

by Jeff Crane, President, Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation



# The Great American Outdoors Act Becomes Law

*The historic, and bipartisan, GAOA is the most significant legislation to benefit America's outdoors recreationists in a lifetime.*

Many who are reading this likely participate in hunting, fishing or other outdoor activities on federally managed lands across the United States. Our public lands are some of the nation's most treasured natural resources, and their value to the public and to our nation's economy through the activities they support cannot be understated.

However, the use of public lands comes with its own set of challenges as the infrastructure has deteriorated with increasing use. Among other challenges that hinder the pursuit of adventure on our public lands, visitors in recent years have had to deal with impassable roads, closed bridges, failing visitor facilities and crumbling boat ramps. And it has been difficult to legally access some federal lands that are surrounded by private property.

## ***A sweeping solution***

Fortunately, a solution to these problems known as the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) was signed into law by President Donald Trump on August 4 after it received very broad bipartisan support from both Houses of Congress. This enactment will go down in history as a milestone for sportsmen and women across our nation—sweeping legislation that will enhance conservation and increase access to public lands and waters today and for generations to come.

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This legislative effort, led by dozens of Congressional Sportsmen's Caucus members, recognizes the need for consistent and reliable funding to manage, support and provide access to federal public lands. The Great American Outdoors Act represents the single greatest financial commitment to public land access and new opportunities for sportsmen and women in a lifetime, and it marks a monumental victory for the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation (CSF) in its work on behalf of hunters, anglers, boaters, recreational shooters and trappers.

As a result of years-long budget shortfalls, increasing use and aging facilities, our public land management agencies have not been able to keep up with the pace at which roads, bridges, trails and visitor centers are deteriorating. The resulting deferred-maintenance program has forced managers to focus on the critical projects they can address with the finances available, while putting other also necessary projects on the back burner.

### ***Maintenance deferred no more***

In total, the deferred maintenance on federal public lands presently amounts to roughly \$20 billion—shortfalls that ultimately impact the ability of the public to access and enjoy some of our nation's most treasured places. The funding guaranteed by the Great American Outdoors Act will reverse years of neglect and help those of us who rely on federal lands to get outdoors. The GAOA will provide \$9.5 billion over five years to repair infrastructure on America's public lands and waters. And that's not all.

Many sportsmen and women know that National Park Service (NPS) regulations often prohibit hunting in National Parks. However, this is not the case on other public lands, such as National Wildlife Refuges, National Forests and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) properties, which collectively host more than 261 million visitors per year.

To benefit sportsmen and women, CSF coordinated with members of the Congressional Sportsmen's Caucus in the Senate to include in the GAOA funding for BLM, Forest Service (USFS) and Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) lands.

While NPS will receive \$6.5 billion in funding, CSF led a successful effort to secure \$3 billion to repair and maintain public land infrastructure overseen by the BLM, USFWS and USFS—agencies that provide critically important recreational opportunities for America's sportsmen and women. More than 246 million acres, or 99%, of BLM lands, are open to hunting and fishing and the USFS reports that 99% of the 193 million acres it administers are open to hunting and at least 99% of USFS-administered rivers, streams and lakes are open to fishing.

Collectively, BLM, USFWS and USFS annually support more than 25 million hunting days and nearly 45 million fishing days, highlighting the importance of these lands to sportsmen and women as well as the outdoor economy. Additionally, funding to address these agencies' maintenance backlogs will create more than 100,000 employment opportunities.

### ***The Land & Water Conservation Fund***

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The second of the two popular priorities in the Great American Outdoors Act will permanently fund the LWCF, the Land and Water Conservation Fund. LWCF is a 50-year-old program that reinvests offshore oil and gas revenues to pay for federal, state and local conservation projects such as enhancing public access, conserving forests, improving fish and wildlife habitat and similar work.

Established in 1964, LWCF is authorized to receive up to \$900 million in federal funding annually but has rarely received that much. In roughly the last half-century, LWCF has provided \$17.5 billion for 40,000-plus recreation and conservation projects in every county in the country. Despite this tremendous impact, Congress has fully funded LWCF only once in its history. The new GAOA will provide permanent and full funding of \$900 million annually for LWCF, with a significant portion going to projects that benefit hunters, anglers, fish and wildlife, and will ensure that managers have more financial certainty for pro-sporting projects.

Another issue for many outdoors enthusiasts is the inability to reach certain public lands that are "open" on a map, but where legal access is limited or non-existent. Recent estimates are that approximately 9.5 million acres of public land in the West can't be reached due to land ownership patterns or topography that shut out hunters, anglers and others.

LWCF helps address this problem and the GAOA reaffirms that at least \$15 million must go to funding a CSF initiative known as "Making Public Lands Public"—part of the LWCF program. This initiative requires that special consideration be given to improving access to these hard-to-reach public lands by providing funds for states, willing private landowners and conservation organizations to complete recreational access projects on a voluntary basis.

### ***A historic success***

Thanks to our champions in the Congressional Sportsmen's Caucus, the Great American Outdoors Act is a historic success that prioritizes the sporting-conservation community—especially important during these unprecedented times. The funding made available by the GAOA for public lands infrastructure and federal, state and local conservation and recreation projects will ensure that future generations can enjoy our nation's most treasured natural resources, while simultaneously stimulating the economy through job creation and better opportunities.

The Great American Outdoors Act is truly landmark legislation, one of the greatest conservation and public-benefit acts of our lifetime.

*Jeff Crane is President of the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation. In the April issue, he wrote about another recent bipartisan legislative success, America's Conservation Enhancement Act.*

*Banner image: A sweeping panorama in Utah. America's federal lands are conservation successes held in trust for citizens to enjoy. Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation photo*

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