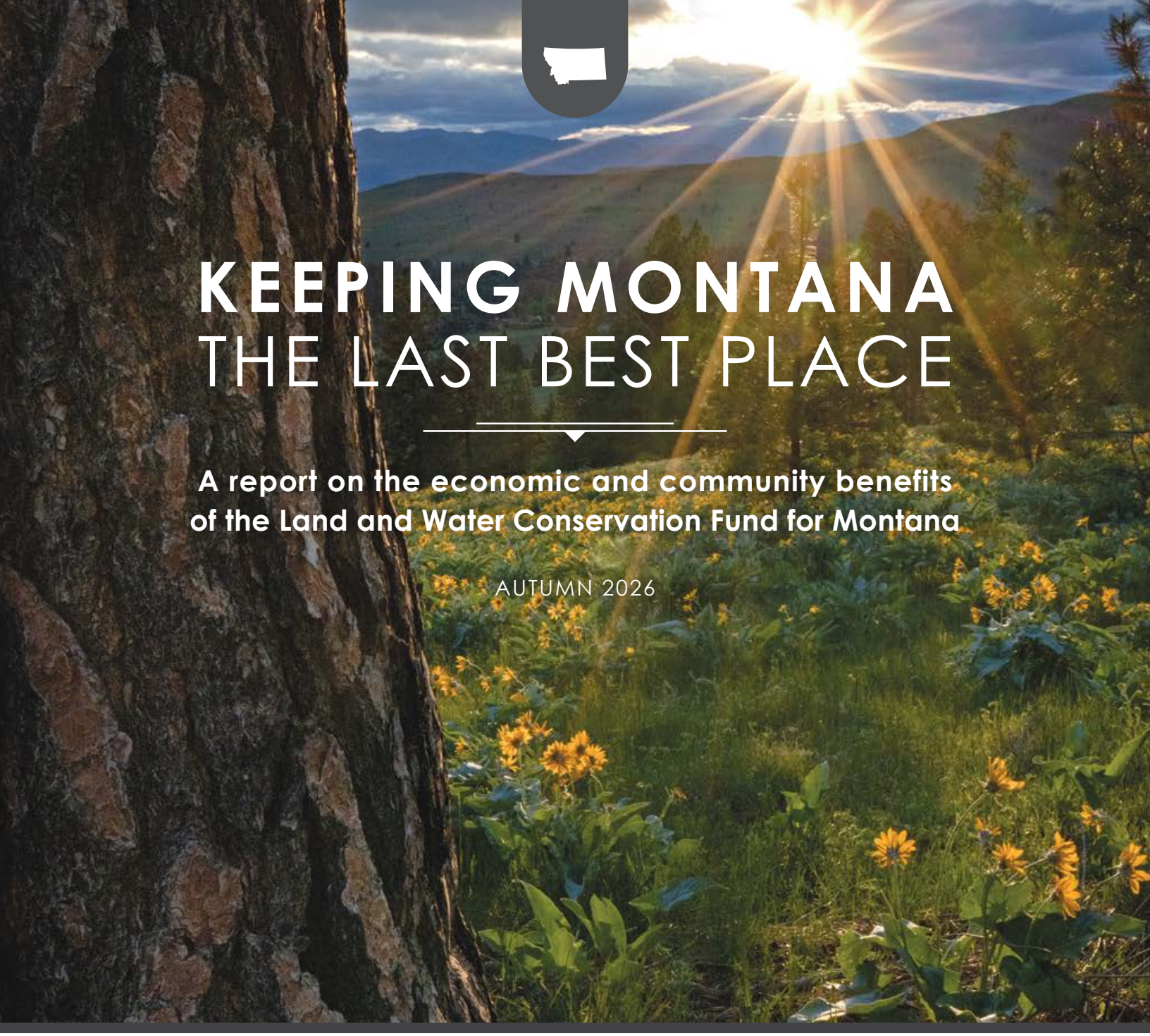


KEEPING MONTANA
THE LAST BEST PLACE

A report on the economic and community benefits of the Land and Water Conservation Fund for Montana

AUTUMN 2026

Montana Wildlife Federation
Greater Yellowstone Coalition
Backcountry Hunters & Anglers
Montana Conservation Voters
Montana Audubon
Montana Trout Unlimited Since 1964
The Nature Conservancy Montana
Business for Montana's Outdoors
Wild Montana
mountain mamas
Trust for Public Land



"HUNTING ISN'T JUST A PASTIME - IT'S HOW WE PASS DOWN VALUES, FEED OUR FAMILIES, AND STAY CONNECTED TO THE LAND. PROGRAMS LIKE LWCF PROVIDE THAT PATHWAY TO CONNECTING WITH OUR PUBLIC LANDS AND WATERS. WITHOUT IT, LACK OF ACCESS THREATENS HUNTING, FISHING, AND OUR ABILITY TO RESPECT NATURE.

~ Ryan Callaghan, CEO & President, Backcountry Hunters & Anglers

Photo: Montana Wildlife Federation / Lisa Ballard
Cover photo: Jeremy Roberts / Conservation Media LLC

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

> Montana's public lands and waters are a major economic driver for the state. LWCF serves as the bedrock of our $3.4 billion outdoor recreation economy and our way of life - without any burden to Montana's taxpayers. *For every dollar invested through LWCF, we see a $4 return* - that's an incredible ripple effect that benefits all. This report is further evidence that LWCF must remain dedicated to its mission of conservation and expanding public access rather than being diverted for other purposes. ~ Marne Hayes, Business for Montana's Outdoors Director

Montana is renowned for its world-class outdoor recreation, blue-ribbon trout streams, and family-friendly small towns. For the last 50 years, a little-known but powerful federal program – the Land & Water Conservation Fund, or LWCF – has helped to shape Montana's vibrant communities and the nature-based economy we enjoy today. Keeping the Fund accessible and strong is critical to the future of Montana.

LWCF directs money from offshore oil-drilling federal royalties – not tax dollars - to conservation, public access, and recreation priorities across America. That's key for a state like Montana that has barely a million people and only limited funds of its own. LWCF has been a boon to Montana with more than $171 million dollars invested in the state between 2021 and 2025 to support access to public lands, working forests, and city parks.

Congress created this program in 1964 to ensure that the American people would have access to nature and recreation. The act authorized up to $900 million per year, but prior to the 2020 Great American Outdoors Act championed by Montana's Sen. Steve Daines, annual allocations fell far short of that amount. The Fund received full funding only once during its first 50 years.

LWCF investments contribute hugely to our freedom to enjoy the great outdoors, our clean water, and to jobs. In addition to timber and ranching, a myriad of professional, light industry, and outdoor-oriented businesses that depend on public land bolster the economy of the Treasure State. A 2013 poll conducted by Business for Montana's Outdoors found 70 percent of businesses in Montana cite public lands and access to the outdoors as major factors in their decision to expand or invest in Montana. A 2025 poll found 75% of businesses said access to public land and quality recreation helped recruit employees.

