

My Turn

In support of the Land and Water Conservation Fund

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Fifty years ago a far-sighted, bipartisan group in Congress established the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which taps a fraction of the nation's offshore oil and gas revenues to give all Americans a lifetime of outdoor recreational opportunity.

Congress intended the fund to be used for "preserving, developing, and assuring accessibility to ... outdoor recreation resources ... and to strengthen the health and vitality of the citizens of the United States"

Every state has benefited from the Land and Water Conservation Fund. It has built playgrounds and parks, improved hiking trails and campgrounds, and provided access to public land for the enjoyment of Americans of every age, background and place of residence.

Hunters and anglers have benefited, too, through the wise use of Land and Water Conservation Fund grants to protect areas with remarkable fish and wildlife resources. Land and Water Conservation Fund grants helped purchase Valles Caldera National Preserve near Espanola, improve the Red River fish hatchery, build boat ramps at Eagle Nest Lake and other popular fishing areas, and make improvements in the Carson, Santa Fe and other national forests.

As early as 1970, Land and Water Conservation Fund grants helped establish recreation facilities in Questa and Red River. They helped pay for recreation programs in Arroyo Hondo and Arroyo Seco, tennis courts in Peasco, a running track in Ojo Caliente, ice rink improvements in Taos and parks around Taos County.

More recently, a \$780,000 Land and Water Conservation Fund grant was used to help purchase 78 acres at the end of Taos County Road 110 that will provide better public access to Rio Grande del Norte National Monument. A trailhead has now been built at the site, creating a jump-off point into the new monument.

The Taos County acquisition is a classic example of how the Land and Water Conservation Fund helps support outdoor recreation and economic development – important though often overlooked aspects of the Land and Water Conservation Fund program.

But in spite of its bipartisan background and positive additions to American life from coast to coast, the Land and Water Conservation Fund is scheduled to expire on Sept. 30. Unless Congress acts, the Land and Water Conservation Fund will disappear.

Most of New Mexico's congressional delegation are strong supporters of the Land and Water Conservation Fund, and Sens. Martin Heinrich and Tom Udall have introduced legislation that not only reauthorizes the fund, but strengthens it. Their bill calls for fully funding the Land and Water Conservation Fund (although Congress is authorized to put \$900 million a year into it, only twice in 50 years has Land and Water Conservation Fund been fully funded) and setting aside 1.5 percent of the fund to provide access to landlocked public lands.

The New Mexico Wildlife Federation, which has been protecting public lands and wildlife habitat for more than a century, fully expects Congress to do the right thing and reauthorize the Land and Water Conservation Fund next month, thanks in part to the strong support from our Washington delegation. Their combined efforts will honor the bipartisan effort that created Land and Water Conservation Fund 50 years ago, as well as ensure that New Mexico residents will continue to enjoy the benefits of outdoor recreation into the future.

John Crenshaw is president of the New Mexico Wildlife Federation, which works to protect public land so all New Mexicans have quality places to hunt, fish and enjoy the great outdoors.