By JOHN CLARK
Special to the Watch

Many of our mountain communities, as well as countless others across the West, are directly impacted by the growing outdoor recreation industry, as well as public lands management, funding and infrastructure. Our communities experience waves of visitors from all over the world, who come to enjoy nearby public lands. These same public lands provide a distinct and desired way of life that attracts families, business owners, recreationalists, entrepreneurs and others to our communities. As residents of some of these communities and advocates for many more, we at the Mountain Pact understand the importance of public lands to the economic and cultural vitality of our communities. However, a crucial conservation program that has been central to protecting and preserving lands in every state, and nearly every county in the United States for the last 52 years, is at risk. If Congress does not act by Sept. 30, the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) will expire and remove a significant funding source from public lands and water protection and enhancement programs.

The LWCF is a federal fund that is set up to invest in the conservation and preservation of public lands and waters. It helps secure and enhance public access, conservation, ecosystem preservation and outdoor recreation infrastructure. This bipartisan legislation uses zero tax dollars. Instead, it uses royalty payments from offshore oil and gas reserves to protect important land and water resources nationwide, including national wildlife refuges, national forests, rivers and lakes, community parks, trails, and ball fields. These funds provide grants for conservation and enhancement of outdoor spaces that support diverse opportunities for outdoor recreation and tourism. This investment ensures that visitors, ecosystems and nearby communities can benefit.

The LWCF has helped create supportive infrastructure and an extensive network of public lands for all Americans to enjoy. In the 11 Western states alone, the LWCF has provided $17.6 billion in funding for the protection and enhancement of 368 sites, including national treasures. Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park, Canyons of the Ancients National Monument, Rocky Mountain National Park, Gunnison National Forest and the Uncompahgre/San Juan National Forest are among the 34 sites in Colorado that have received funding from the LWCF in the last 50 years. Approximately $268 million worth of LWCF money has been spent on these programs, supporting the $28 billion Colorado outdoor recreation industry. An industry that supports 229,000 jobs and generates $9.7 billion in wages and salaries.

The LWCF is an essential component of so many Western community’s overall economic development strategy, especially in light of the challenges inherent in our ever-changing economy. Full funding (and permanent reauthorization) of the LWCF will give towns like Ridgway the confidence we need to make necessary infrastructure investments and plan for our future. Ridgway’s future economic security demands that we continue to expand our many outdoor recreation opportunities, and I can’t imagine how we’ll do that with-

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out programs like the LWCF.
Specifically, outdoor recreation and proximity to open spaces — many of which have been enhanced through use of the LWCF — are a major reason people flock to our communities, which provides significant economic support. In fact, counties in close proximity to public lands have been found to perform better in several key economic factors than counties without nearby public lands. Outdoor recreation such as hiking, biking, kayaking, hunting and fishing contributed an incredible 2 percent to the United States Gross Domestic Product in 2016, and is growing faster than the overall United States economy at a rate of 3.8 percent compared to 2.8 percent. Further, the Outdoor Industry Association found that the outdoor recreation economy contributes $887 billion to the United States economy and supports 7.6 million jobs.

Without funding for the further protection and enhancement of America’s public lands and waters, the economic success and cultural vitality of our communities may be at risk. The continued health, cultural well-being and economic success of our communities are inextricably linked to the American public land system and outdoor recreation. The LWCF is too important for public lands, waters and recreation to let it expire. Congress must act now to help preserve our American public lands legacy.

Ridgway Mayor John Clark is a member of The Mountain Pact, is an effort to educate, mobilize and empower mountain towns with outdoor recreation-based economies in the American West around federal policy. The organization works with local elected officials in over 40 mountain communities across 11 states to build resilience in the face of environmental stresses and economic impacts through a shared voice on policies related to climate, public lands and outdoor recreation.