Across the state, Montana families, sportsmen, land trusts, ranchers, city officials, and conservationists have come together to make the best use of this important program. LWCF has helped conserve tens of thousands of acres of working timberlands in western Montana, keeping them in production and keeping loggers on the ground. At the same time, it has helped pay for more than 800 community projects statewide – including town parks, swimming pools, tennis courts, skate parks and bicycle trails. In addition, roughly half of the 330 fishing access sites that dot the Treasure state were purchased with help from LWCF.

Montanans from all walks of life agree that the LWCF has been a tremendous success for Montana. This vital program:

- PROVIDES ACCESS TO PUBLIC LAND AND WATER FOR MONTANANS AND VISITORS ALIKE
- CONSERVES FAMILY RANCHES IN PLACES LIKE THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN FRONT, AND THE BLACKFOOT AND CENTENNIAL VALLEYS
- BUILDS CITY PARKS AND GREENWAYS FROM GLASGOW TO SUPERIOR AND POINTS IN BETWEEN
- KEEPS TIMBERLAND IN PRODUCTION AND UNDER MANAGEMENT IN TOUGH ECONOMIC TIMES

The fate of the Land & Water Conservation Fund is in the hands of Montana's Congressional delegation, which will have new members come 2027. It is up to them to take up the torch and protect this important tool that helps Montana remain as the Last Best Place. This is increasingly important as the bipartisan conservation legacy of LWCF is under threat. The Department of Interior and U.S. Forest Service are considering arbitrary restrictions and bureaucratic hurdles on LWCF projects related to Secretarial Order 3442. Anti-public lands Members of Congress repeatedly bring forward plans to divert LWCF funding and reduce access to public lands. May this analysis help Montana's future congressional delegation to advocate for LWCF and stand firm against attempts to divert funding away from its original intent or add more red tape to a program that has worked well.





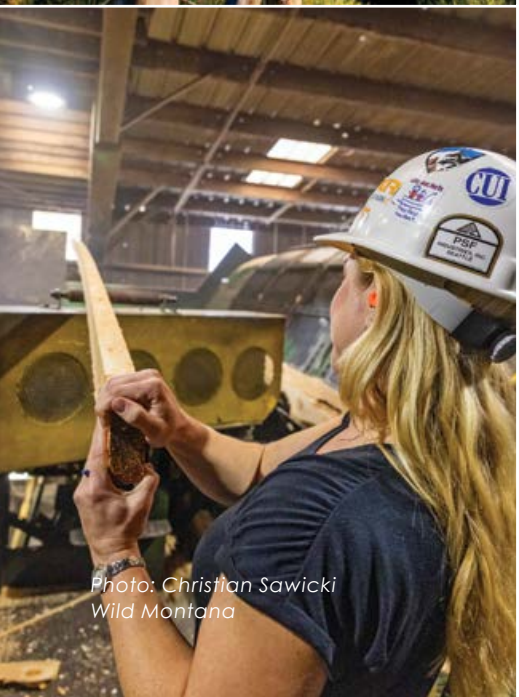


Photo: Christian Sawicki
Wild Montana

MONTANA BY THE NUMBERS:
LAND & WATER CONSERVATION FUND

$171 million LWCF money invested in Montana since 2021, compared to $237.6 million between 2005-2014

75 Percent of Montana businesses that cite access to public land and quality recreation helped recruit employees. *(2025 Business for Montana Outdoors Survey)*

165 Approximate number of Fishing Access Sites acquired or improved with LWCF.

$3.4 million LWCF money spent to buy or improve Montana's river fishing access sites.

$1.29 billion Consumer spending related to Montana's sport fishing industry in 2024. *(UM Bureau of Business & Economic Research August 2025 report)*

83 Percent of Montanans who say national public lands help the economy. *(Colorado College Poll, 2024)*

3 million Acres, state and federal, in Montana owned by the public but inaccessible within private land holdings.

95 Percent of Montanans who agree that LWCF funds should be used to buy private inholdings within public lands. *(2026 Colorado College Poll)*

226,400 Number of acres of working forest lands in Montana conserved through the LWCF Forest Legacy Program between 2021 and 2025.

67 Percent of total Montana timber harvest that came from public timberlands in 2022. *(UM Bureau of Business & Economic Research April 2025 report)*

~7,500 Number of direct jobs in the wood products industry in Montana. *(Montana Wood Products Association website)*

$53.2 million LWCF Forest Legacy Program money spent keeping Montana timberland in production between 2021 and 2025.

$1.87 billion Value of Montana's outdoor recreation economy in 2024. *(2024 Headwaters Economics report)*

$2.7 million LWCF money spent to buy or upgrade state parks since 2021.

800 Number of community recreation sites, such as city parks, trails and ball fields, purchased at least in part with LWCF dollars.

$10.5 million LWCF grants to Montana county and municipal parks and school districts since 2021.

2 Number of times Congress fully funded LWCF prior to passage of the 2020 Great American Outdoors Act.

WHAT IS THE
LAND & WATER CONSERVATION FUND?

When Congress passed the Land and Water Conservation Act in 1964, it supported a simple democratic idea: take a portion of fees paid by energy companies profiting from offshore resource extraction and use the money to preserve important natural resources on land and provide recreational opportunities for all Americans.

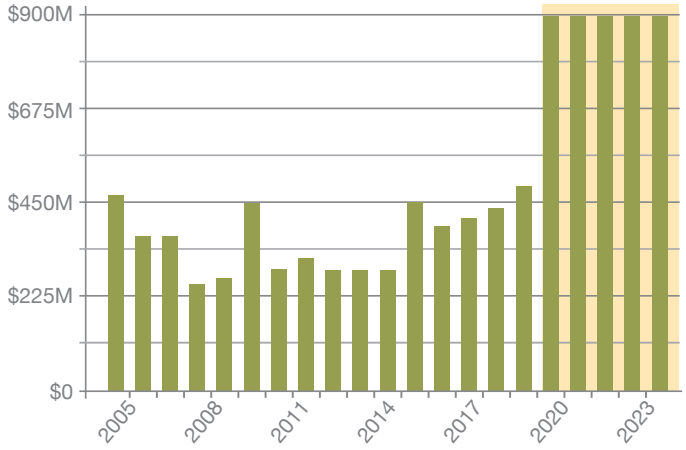
LWCF IS **NOT** FUNDED BY TAXPAYER DOLLARS.

The act directs Congress to appropriate up to $900 million annually from offshore royalties to LWCF. Thanks to the Great American Outdoor Act, it has received the full $900 million every years since 2020. As a result, the nation's natural-resource bounty is helping to preserve more open lands and build more city parks.

Part of Congress's goal was to encourage recreation and strengthen the "health and vitality" of all Americans. Montanans, in particular, have reaped these benefits. It's safe to say that LWCF helped shape and preserve the Montana we know and love.

FIG. 1

CONGRESSIONAL LWCF ALLOCATION



Congressional allocation to the Land and Water Conservation Fund for each fiscal year, in millions of dollars.

Gold shading indicates time since the passage of the Great American Outdoors Act.



