Victory for the Great American Outdoors

Steve Blackledge, director of our national network’s conservation team, on this summer’s historic victory for American conservation: the passage of the Great American Outdoors Act.

Passed in bipartisan fashion this summer, the Great American Outdoors Act fully funds a highly effective, but long-neglected, program called the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). In short, that means $900 million for America’s public lands each year and $9.5 billion over five years to take care of maintenance issues at our parks.

The LWCF—little-known by the general public, and almost always underfunded by Congress—has quietly but effectively gotten the job done for more than 50 years, “preserving, developing and assuring accessibility to all citizens” for outdoor recreation by putting billions of federal dollars into national parks, places of cultural and historic value, and local parks, playgrounds and playing fields. Add it all up, and America has gotten more than 15 million acres of public land conserved in almost every single county in the country.

So what’s the problem? Why did Environment Oregon and our national network have to run a campaign to save LWCF?

Americans were promised more

LWCF was supposed to serve as a trust fund, with the money raised primarily in the form of royalties paid by oil companies for offshore drilling leases—up to $900 million per year—and then held and spent on behalf of all Americans to ensure access to outdoor recreation.

Except it hasn’t worked that way. Since 1965, Congress has fully funded the program just twice (in 1998 and 2001), diverting more than $22 billion for other purposes. And if undermining the program’s funding and failing to fulfill its promise weren’t bad enough, Congress let the program expire in September 2018.

Working in coalition with The Wilderness Society, National Wildlife Federation and others, we sought to clean up this mess in two ways: by permanently reauthorizing the program and securing the full $900 million per year for it for … well, forever.

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Federal Energy Regulatory Commission dismisses effort to undermine solar rights

This summer, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) took action to protect the rights of solar panel owners.

On July 16, the commission dismissed a petition from the New England Ratepayers Association (NERA) that threatened states’ rights to set a key policy that allows solar owners to be properly compensated.

The policy wonks call it “net metering”—it means that if you install solar panels, you should get paid for any excess power you put back into the grid.

“With this policy still in place in states across the country, local solar can continue to grow—helping to reduce pollution and create healthier, more livable communities,” said Bronte Payne, Go Solar campaign director for Environment America Research & Policy Center, our national research partner.

In response to the NERA proposal, Environment Oregon Research & Policy Center and our national network delivered more than 12,000 public comments from our supporters asking FERC to uphold rooftop solar rights.

Through net metering, homeowners with installed solar panels are paid for the excess solar power they put back into the grid.

U.S. House approves massive investment to tackle lead contamination of water

The U.S. House of Representatives took a historic step toward protecting our kids and drinking water from lead.

On July 1, the House approved $22.5 billion over five years to replace our country’s ubiquitous lead service lines, the single worst source of lead contamination in drinking water, as part of a House infrastructure spending package. Reps. Elissa Slotkin (Mich.), Dan Kildee (Mich.), Rashida Tlaib (Mich.), David Cicilline (R.I.) and Gwen Moore (Wis.) co-sponsored the amendment.

“We’ve long known that lead is a potent neurotoxin especially damaging to our children’s health,” said John Rumpler, clean water program director for Environment America, our national partner. “Yet it’s still getting into the drinking water in thousands of communities across America, including at our schools and child care centers.”

“We urge the Senate to adopt this ambitious measure so we can ensure safe drinking water for all Americans.”

House leaders release sweeping plan for climate action

Climate change touches everything—from the food we eat, to the ways we get around, to the natural spaces we enjoy with our families. It only makes sense, then, that a plan to tackle climate change should be as broad and deep as the problem.

That’s why a report released June 30 by Democrats with the U.S. House of Representatives’ Select Committee on the Climate Crisis covers so much ground. It details everything from transforming our transportation system, to preserving natural resources and public lands, to increasing clean energy as important steps on the path to achieving net-zero carbon emissions nationwide by 2050.

“The report is a bold blueprint at a time that requires bold action,” said Wendy Wendlandt, acting president of Environment America, Environment Oregon’s national partner. “We look forward to working with Americans from all parties and perspectives to make that vision a reality.”

The report calls for reaching 100 percent zero-emissions car sales by 2035, eliminating global warming emissions from the electricity sector by 2040, and protecting 30 percent of U.S. lands and ocean areas by 2030.

Get more updates on our work online at http://environmentoregon.org.
Strategy for success

To achieve these goals, the conservation team and I needed to demonstrate strong grassroots support for the program “back home”—in the states and districts represented by officials and members of Congress whose backing would be decisive. Our staff made several trips to the Capitol—sporting “Fund LWCF” t-shirts and, during the 2018 and 2019 World Series, handing out cookies decorated like baseballs (LWCF funds Little League fields, too).

With organizers spreading out across the country starting in August 2018, we gathered photo petitions from people featuring pictures of some of the iconic places LWCF protects, and our members and supporters graciously allowed us to place more than a thousand lawn signs in key states. By late February 2019, we had won our first big victory. With a strong, bipartisan majority, both houses of Congress passed a bill to reauthorize LWCF permanently, and the president signed it into law in March of the same year.

The next challenge: permanent funding

In February 2020, when a reporter asked Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell what Congress could accomplish amid all the partisan gridlock, he singled out funding LWCF as a strong possibility.

To push that legislation—the Great American Outdoors Act—over the finish line in the Senate, our advocates held 55 remote meetings and calls with key congressional staff to rally support for the bill, after the pandemic made in-person meetings impossible.

Our members and supporters also sent more than 11,000 messages to Congress during the final push to pass the Great American Outdoors Act.

On June 17, that work paid off with another big, bipartisan victory, by a vote of 73-25 in the Senate. Weeks after we organized a virtual rally featuring six members of Congress, the House followed suit on July 22 in a 310-107 vote.

The little law that could is now a lot bigger

Fifty-five years after President Lyndon Johnson signed the bill that created the program, the Land and Water Conservation Fund still doesn’t get all of the recognition it deserves. But thanks to the work and support of our staff, members, partners and allies, the program is in a stronger position than ever to preserve the land and waters we love for all Americans to explore and enjoy.

By Steve Blackledge, Senior Director, Conservation America Campaign

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Thank you for supporting and sustaining our work—now done at a safe social distance, of course—to create a greener, healthier, more sustainable world. In these pages, you’ll find the stories of the advocacy you made possible.

Your action and support allows us to keep working for a better world. Thank you.

Celeste Meiffren-Swango
State Director
We're going to court to defend clean water protections

The Trump administration’s Dirty Water Rule puts our rivers and drinking water at risk. So we went to court to stop it.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Army Corps of Engineers have revoked federal protections for thousands of waterways across the country. On April 29, our national partner, Environment America, joined the Southern Environmental Law Center in a lawsuit to challenge the Dirty Water Rule in court.

From the Great Lakes to the Chesapeake Bay, the streams and wetlands that lost protections under the rule are crucial to the health of the nation’s most iconic waterways by providing habitat for wildlife, filtering pollutants and absorbing floodwaters.

“As surely as water flows downstream, the Dirty Water Rule endangers the waterways where millions of Americans swim, fish, boat and draw our drinking water,” said John Rumpler, senior director of our national network’s Clean Water for America campaign. “The rule violates the Clean Water Act itself.”

“The Dirty Water Rule defies common sense, sound science and the law. We will not allow it to stand.”

Our national network’s Clean Water for America Campaign Director John Rumpler testifies before the House Committee on Appropriations.