Opinion: Congress must reauthorize the Conservation Fund


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By Guest Columnist
By Peter Cornelison
A key conservation program that has been at the center of protecting and preserving lands for more than 50 years is at risk. On Sept. 30, Congress allowed The Land and Water Conservation Fund to expire. Congress has taken the first step in both the House and Senate committees. But now that the fund has expired, it is crucial that Congress work quickly to ensure the future of America’s best conservation program and its countless projects that now have an uncertain future.

The federal Land and Water Conservation Fund is set up to invest in the conservation and preservation of public lands and waters. It has helped secure and enhance public
access, conservation, ecosystem preservation and outdoor recreation infrastructure in every state over the past 52 years. Instead of tax dollars, this bipartisan legislation used royalty payments from offshore oil and gas reserves to protect important land and water resources nationwide including national wildlife refuges, forests, rivers, lakes, community parks, trails and ball fields. These funds have provided grants to towns like Hood River for conservation and enhancement of outdoor spaces that support diverse opportunities for outdoor recreation and tourism.

In the 11 Western states alone, the fund has provided $17.6 billion to protect and enhance 368 sites, including numerous national treasures. In Oregon, approximately $305 million in grants went to 46 areas, including Mt. Hood National Forest, Siskiyou National Forest, Three Sisters Wilderness, Cascade Siskiyou National Monument, the Oregon Dunes National Recreation Area and one I'm particularly fond of, the Columbia Gorge National Scenic Area.

The fund has been a vital component of job creation and economic development for our community. And permanent reauthorization and full funding of it will encourage further infrastructure investments and ensure protection of America's natural heritage and Hood River's outdoor recreation opportunities.

Outdoor recreation and open spaces -- many enhanced through use of the fund -- draw residents and tourists to mountain communities, providing significant economic support. Outdoor pursuits including hiking, biking, kayaking, hunting and fishing contributed an incredible 2 percent to the U.S. gross domestic product in 2016 and is growing faster than the overall national economy. Further, the Outdoor Industry Association found that Oregon has a $16.4 billion outdoor recreation industry that is supported by these public lands. This industry supports 172,000 jobs in Oregon that generate $5.1 billion in wages and salaries. Without the funding for further protection and enhancement of America's public lands and waters, the economic success and cultural vitality of communities such as Hood River may be at risk. Congress must continue the bipartisan momentum and pass a bill that will provide full and permanent funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund, and preserve our American public lands legacy.

-- Peter Cornelison is a Hood River City Council members who is involved with The Mountain Pact, which works with elected officials in 50 mountain communities in 11 states to build resilience in the face of environmental stresses and their economic impacts.