Photo: Montana Audubon

BENEFITS FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES

FIG. 2

LAND & WATER CONSERVATION FUND
STATESIDE PROJECT SITES



Source: Land & Water Conservation Fund, National Park Service http://www.nps.gov/lwcf/

LWCF is not just about big forests and vast open spaces. It's also about small Montana communities.

One glance at the map above shows the diversity of Montana counties and towns that have been able to add community parks, pools, tennis courts and skate parks with the help of LWCF's State and Local Assistance Program.

During its first 50 years, LWCF allowed around 90 Montana towns and 45 school districts to complete projects that they otherwise couldn't have afforded, according to Tim Burton, former executive director of Montana League of Cities and Towns, which represents 129 municipalities.

The challenge of affordability has only increased in Montana over the past decade. For example, from 2017 to 2025, most housing prices in the state doubled, according to Derek Sheehan, an economist at the UM Bureau of Business and Economic Research. That makes buying new park properties almost impossible for smaller towns, and even paying for construction materials for upgrades can be a heavy lift.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, which oversees the State and Local Assistance Program, shifted to a biennial grant process after 2022 and receives dozens of proposals every grant cycle from counties, cities and schools needing money to build parks and playgrounds. As Montana grows, the need will continue to increase. But thanks to the full funding of LWCF enacted by the Great American Outdoors Act, Montana has received $10.5 million from the State and Local Assistance Program since 2021 to fund more than 30 municipal parks, trails and school playgrounds.

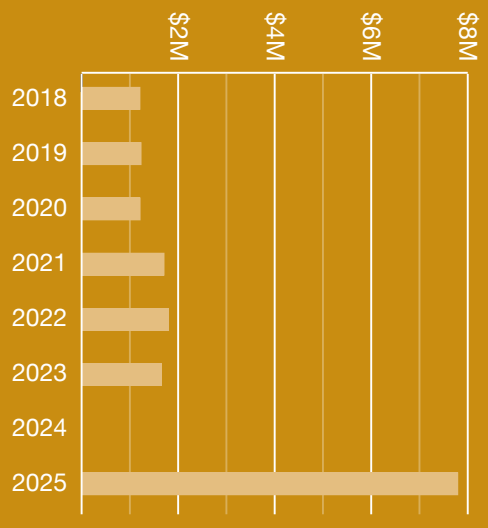
In addition, the state itself also needs money for upgrades to the parks and recreational areas it manages. In the past, FWP has taken advantage of the assistance program to provide anglers with access to miles of Montana's lakes and rivers. Almost half of Montana's 336 fishing access sites were bought or improved using LWCF money.

LWCF has also played a big role in developing Montana's network of state parks, which cater to every kind of recreation and contribute to the economies of nearby towns. Montana State Parks maintains its sites using entrance fees and a $6 fee on Montana automobile registrations, but there's not much left over to pay for needed improvements or new sites. Fortunately, LWCF money helps stretch those budgets to keep Montana's recreational properties attractive and safe. Since 1965, more than 70 projects and $10.5 million in grants have helped the state preserve historic, cultural and recreational sites. These include Travelers' Rest State Park near Lolo, Giant Springs State Park outside Great Falls, Chief Plenty Coups State Park near Laurel and the Missouri Headwaters State Park near Three Forks.

Prior to the passage of the Great American Outdoors Act, the unmet demand for outdoor recreation facilities and parks at the state level was $27 billion nationwide, according to the National Park Service.

FIG. 3

MONTANA ALLOCATION
(STATESIDE)



Congressional appropriations for the State and Local Assistance Program nationwide between 2018 and 2025.

CASE STUDY

RECREATION ACCESS:
SOMERS BEACH STATE PARK

- 106 ACRES
- $1,338,000 IN LWCF STATE & LOCAL ASSISTANCE GRANTS

Flathead Lake is the largest freshwater lake west of the Mississippi River, but 89% of the 185 miles of shoreline is in private ownership. Prior to 2021, that meant the public had to compete for space in the five small state parks and six fishing access sites that ring the lake. Between local traffic and out-of-state visitors, it can get pretty crowded.

Near Somers, the Sliter family had for generations allowed the public to use their half-mile of northern shoreline. Their generosity took substantial pressure off the other public access sites. In 2010, the Sliter family hoped the 106-acre property could become a state park. Locals were excited at the prospect. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks knew the site could provide priceless access, but how to pay the appraised cost of $2.74 million?

> "THERE WERE SOME MOUNTAINS MOVED TO MAKE THIS HAPPEN. YOU KNOW ABOUT THE DEVELOPMENT PRESSURES IN THIS VALLEY AND THIS COULD ALL BE A NEIGHBORHOOD AND CONDOMINIUMS, BUT INSTEAD WE HAD A FAMILY, THE SLITER FAMILY, THAT CARES ABOUT A SENSE OF PLACE.
>
> ~ Jim Williams, former FWP Region 1 supervisor

In October 2020, the department applied for $1,338,000 in LWCF funding, which requires a 50:50 match for each grant. In the meantime, FWP worked with nonprofit organizations and major donors to raise the other half of the sum. Thanks to the Great American Outdoors Act, FWP received the grant for fiscal year 2021. The park opened in May 2022, fulfilling the Sliter family dream.

Valued for its open space, beauty and outdoor recreation, Somers Beach State Park added significant public access to Flathead Lake. Visitors value its year-round opportunities for walking on its broad expanse of beach in spring, playing in its sand, picnicking, kayaking, swimming, playing with dogs, birdwatching, and even cross-country skiing. The park safeguards bird, fish, and wildlife habitat, while protecting water quality and helping the local economy.

Since the passage of the Great American Outdoors Act, $2.7 million in LWCF money has paid for improvements to Montana state park facilities and water and lighting systems.









FIG. 4

STATE PARK ACQUISITIONS AND IMPROVEMENTS SINCE 2012

2012-2017	FINLEY POINT STATE PARK	CAMPGROUND UPGRADE	$200,000
2012-2017	TRAVELERS REST STATE PARK	ACQUISITION AND DEVELOPMENT	$505,000
2012-2017	GIANT SPRINGS STATE PARK	PLAYGROUND EQUIPMENT	$22,725
2012-2017	LEWIS & CLARK CAVERNS STATE PARK	LIGHTING	$800,000
2018	MILLTOWN STATE PARK	BANDMANN FLATS TRAILHEADS AND TRAILS	$145,000
2020	MILLTOWN STATE PARK	BANDMANN FLATS TRAIL ENHANCEMENT	$145,000
2021	SOMERS BEACH	SOMERS BEACH ACQUISITION	$1,338,000
2025-2026	LEWIS & CLARK CAVERNS STATE PARK	WATER SYSTEM REPLACEMENT	$863,015
2025-2026	BEAVERTAIL HILL STATE PARK	COMFORT STATION	$500,000



Photo: Montana Audubon



CASE STUDY

BENEFITS FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES:
GLASGOW

- 8 PARKS, PLAYGROUND AND POOL PROJECTS
- $1,044,871 IN LWCF STATE ASSISTANCE GRANTS

The smaller communities of Eastern Montana face budget strains due to dwindling populations and increasing tourist pressure, especially during hunting season. Fortunately, they can call on LWCF funding to create recreational opportunities for their residents, but even then, raising the matching funds isn't easy.

