

Senator Manchin Cloture Floor Speech On Great American Outdoors Act

Madam President — Today the Senate will take the first step towards passing the Great American Outdoors Act, with the vote to invoke cloture on the motion to proceed to the House bill that will be used as the underlying legislative vehicle.

A majority of my Senate colleagues have cosponsored this bill, and we have an incredible opportunity to enact this important bipartisan legislation.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that our nation is in turmoil and hurting. We are still very much in the midst of both a health and economic crisis and this weekend we saw millions of people join peaceful demonstrations in communities across the country.

It is so important that we in Congress take action, and I'm so pleased that we have returned to legislating. There is no shortage of important business for us to address as a body.

The Great American Outdoors Act will create jobs while protecting and expanding access to the great outdoors across our country for everyone, whether that be hunting, fishing, or hiking in the Monongahela National Forest or rafting down the Gauley River, or learning about Civil War history, just to give a few examples from my home state of West Virginia.

This is a legacy that we can all pass down to our grandchildren and generations to come, and it's been a long time coming.

I want to thank my good friend, Senator Lisa Murkowski, for working with us through the committee process.

I'd also like to thank my colleagues, Senators Gardner, Warner, Daines, Cantwell, Portman, King, Alexander, and Heinrich for their work over many years on the Land Water Conservation Fund and deferred maintenance bills that are now joined together as the Great American Outdoors Act.

This bill would realize a goal that so many of us in this body have fought hard to attain for so long — to provide permanent, mandatory funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund at its fully authorized level of \$900 million annually.

Last year, the Senate passed a public lands package by an overwhelming vote of 92 – 8 that permanently authorized the LWCF, the most successful land conservation program in our nation's history.

A vote that bipartisan is unfortunately unheard of today and speaks to the overwhelming popularity of conservation programs in every state in the country.

The day after we secured permanent authorization of LWCF, I made it clear our next hurdle was achieving mandatory full funding.

The Great American Outdoors Act includes the LWCF mandatory funding bill that I introduced, and I'm glad that my friend Senator Gardner signed on as the lead Republican cosponsor.

We had strong bipartisan support for mandatory LWCF funding, with a majority of the Senate cosponsoring the bill and a strong bipartisan vote coming out of committee.

We need to secure this funding because since the LWCF was established 55 years ago, over \$22 billion have been deposited into the LWCF but was never appropriated for LWCF purposes.

And although every state, territory, and almost every county has benefitted from LWCF, it has only been fully funded twice in its history.

Despite that, LWCF has been able to do wonderful things with the funds that have been appropriated, which in recent years have averaged about half of the authorized funding level, and in previous years even less than that. Just imagine what we can achieve for our country with full funding.

The LWCF is the primary conservation funding tool that helps provide public access for hunting, fishing and recreational use of public lands.

It also helps fund state and local parks; it helps maintain working forests through the Forest Legacy program; it protects historic battlefields through the American Battlefield Protection Program, and it helps landowners voluntarily protect habitat for endangered species.

Permanent LWCF funding will help improve access to public lands, including providing important access for hunting and fishing opportunities, and will ensure the program remains an important contributor to a strong and growing outdoor recreation economy that will benefit state and local communities throughout the nation.

A recent analysis from Boston University shows that at full funding of \$900 million, the LWCF could support approximately 15,000 to 28,000 jobs at a time when our country needs it most.

Passing permanent LWCF authorization last year was an important step, and we are so close to realizing the ultimate goal of fulfilling the original intent of the LWCF program and securing a permanent, dedicated funding source for the multiple conservation programs funded by the LWCF.

The Great American Outdoors Act also includes \$9.5 billion for deferred maintenance projects on federal lands, with 70% of that amount dedicated for our national parks.

Senators Portman, Warner, Alexander, King and many others have worked so hard on that original legislation and I was proud to cosponsor and support it as it went through the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee.

This legislation will be the most significant reduction ever in eliminating a major portion the deferred maintenance backlog on our national parks and public lands.

The impact of failing to fund parks maintenance for so long is clear to see.

Last summer, I visited Pearl Harbor with my family, and I was incredibly disappointed to see the state of disrepair it was in, with faded and torn signs and audio displays and lights not working.

The infrastructure projects that will be funded through this bill are critical to protecting many of our national treasures, and like the LWCF funding, will provide a significant benefit to the outdoor recreation economy.

The National Park Service estimates that investing in deferred maintenance projects will create more than 40,000 direct infrastructure related jobs, and over 100,000 total jobs. And that just for deferred maintenance projects at our national parks.

This bill includes funding for maintenance projects at other land management and Bureau of Indian Education schools, so the total number of jobs created by this bill will be much higher.

The Great American Outdoors Act will help us to be good stewards of our public lands while at the same time creating thousands of new jobs —a bipartisan win-win.

We have broad bipartisan support with 60 Senators signing on, which is representative of how important these bills are to every state.

We have support from the administration, and unwavering support from over 850 conservation and sportsmen's groups throughout the nation.

It is a shining example of Democrats and Republicans coming together to put politics aside to do what is best for conserving the natural resources of this great nation.

Passage of this bill will be a historic achievement, and I believe this will be one of the most significant conservation bills ever enacted into law.

I urge all of my colleagues to join me in voting yes to invoke cloture and begin consideration of the Great American Outdoors Act.