conservation Fund permanently authorized, he added.

THE COMMITTEE also approved legislation to help address the maintenance backlog across the National Park System. The Restore Our Parks Act could provide upwards of \$6.5 billion over five years to address deferred maintenance needs, though Daines said it will take **about \$11.9 billion** to fund all the maintenance projects.

He added that Glacier and Yellowstone national parks together have over \$700 million worth of deferred maintenance backlog. “Our national parks set us apart from the rest of the world,” Daines said. He said increased visitation to national parks is good for the economy and the country, but is “taxing the bridges, trails, parking lots, employee housing, bathroom pipes” and other park infrastructure.

Daines addressed criticism from groups like the Montana Conservation Voters, which on Tuesday said Daines’ “support rings hollow after he asked his colleagues to shortchange LWCF by hundreds of millions of dollars just a few months ago” in a press release. The organization pointed out that Daines encouraged his colleagues in a May 16 letter to allocate “at least \$600 million” despite claiming he supported full funding a month earlier.

“It’s an inaccurate statement,” Daines said. He said for the sake of politics, these criticisms “aren’t presenting the totality of the picture.” He added that he’s received support from groups like the Land and Water Conservation Fund Coalition and Trout Unlimited.

Daines is confident the Senate will vote in favor of full funding for the Conservation Fund and the Restore Our Parks Act.

“It always helps when you have a bipartisan vote” from the committees, Daines said. He pointed out related successes from earlier this year, including the Yellowstone Gateway Protection Act, which was part of a legislative lands package that cleared the Senate in a 92-8 vote. That bill was sponsored by Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont.

Daines did not think the money required to fund the Restore Our Parks Act would have any effect on permanent funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

“We’re going to argue each one on a stand-alone basis,” he said.

Daines said he thinks about deferred maintenance in the National Park System as “debt” and “a burden we are not addressing.” Congress cannot continue to “punt” on deferred maintenance, he added.

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(Emphasis added)



In their own words:

[Land and Water Conservation Fund](#)

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The National Park Service is guided by the Act of August 25, 1916, (the National Park Service Organic Act) to protect and preserve resources within units of the National Park System, while providing for public use and enjoyment of those resources. A number of park units contain non-Federal land. Depending on the use of these lands, it is sometimes necessary to **seek to acquire them**, or interests in them, or conduct land exchanges in order to protect resources and provide for visitor use and enjoyment. This work is done in cooperation with States, local

governments, nonprofit organizations and property owners to provide various forms of protection.

Today, the National Park System totals more than **84 million acres**, yet more than 2.6 million acres of privately owned lands remain within park boundaries. Acquisition of all privately owned land within a given park boundary is not always necessary and, in some cases, not feasible. However, many of these lands are important for visitor use and preservation of resources and have therefore been identified to be protected in fee or by scenic/conservation easement interest.

The Federal portion of the Land and Water Conservation Fund is used to acquire lands, waters, and interests therein necessary to achieve the natural, cultural, wildlife, and recreation management objectives of the National Park Service. The [Land Resources Division](#) utilizes funding from the Federal portion of the Land and Water Conservation Fund to make these acquisitions.

(Emphasis added)

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