Located near Fort Peck Reservoir, Glasgow is an example of a town that experienced the advantages of LWCF assistance grants. With a population that hovers around 3,000, the town has limited resources. In 2002, the city wanted to improve its aging parks, but didn't have much money to invest.

In 2003, Glasgow Public Works Director John Bengochea applied for a $25,000 LWCF grant to install new playground equipment in Centennial and Hoyt parks. The city was able to apply local donations to assist the city in meeting their 50:50 matching amount. Glasgow subsequently received two LWCF of $25,000 each between 2004 and 2005 to make additional upgrades to Centennial Park.

But it proved more complicated when the town wanted to replace its pool. Built in 1974, the pool had developed major cracks that couldn't be repaired. But in 2018, building a new pool would cost $2.78 million. Citizens formed the Valley County Community Pool Campaign, which applied for and received a $250,000 state assistance grant in 2019 to demolish the pool. The following year, they received another $258,400 for a new pool. As they tried to raise the matching funds, the pandemic hit. They worried they'd lose the grants. Fortunately, LWCF allows extensions of up to five years.

In the meantime, construction costs continued to climb. By 2021, the costs for the entire project including pool, pool house and drive-up loop was estimated at $3.3 million. Demolition finally began in March 2024, with hopes that they could raise enough additional funds to open the pool in May 2025 for swim season. Then the city of Glasgow learned they'd received additional LWCF funding of $324,000 for the pool bathhouse. In the end, the Pool Committee raised nearly $4 million, with the help of LWCF.

> "A COMMUNITY POOL IS AN IMPORTANT ATTRACTION FOR OUR AREA. IT PROVIDES INFRASTRUCTURE FOR HEALTHY, FUN ACTIVITIES FOR ADULTS AND YOUTH ALIKE, AND DRAWS IN ENOUGH VISITORS TO FILL LOCAL HOTELS DURING SWIM MEETS. IT ALSO PROVIDES OUR CHILDREN ACCESS TO SWIMMING LESSONS, WHICH ARE SO IMPORTANT IN VALLEY COUNTY DUE TO OUR PROXIMITY TO FORT PECK LAKE, AND THE MISSOURI AND MILK RIVERS.
>
> ~ Valley County Board of Commissioners

CASE STUDY

BENEFITS FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES:
SHELBY

- 14 PARK PROJECTS
- $526,000 IN LWCF LOCAL ASSISTANCE GRANTS

Farther west along the Hi-Line, the 3,200 residents of Shelby take their role as the county seat of Toole County seriously and make their town vibrant and welcoming. After the Marias River flooded in 1964 and caused massive damage, the town had to rebuild. The town had some money, thanks to the local oil patch that boomed from 1920s to the 1950s, but that's dropped off. Fortunately, Congress passed the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act that same year.

Over the following 50 years, Shelby received a total of $250,000 in LWCF local assistance grants to restore or build six city parks, tennis courts and a pool while the Shelby School District developed a sports complex.

> "PARKS AND RECREATION FACILITIES ARE VITALLY IMPORTANT TO ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING THE QUALITY OF LIFE FOR CITY RESIDENTS BY ENSURING THE HEALTH OF FAMILIES AND YOUTH AND CONTRIBUTING TO THE ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL WELL-BEING OF THE COMMUNITY.
>
> ~ 2024 Town of Shelby Capital Improvements Plan

The citizens of Shelby learned to value their recreational areas. In November 2001, they passed a mill levy to provide the city with approximately $40,000 in recreation funds each year. But having completed all that earlier work, the town needed less park development, although it received a 2015 LWCF grant for $91,000 to add a splash park to its pool facility.

All those appealing parks have helped Shelby's tourism economy. Even though most tourists just pass through on their way to attractions like Glacier National Park, they say they visit Shelby because it is on their route, less crowded, and "a charming small town," according to a 2018 University of Montana Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research report.

In 2010, the nonprofit organization Montana Pool Service started building skateparks for Montana's rural communities, particularly along the Hi-Line. After seeing new skateparks gain popularity in Browning and Havre, Shelby finally got the nod in 2020. Montana Pool Service paid $34,000 to build the skate structure, but Shelby needed money for the surrounding green spaces, fencing, benches and trashcans. The town also wanted to add a playground structure to Meadowlark Park.

So Shelby again turned to LWCF, which provided a $65,000 local assistance grant in 2022. The Shelby Skatepark was one of several rural Montana skateparks recently featured in the documentary, "Montana Grind."





CASE STUDY

BENEFITS FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES:
SUPERIOR

$182,000 IN LOCAL ASSISTANCE GRANTS

Shelby wasn't the only town wanting to jump on the skatepark bandwagon. A year after the nonprofit Missoula Pool Service sponsored the Shelby Skatepark, it turned its sights on Superior.

Superior, the county seat of Mineral County, has gone through the boom-and-bust of the mining and logging industries. With a reduced timber industry, Superior depends increasingly on the hospitality industry. Fortunately, it sits on the Clark Fork River and is surrounded by public land, campgrounds and ski areas.

But kids in town still need places to play. So when Missoula Pool Service offered a $13,400 grant to build a skate park in 2019, Superior Treasurer Brenda Schneider got to work writing grant applications and asking for donations. She applied for and received LWCF local assistance grants of $79,000 in 2019 and $81,654 in 2020 to expand the Eva Horning Park and add other skatepark amenities. Three years later, the park was a reality.

"We pretty much ended up with every penny available that was out there (through grants) plus donations from other people and organizations," said Superior Mayor Roni Phillips.

Prior to the skatepark, the town of Superior received two LWCF assistance grants totaling $22,000 to improve its Eva Horning Park, which it purchased in 1952.

> "FOR A SEEMINGLY SMALL TOWN, THIS WAS A LARGE PLAYGROUND - WITH LOTS OF DIFFERENT EQUIPMENT FOR KIDS OF ALL AGES. NO IDEA WHEN WE MIGHT DRIVE INTO MONTANA AGAIN - BUT IF WE DO, **THIS WOULD DEFINITELY BE A PLACE MY KIDS WOULD LIKE TO STOP!**
>
> ~ May B., Kirkland, Wa, July 2022
> YELP review of Eva Horning Park



ELIMINATING LAND MANAGEMENT HEADACHES

Congress directs a portion of LWCF funds toward federal land managers such as the U.S. Forest Service and National Park Service. These funds have helped public agencies improve efficiency and correct problems left as a legacy of outdated land policies from the frontier era.

Between 2005 and 2014, about $170 million in LWCF money went to the four federal land agencies to acquire public land in Montana. More than half of that went to consolidate land and improve public access in Montana's national forests and national parks, a role LWCF has filled for half a century.

Glacier National Park used LWCF funds to buy out privately owned inholdings within the park boundaries. These land deals satisfy the private landowner, protect natural and cultural features, and make park management simpler and more efficient.

