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Contact:

Kelley Beamer, Executive Director, Coalition of Oregon Land Trusts
503.348.9612 | kelley@oregonlandtrusts.org

Congress passes landmark bill that will more than double conservation funding nationwide and help protect more than 30,000 acres in Oregon

Bill also address national parks maintenance backlog. President said he will sign.

Washington, D.C. — The U.S. House of Representatives – including all five members of Oregon’s delegation – voted to pass the Great American Outdoors Act today by a vote of 310-107. The act fully and permanently funds the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF)— America’s longstanding and most important conservation program to safeguard natural areas, water resources, cultural heritage and recreation opportunities. This commitment more than doubles the funding previously available for the fund each year; helps complete three pending Oregon conservation projects right away, totaling more than 30,000 acres; and invests \$9.5 billion in the national parks’ maintenance backlog.

The bill now moves to the president, who has said he will sign it into law.

By providing full and permanent funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund, the new law is expected to help fund the following projects led by land trusts throughout Oregon:

- A plan by the Arch Cape Water District with support from the **North Coast Land Conservancy** to acquire 2,121 acres of private forest that supplies that town’s drinking water. [The water district has spent \\$700,000 \(and counting\) to filter its drinking water in recent years.](#) Protecting the source of its drinking water is a more effective and cost-efficient method to provide safe drinking water.
- Spence Mountain, a 7,500-acre working forest in the Klamath Basin with important wildlife habitat and more than 35 miles of trails. This project is led by the **Trust for Public Land**, which will help establish a locally guided community forest managed for timber, public recreation, wildlife habitat and watershed health.
- Conservation of 21,946 acres of important land along the John Day Wild & Scenic River corridor, including Thirtymile Creek, the most important steelhead spawning and rearing tributary on the lower John Day River. **Western Rivers Conservancy** is partnering with local residents and the **U.S. Bureau of Land Management** to conserve important stretches of this waterway for native fish and wildlife as well as visitors who can explore this spectacular slice of Oregon.

The fund was first passed by Congress in 1965 to reinvest a small portion of proceeds from offshore oil and gas drilling into conservation of our nation’s natural, recreational and cultural resources. But Congress has siphoned off more than half of these funds for non-conservation uses. By providing full and permanent funding, Congress has stopped this practice and more than doubled available conservation funding nationwide each year.

The bill also helps Oregon address the \$127 million in deferred maintenance at its four national park sites.

“Protecting wilderness reflects the best values of Oregon – environmental protection, stewardship of our land, and community partnership,” said **Rep. Suzanne Bonamici** (D-Ore.). “The Great American Outdoors Act will help mitigate the climate crisis and protect the natural beauty and robust habitats that fish and wildlife depend on for survival. And at a time when our communities are struggling to recover from the economic consequences of the coronavirus pandemic, a time when there is heightened awareness about inequities and injustices in our society – including inequitable access to our wild places – this bill will boost rural economies and expand access to public lands for future generations.”

“Permanent funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund has been a dream that so many have fought for since 1964. Finally, Congress has done the right thing for our parks and passed the Great American Outdoors Act, providing for this funding and addressing the deferred maintenance backlog that has hampered many of our treasured outdoor places for too long. But now is not the time to breathe easy. We must continue our work to protect more public land, expand equitable access to these beautiful landscapes, and push back on the Trump Administration’s assault on our environment,” said **Rep. Earl Blumenauer** (D-Ore.).

“This bill is a win for the country, for Oregon and for towns across the Fifth District,” said **Rep. Kurt Schrader** (D-Ore.). “This is truly an investment in our children, our environment and our quality of life, and that’s why we’re seeing such bipartisan support in Congress. Long term dedicated funding in these uncertain times for our national parks is crucial and that is why this bill has so much support from sportsman and environmentalists alike.”

“Land Trusts across Oregon are celebrating the Senate’s passage of the Great American Outdoors Act. We are grateful to the entire Oregon congressional delegation for supporting the bill and for their ongoing efforts to fully fund LWCF,” said **Kelley Beamer, executive director for the Coalition of Oregon Land Trusts** (COLT). “Full funding will give Oregonians more of what they are clamoring for, outdoor spaces that provide health and solace.”

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Background

The 50-year-old Land and Water Conservation Fund has invested hundreds of millions of dollars in Oregon to conserve everything from working private farms and forests to national treasures including the Pacific Crest Trail, Columbia River Gorge, John Day Fossil Beds, Mount Hood, Hells Canyon, Smith Rock State Park, Klamath National Wildlife Refuge, Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument, Rogue River Wild and Scenic River, Table Rocks, Lewis and Clark National Historic Park, and many more. In January of this year, the East Moraine of Wallowa Lake was permanently protected using nearly \$4 million in grant funding from the fund.

The fund was first passed by Congress in 1965 to reinvest a small portion of proceeds from offshore oil and gas drilling into conservation of our nation’s natural, recreational and cultural resources. It was set to sunset in 2015, but because of its long history of success conserving public lands throughout the nation, in 2016 Congress temporarily reauthorized the fund for three years, and in 2019 Congress voted to permanently reauthorize the fund. However, they did not secure permanent funding. The Great American Outdoors Act takes the final step of securing full, permanent funding from oil and gas royalties for this landmark conservation fund.

Quotes from Oregon’s senators

"This watershed conservation legislation will protect Oregon's treasured places for generations to come. And it couldn't come at a better time with the economic impact of the COVID-19 emergency hitting our rural communities like a wrecking ball," **Sen. Ron Wyden** (D-Ore.) said. "The LWCF not only helps to get people outdoors and expand access to public lands, it has a proven track record of boosting the economies of the communities near those lands.

It's the ultimate game plan for economic success in rural Oregon when you're talking about jobs and recreation around our natural wonders."

"Just as Oregon's shores, forests and deserts have long been woven into the spirit of our state and the vitality of our economy, America's incredible public lands have made invaluable contributions to every region of our country," said **Sen. Jeff Merkley** (D-Ore.). "It's our responsibility to be good stewards of those treasures, so that they can be enjoyed by future generations of hikers, hunters, fishermen, and other outdoor recreationists. I'm pleased that the Senate took an important step toward protecting Oregon's and America's great outdoor spaces by passing this legislation."

About the Coalition of Oregon Land Trusts

The Coalition of Oregon Land Trusts (COLT) is a statewide coalition that works to serve and strengthen the land trust community of Oregon. Our coalition is comprised of 29 organizations that work with local communities to protect water quality and wildlife habitat, preserve open lands, maintain working farms, and retain social and economic values that make Oregon special. Collectively, COLT's member organizations have permanently conserved more than 450,000 acres of land. <http://oregonlandtrusts.org/>