Colorado towns urge reauthorization of land, water conservation fund

By: Erin Prater
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More than 30 Colorado mayors, town trustees and council members sent a letter Wednesday urging Congress to permanently reauthorize and fully fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

The fund “is a vital component of job creation and economic development through support for public land infrastructure,” the letter reads.

Reauthorizing the fund “will encourage further infrastructure investments and provide a long-term funding solution to ensure protection of America’s natural heritage and outdoor recreation opportunities,” it continues.

The letter was signed by more than 60 local elected officials from 10 states and sent by the Mountain Pact, an organization that works with mountain towns that have outdoor recreation-based economies in the American West.

Last month Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper sent a plea to members of Colorado’s congressional delegation, urging them to push for full funding of the fund, which relies on federal oil and gas drilling lease revenues from offshore sites rather than tax revenue.

The fund was envisioned by President Dwight Eisenhower in the 1950s and became fully funded starting in 1965. Its recommended funding is $900 million per year, although it rarely gets the full amount.

President Donald Trump’s proposed 2019 budget would slash the fund to as low as $8 million per year, down from the $400 million the fund received in the 2017 budget.
Congress allowed the fund to lapse in 2015, with conservative critics complaining that too much of the fund’s money was used on federal rather than local projects. But a compromise was reached to extend the fund another three years. Without congressional reauthorization, however, the fund will expire on Sept. 30.

In Colorado, more than 1,000 outdoor and recreational projects have been awarded grants from the fund. The grants must be leveraged with other dollars, so its impact goes way beyond the $61 million the Centennial State has been awarded over the years.

“So much of what is important to our community and why we live in Ophir is because of our proximity to landscapes like the Ophir Valley where we hike and explore,” said Corinne Platt, mayor of Ophir, in a Wednesday press release sent by the Mountain Pact. “In the past 15 years, over 1,000 acres of forest land was protected by the Land and Water Conservation Fund. This is a critical piece of legislation that impacts significant view corridors, wildlife corridors and recreation opportunities; it needs to be permanently reauthorized and fully funded.”

Representatives of Aspen, Avon, Estes Park, Frisco, Breckenridge, Carbondale, Crested Butte, Eagle County, Ophir, Ridgway, Telluride and Vail were among the letter’s signers.

Colorado Politics reporter Marianne Goodland contributed to this report.