LWCF has also been used to correct another management headache: the checkerboard land ownership patterns of offset sections of private and public land. This pattern is a relic of Congressional policies to develop the frontier, dating back to the Civil War.

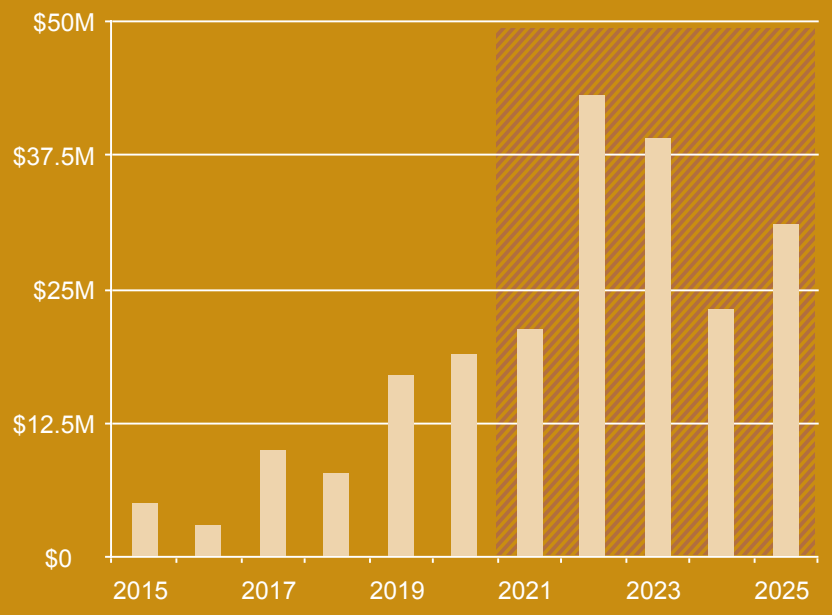
Through a series of laws passed in the late 1800s, ***Congress created the checkerboard*** *of ownership that still challenges land management in much of the West.*

To help finance the building of a transcontinental railroad, Congress passed the Union Pacific Act of 1862, which granted every other section of land (section = 1 sq. mile) within 10 miles of the railroad to the Union Pacific so it could sell the land to raise capital. When sales proved to be sluggish, Congress doubled the area to 20 miles on each side of the railroad. Congress members had bet that the coming of the railroad would greatly increase the value of the land retained by the government, and it could be sold later for a profit. While successful in the East, this scheme was not practical in the vast semi-arid rangelands of the West. Many sections remained unsold.

Similarly, various Homestead Acts continued to offer every other section as free land until 1930. When homesteading and government sales of land ceased, many areas were left in a permanent checkerboard pattern of alternating public and private land.

FIG. 5

LWCF FUNDS FOR FEDERAL PROJECTS
IN MONTANA 2015-2025



Land and Water Conservation Funds invested in Montana for each fiscal year, in millions of dollars.

Striped shading indicates time since the passage of the Great American Outdoors Act.

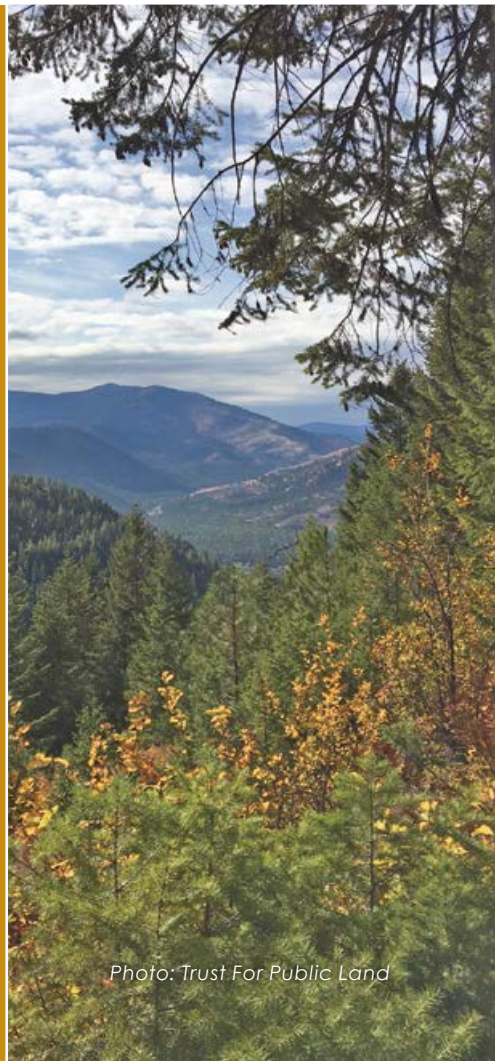


Photo: Trust For Public Land



AS THE AMERICAN POPULATION GROWS LARGER AND MORE URBANIZED, HUNGER FOR ACCESS TO NATURE HAS EXPANDED AS WELL.

Photo: Jeremy Roberts / Conservation Media LLC

PROVIDING PUBLIC ACCESS

The checkerboard of land ownership can threaten Montanan's access to public land when roads or trails leading to public land have to cross sections of private land. A landowner who historically allowed access might sell the property to a new landowner who isn't informed or who doesn't want the public passing through their land. Conflict or legal disputes can result.

In 2013, the Center for Western Priorities found that almost 2 million acres of national forest and other public lands in Montana were inaccessible to the public, locked behind gates and no-trespassing signs.

Similarly, as more people move to the state, poorly-conceived development can limit access to many treasured places. In one mountain range after another, activities such as logging, fire management, hunting, and camping have become difficult to maintain as subdivisions and trophy homes break up the landscape. Fire fighting, for example, becomes exponentially more expensive as firefighters spend more time and money defending homes and other structures.

Over and over, LWCF has helped make Montana's public lands whole. This creates numerous benefits including preserving uninterrupted habitat for wildlife, reducing human-wildlife conflicts, allowing more effective forest management, and providing more opportunity for recreation.



CASE STUDY

PROVIDING PUBLIC ACCESS:
BAD ROCK CANYON WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA

- $4 MILLION IN LWCF FUNDING
- MORE THAN $3.1 MILLION IN STATE AND COMMUNITY CONTRIBUTIONS
- 772 ACRES ADDS TO 12,000-ACRE STRETCH OF FLATHEAD RIVER CONSERVATION LAND

In 2015, Glencore Co. closed the 65-year-old Columbia Falls Aluminum Plant after buying it 15 years earlier. The citizens of Columbia Falls mourned the loss of jobs but were also concerned about the company's property, especially a wedge of land where the Flathead River flows into the narrow Bad Rock Canyon east of town. The company had allowed hikers, bikers, birdwatchers, and others to use a trail that traversed the area.

In 2019, the Columbia Falls Aluminum Company announced it would sell the 772-acre property. The Flathead Land Trust and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks scrambled to raise the appraised $7.26 million and turn the property into a state wildlife management area. The parcel abuts a sizable block of public land and would add to a 12,000-acre network of conserved land along a 43-mile stretch of the Flathead River between Columbia Falls and Flathead Lake.

CFAC extended its deadline to the end of 2021 to complete the acquisition. Luckily, the project received a $4 million LWCF Forest Legacy Program grant in 2021. But Forest Legacy funding requires at least a 25% match. At the urging of the company and the city, the Montana Land Board approved the land purchase and the use of $2.5 million from the Habitat Montana fund. The Flathead Land Trust raised almost $600,000 and the Whitefish Community Foundation added $15,000.

If the project had failed, the property would most likely have been sold, subdivided, and developed, forever sacrificing the natural values and public access.

> "THE CITY OF COLUMBIA FALLS IS THRILLED TO HAVE THE BAD ROCK CANYON WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA PURCHASE FINALIZED. THIS AREA GIVES THE CITIZENS OF COLUMBIA FALLS AND THE SURROUNDING AREA A WONDERFUL OPPORTUNITY TO RECREATE AND ENJOY THE PRISTINE NATURE OF THIS LAND AND ACCESS TO THE BEAUTIFUL FLATHEAD RIVER, RIGHT NEXT DOOR TO OUR COMMUNITY.
>
> ~ Don Barnhart, Mayor of Columbia Falls.





CASE STUDY

PROVIDING PUBLIC ACCESS:
BEAVERHEAD-DEERLODGE NATIONAL FOREST

- 1,745 ACRES CONSERVED ON THE BEAVERHEAD-DEERLODGE NATIONAL FOREST SINCE 2020 WITH $8.3 MILLION IN LWCF FUNDS
- 1,350 ACRES OF PRIVATE INHOLDINGS TRANSFERRED TO PUBLIC LAND
- SINCE 1964, THE BEAVERHEAD-DEERLODGE NATIONAL FOREST HAS BENEFITTED FROM $38.4 MILLION IN LWCF FUNDING.

In order to access public lands, Montanans sometimes need to travel roads or trails through private land. Repeatedly, those kinds of access routes have been cut off as private land changes hands. Since 2020, the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest has been able to acquire four parcels that have improved public access and consolidated national forest land.

Most recently, The Conservation Fund, a nonprofit group, bought a 600-acre inholding in the Tobacco Root Mountains east of Twin Bridges in 2024 and was able to sell it to the Beaverhead Deerlodge National Forest a year later, thanks to $1.74 million in LWCF funding.

The parcel covered the upper reaches of Dry Boulder Lakes Road including sections of trail that are the gateway to Lower and Upper Boulder Lakes. The landowners allowed road access to Boulder Lakes across their property through an informal agreement, because they considered public access and conservation to be a priority. The area is now fully open and accessible to the public.

In 2023, The Conservation Fund bought another 589-acre inholding 3 miles east of the Boulder Lakes property deeper in the Tobacco Roots. Private landowners had held the land so the Forest Service could acquire it, which it did in 2024 with $1.62 million in LWCF money. Curly Lake Trail cuts through the north half of the property, providing access to Westphal Parks and other backcountry trails. This arrangement permanently secures public access to public land, instead of relying on a more tenuous access easement.

In 2023, a $3 million LWCF grant helped the Beaverhead Deerlodge Forest acquire another private inholding of 160 acres in the Gravelly Range southwest of Ennis. It was the last of three private inholdings totaling 461 acres that were bought with the help of the Beartooth Group, an investment company.

> "CONNECTING MONTANA'S PATCHWORK OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE LANDS IS THE KIND OF PROBLEM THE LAND AND WATER CONSERVATION FUND WAS CREATED TO SOLVE. ~ Gary Sullivan, The Conservation Fund Montana state director

The West Fork Madison properties are located just west of the Elk River Trailhead which is a common starting point for members of the public accessing National Forest System Lands. Several motorized trails begin at this trailhead and connect over 68 miles of trails.

In 2024, another LWCF grant of $1.93 million helped the Beaverhead-Deerlodge Forest acquire the 396-acre Point of Rocks on the northwest edge of the Tobacco Root Mountains near Whitehall. The deal, two years in the making, was made possible by the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and the landowner, RMEF member Paul Hunt.

Because the property connects to a county road, it greatly improves public access to an additional 2,700 acres of public land to the east. It also protects part of a migration corridor for pronghorn antelope, and winter range for elk, mule deer and moose.

"It actually touches the Point of Rocks county road. For us, it's a really important property to get access for people into that portion of the mountain range where they haven't had a lot of access in the past," said Butte District Ranger Tim Lahey.







THE FUTURE OF MONTANA'S OUTDOOR TRADITIONS AND ASSOCIATED ECONOMY DEPEND ON READY ACCESS TO THE OUTDOORS.

Photo: Jeremy Roberts / Conservation Media LLC

PROTECTING FAMILY RANCHES

As high production costs and increasing development pressure strains family-owned farms and ranches, LWCF has been an increasingly important method for keeping agricultural lands in production.

Montana agricultural producers must be innovative to survive, and LWCF-funded conservation easements are one important tool in their toolbox. Local nonprofit land trusts (such as the Flathead or Five Valley land trusts) are critical allies in this relationship between producers, state and local agencies, and federal funding agencies.

Many agricultural families understand the long-term value of productive soils and clean water a legacy for the future. At the same time, they want to be able to keep their land to hand down to future generations. Conservation easements are a powerful tool for helping landowners exercise these property rights.



Photo: Dave Hanna / The Nature Conservancy

CASE STUDY

PROTECTING FAMILY RANCHES:
RAPPOLD RANCH, DUPUYER

- 8,000 ACRES ADDED TO THE RANCH PROPERTY
- 20,000 ACRES ADDED IN GRAZING ALLOTMENTS
- MORE THAN 5,000 ACRES PRESERVED THROUGH CONSERVATION EASEMENTS

West of the tiny town of Dupuyer, the Rappold Ranch sits snug against the slopes of the Rocky Mountain Front. There, the Rappold family has raised cattle since 1882. Times have changed, but LWCF is helping keep that tradition alive.

Karl Rappold, 72, has a deep love of the wildlife and the land where he grew up, and he wants to pass it on to his children. But, over the past few decades, more wealthy people have discovered the beauty of the Rocky Mountain Front, and land prices have soared as they've bought several of the old ranches. As his property taxes climbed, Rappold didn't know whether his family could afford to stay.

By 2004, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had identified around 170,000 acres along the Front as ecologically important wildlife habitat. Fortunately, the agency had an option to use LWCF dollars to incentivize voluntary conservation measures, such as easements. Being able to set up easements with agencies like USFWS and groups like The Nature Conservancy have helped Rappold achieve his ranching goals.

> "LWCF HAS BEEN A GREAT TOOL FOR ME. IT HAS ALLOWED ME TO EXPAND MY OPERATION, FOR MY KIDS TO COME BACK HOME. BUT MORE THAN THAT, IT'S ABOUT DOING WHAT'S RIGHT FOR THE LAND - CONSERVING ACRES, PREVENTING DEVELOPMENT, CREATING WIDE OPEN SPACES AND LEAVING AVAILABLE HABITAT FOR WILDLIFE, PREDATORS, AND MY CATTLE. LWCF IS A WIN FOR EVERYBODY.
>
> ~ Karl Rappold, Rappold Ranch

"This ranch has been in my family since 1882, and I want it around for at least another 150 years," Rappold said.

Rappold is joined by a growing list of ranchers along the Front, in the Blackfoot and Centennial Valleys who use LWCF-funded conservation easements as part of their ranch management strategies.



Photo: Dave Hanna / The Nature Conservancy



Photo: Dave Hanna / The Nature Conservancy

PROTECTING FOREST JOBS, HUNTING AND FISHING

The Land and Water Conservation Fund supports two programs that help states buy conservation easements (and fee-title land where appropriate) to protect America's private timberlands and conserve important wildlife habitat. Competition for these funds is fierce, but Montana's projects repeatedly rank as some of the top in the nation. This is a win-win for the timber industry and Montanans in general.

The Forest Legacy Program (FLP) was created a few decades after the LWCF was passed as a tool to help states and private forest owners keep working timberlands in production. It provides states with LWCF grants to cover the majority of the cost of easements on private forests using a 3:1 match. The easements help timber companies and tree farmers maintain their forest operations while protecting water quality, wildlife habitat, recreation and other benefits. Companies, such as Plum Creek Timber and Stimson Lumber, have augmented the value of their lands by placing them under conservation easements. In this way, the Forest Legacy Program can also help Montana avoid the fate of states like Colorado, which has lost nearly all its sawmill capacity.

> "THE FOREST LEGACY PROGRAM MAKES CRITICAL INVESTMENTS IN WORKING FORESTS WITH STATE PARTNERSHIPS TO PROVIDE TIMBER SUPPLIES AND OTHER WOOD PRODUCTS, PROVIDE PUBLIC ACCESS FOR RECREATION, SECURE DRINKING WATER, AND MAINTAIN WILDLIFE HABITAT IN SOME OF THE MOST IMPORTANT FORESTS ACROSS THE NATION.
>
> ~ Forest Service Chief Tom Schultz, May 2026

In 2000, Plum Creek Timber Company started working with the Trust For Public Land on what was at the time Montana's largest conservation easement in the Thompson and Fisher valleys southeast of Libby, protecting more than 220 square miles from development. The project earned $9 million in FLP money. In 2011, Stimson Lumber Company also took advantage of FLP funding, proposing first its Stimson Forestlands Project and then the Kootenai Forestlands Conservation Project in 2018.

Then, in December 2019, residents of western Montana communities were stunned when Weyerhaeuser Company announced it was selling 630,000 acres of its Montana forests to Southern Pine Plantations, a Georgia-based property investment firm. The Trust For Public Land knew it had to act fast if it wanted to conserve some of the undeveloped timberlands. Weyerhaeuser already placed conservation easements on 110,000 acres, which Southern Pine Plantations said it would honor.

The second program, the Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund, provides states with a 3:1 funding match for species and habitat conservation actions on non-federal lands. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks has often partnered with land trusts to put these dollars to work. From 2005-2014, Montana received $31.5 million in Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund money, mainly to conserve habitat in the Blackfoot and Flathead valleys The benefits are multiple: conserved habitats can help recover imperiled species, can help prevent some species from being listed under the Endangered Species Act and provide important habitat for more abundant wildlife that Montanans enjoy hunting, fishing and observing.

CASE STUDY

PROTECTING FOREST JOBS, HUNTING & FISHING:
KOOTENAI FORESTLANDS CONSERVATION PROJECT PHASE 2, LIBBY

- 27,300 ACRES OF TIMBERLANDS CONSERVED IN PHASE II
- $6 MILLION IN FOREST LEGACY PROJECT FUNDING
- 77.5 SQUARE MILES CONSERVED IN KOOTENAI PHASE 1 AND 2 COMBINED

In 2018, working with the Trust for Public Land, Stimson Lumber Company proposed placing a conservation easement on almost 50,000 acres of sections interspersed among Kootenai National Forest lands. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks would hold the easement to would allow Stimson to retain ownership, preclude development, protect important wildlife habitat and key landscape connectivity, and provide permanent public access and associated recreational opportunities. To enable fundraising, the project was broken into two phases. In 2019, FWP received a $6 million Forest Legacy grant to pay for Phase I.

> "THIS PROJECT WILL HELP INCREASE PUBLIC ACCESS TO PUBLIC LANDS AND SUPPORT OUTDOOR RECREATION FOR ALL MONTANANS. THIS PROJECT WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN POSSIBLE WITHOUT THE PASSAGE OF MY HISTORIC CONSERVATION LEGISLATION, THE GREAT AMERICAN OUTDOORS ACT.
>
> ~ U.S. Sen. Steve Daines

Then the COVID pandemic hit in 2020, delaying projects and causing land prices to surge. When the Trust For Public Land proposed Phase II in 2021, it discovered that, while the preliminary estimate was $8.9 million in 2019, it had almost doubled to $16,300,000 by 2021.

Phase II received an FLP grant in 2021, but it was for only $6 million. National and state fish and wildlife foundations donated an additional $450,000, but that couldn't touch the amount required. Fortunately, Stimson Lumber Company agreed to donate a significant portion of the estimated cost to make the project a reality.

"Working forestlands also promote vibrant, healthy forests which contribute to important rural economies. Stimson appreciates being a part of the collaborative effort with The Trust for Public Land and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks on this important landscape project in northwestern Montana. Present and future generations will appreciate the benefits of this important project," said Andrew Miller, Stimson Lumber Company's president and CEO.



Photo: Trust For Public Land

CASE STUDY

PROTECTING FOREST JOBS, HUNTING & FISHING:
MONTANA GREAT OUTDOORS EASEMENT, LIBBY

- $55.8 MILLION IN FOREST LEGACY PROGRAM FUNDING
- 86,000 ACRES OF CONSERVATION EASEMENTS
- ADDS TO TWO PREVIOUS PROJECTS TO CONNECT 478 SQUARE MILES OF PRIVATE CHECKERBOARD TIMBERLANDS WITHIN NATIONAL FORESTS

After Weyerhaeuser Company publicized its land sale in 2019, the Trust For Public Land announced in July 2020 that it had worked with the new owner, Southern Pine Plantation subsidiary SPP Montana, to create the Montana Great Outdoors Easement, which would place 114,000 acres around the Thompson Lakes into conservation easements. When Green Diamond Resource Company bought the land in November 2020, it honored the project.

Similar to the Kootenai Forestlands Project, Green Diamond would own the land, so timber operations could continue. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks would hold the easement, so sportsmen and recreationalists would continue to have access.

But like the Kootenai Project, the Trust For Public Land had to deal with Montana's soaring property values. Under the agreement, the land trust had to raise $30 million by the end of 2022. After being ranked No. 1 in the nation, the Montana Great Outdoors Easement was awarded $20 million, the largest award in the history of the program. But it obviously wasn't enough to keep up with rising land prices.

So the Trust For Public Land made the tough decision to reduce the project by about 28,000 acres and broke the remaining easement into two phases: The Montana Land Board approved Phase I with almost 33,000 acres in 2024; the 53,000-acre Phase II was approved in October 2025.

In the meantime, real estate values continued to climb. By 2024, Phase I alone had been appraised at more than the project's original $30 million estimate. By 2025, the value of Phase II was estimated at almost twice that. The Trust for Public land had to request an extension and an increase of the LWCF grant, which was boosted by $35.8 million. Additional money came from state wildlife funds, and Green Diamond donated $20 million.

"We aim to support working timberlands by discouraging fragmentation, poorly planned development, rural sprawl and increased wildland-urban interface areas," said Jason Callahan of Green Diamond Resources.

The Montana Great Outdoors Easement finally covers much of the checkerboard of privately owned timberlands that remained between the two regions of the 2003 Thompson-Fisher project. The easements created by those projects, plus those of the Kootenai Forestlands, now conserve more than 478 square miles within the Flathead, Kootenai and Lolo national forests for timber, wildlife and recreation.

> "WE DON'T WANT TO TURN IT INTO A RICH MAN'S HUNTING PARADISE. WE DON'T WANT TO TURN IT INTO A SUBDIVISION AREA. I ENCOURAGE A YES VOTE TODAY ON EACH OF YOUR PART. I'M PROUD TO SUPPORT THIS.
>
> ~ State Sen. Mike Cuffe to the Montana Land Board

CASE STUDY

PROTECTING FOREST JOBS, HUNTING & FISHING:
UPPER THOMPSON CONNECTIVITY PROJECT
PHASE 1, PLAINS

- $13 MILLION FOREST LEGACY PROGRAM GRANTS
- 34,600 ACRES PLACED UNDER CONSERVATION EASEMENTS ALLOWING TIMBER PRODUCTION

In 2022, the Trust For Public Land and Green Diamond Resources started working on a project to secure conservation easements on the checkerboard of private parcels remained around the southern portion of the 142,000-acre Thompson-Fisher Project. The Upper Thompson Connectivity Project would ultimately put 48,000 acres into conservation easements.

The area is home to a variety of wildlife species including elk, moose, deer, mountain lions and black bears. The agreement prevents future development, secures permanent free public recreation access and allows Green Diamond to keep the land in active forest management with continued sustainable timber harvest. Elsewhere in the West, the issue of access in places that have a checkerboard land ownership pattern has been quite contentious. This is an example where LWCF helped head off that problem before controversy could develop.

But like the two projects before it, it had to be broken into two phases to make fundraising easier. Phase I included 34,600 acres of the more rural sections in the Cabinet Mountains away from Plains that were appraised at $20.6 million in 2025.

In 2023, Phase I received a $6 million Forest Legacy Program grant. The program added another grant of $7 million in 2024. Green Diamond donated $7 million and FWP was able to cobble together another $600,000 from fish and wildlife grants and donations.

The Fish and Game Commission approved the easement in June 2026. That means Phase II can get underway to conserve the remaining 13,400 acres north of Plains, which will likely cost more per acre, so another Forest Legacy Program grant is needed.



Photo: Christopher Boyer / Kestral Aerial / Trust For Public Land



Photo: Montana Audubon



Photo: John Lambing / Montana Audubon

CONCLUSION:
THE FUTURE OF LWCF AND THE FUTURE OF MONTANA

Montanans had it good for decades. They could walk out the door and arrive at a favorite hiking, fishing or hunting spot often in less than an hour and it wouldn't be crowded. That started to change toward the end of the 20th century as more tourists and migrants trickled in, drawn by the rugged beauty and recreational opportunities of the Treasure State. Worried the addition of more people would threaten Montana's character, some Montanans worked to preserve what open spaces they could.

Then change accelerated, as the COVID pandemic and the rise of remote work brought a significant influx of people. Since 2020, Montana has added almost 50,000 people, a massive jump for a state that only recently numbered under a million. Real estate prices and costs in general have risen in parallel. Even so, undeveloped land, including working timberlands, have made way for subdivisions in what feels like a constant churn of new land ownership. It's a perfect storm of conditions poised to irrevocably wipe out working lands and the recreational uses that Montanans enjoyed for generations.

That makes LWCF even more essential to protecting the Montana lifestyle from the forces of development that threaten to water it down. That not only allows Montanans to live the life they've chosen; it also ironically attracts more tourists who come to experience "the last best place." No matter which route visitors take driving between Glacier and Yellowstone national parks, they travel past lands conserved by LWCF projects, including the Rocky Mountain Front or the forests of the Swan Valley, and marvel at the wild country.

But projects are still being planned in Montana to preserve timberlands, provide more parks, improve public access, and consolidate checkerboarded lands under uniform ownership. Future fishing access sites await on the lower Yellowstone River. So funding is still critically necessary. But even after Congress recently voted to make it permanent and fully funded, LWCF still faces threats. Some politicians and Washington, D.C., bureaucrats continue to try to redirect LWCF funds to other issues, but that would rob money from Montana and the projects that need it.

Another hurdle was created by a 2025 Interior Department Secretarial Order that could stymie federal land acquisitions that continue to be so important to Montana. The order requires letters of support from both the governor and affected county commissions for projects that would acquire land, water or conservation easements. In some states, that's prompted land trusts who anticipate they couldn't get such letters to question proposing projects for LWCF. The result is that some land deals may be lost forever as land trusts struggle to raise enough money to pay the sky-high assessed values. The order should be rescinded because a few temporarily elected politicians shouldn't hold sway over land deals intended to benefit future generations.

Montana voters consistently demonstrate cross-partisan support for public lands and conservation. In 2026, the University of Montana Crown of the Continent and Greater Yellowstone Initiative revealed Montanans are increasingly concerned about access to public lands, increasing

(Continued)

environmental pressures, and the impacts of reduced funding and staffing for public land. Two-thirds of Montana voters polled want continued LWCF funding for conservation over infrastructure use.

Montana's current congressional delegation understands LWCF is an important issue to voters. Sen. Steve Daines was a key leader in the passage of the 2020 Great American Outdoors Act. Rep. Ryan Zinke is a founder and Rep. Troy Downing is a member of the bipartisan Public Lands Caucus, created in 2025 to promote policies that advance conservation and public access. Finally, Sen. Tim Sheehy co-founded and Daines is a member of the Senate Stewardship Caucus established also in 2025 to "safeguard the rights of Americans to hunt, fish, and recreate on our public lands and ensure we protect them for generations to come."

The Montana delegation has repeatedly advocated for LWCF, and as two members step down, Montana will be looking for her next champion to take up the LWCF torch so it can light future conservation efforts.

> "THE PRESSURE TO DEVELOP AND SUBDIVIDE WORKING LANDS AND WILDLIFE HABITATS HAS SKYROCKETED. IF THESE AREAS ARE LOST TO RESIDENTIAL SUBDIVISIONS, IT WILL NOT ONLY FRAGMENT THE LAND BUT ERODE THE ACCESS WE ALL ENJOY, WHICH IS A CORNERSTONE OF THE MONTANA WAY OF LIFE.
>
> ~ Jim Williams,
> Heart of the Rockies Initiative

FIG. 6

LWCF PROGRAM ALLOCATIONS
FY2021-FY2026

