

Support for the Great American Outdoors Act

June 16, 2020

The Honorable John Cornyn
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Senator Cornyn:

We the undersigned organizations and individuals strongly support the passage of the bipartisan Great American Outdoors Act (s. 3422) as soon as possible and without amendments. This bill would permanently fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) at \$900 million annually and provide \$9.5 billion over five years to fix maintenance problems that are plaguing America's public lands.

Texas is full of special places. Our state and national parks give us the opportunity to build sandcastles at the beach, camp in the mountains, stargaze in dark sky sanctuaries, and even explore dinosaur footprints. Our local parks provide respite from urban living and opportunities to go for a walk, bike ride or family picnic and provide safe places for our kids to get outside and play or swim. And in addition to bringing us together for recreation and experiencing natural wonder, our parks help protect our waterways and provide refuges for iconic wildlife.

For most Texans, the idea that we've found some places so special, that we made sure they would be protected, forever, is one of our proudest achievements. And with the Land and Water Conservation Fund, we've been able to do just that.

The Land and Water Conservation Fund is America's premier conservation and recreation program. For more than 50 years, it has protected millions of acres of irreplaceable lands across our country, including national parks, wildlife refuges, forests, lakes, rivers, trails, state parks, community parks and more. "Working lands" initiatives, such as the Forest Legacy Program, have also helped private landowners protect wildlife habitat while keeping land in production to provide food, fiber, and lumber for our citizens.

Texas has received more than half a billion dollars from this fund, supporting everything from the Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge to the Angelina National Forest to Bastrop State Park to Lady Bird Lake.

Meanwhile, after decades of neglect, the infrastructure on our public lands is crumbling. The last major infrastructure investment in national parks was [50+](#) years [ago](#). The National Parks Service is estimating [41,000 assets](#) are now in need of maintenance or repair, including bridges, trails, roads, campgrounds and visitor centers. As a result, the American Society of Civil Engineers has given our parks a [D+ infrastructure score](#). In Texas, our 13 national parks, monuments and historical parks have a \$154 million maintenance backlog.

The costs of these repairs tend to balloon over time and often constitute a safety concern for federal workers and the public. The Great American Outdoors Act would directly address this problem with a 5-year infusion of funds so we can invest in our public lands for ourselves and for future generations.

As you know, Texans love our public lands. Last November, Texans overwhelmingly -- 88% -- voted for Prop 5, which secures funding for our state parks. **That was the largest victory of a statewide conservation measure in American history.**

But the state can't do it alone. Our parks and open spaces face chronic underfunding, which threatens their accessibility for recreation and effectiveness in protecting key ecosystems. And as Texas' population continues to expand, the problem only gets worse. Every hour, almost 20 acres of open space are destroyed in Texas to make way for new development. Meanwhile, demand for parks is skyrocketing. Our existing parks are often overcrowded, with visitors sometimes facing long lines to enter or even being turned away.

We've known about this problem for years. A 2001 report commissioned by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) found that the state would have to add 1.2 million acres of state park lands by the year 2030 in order to keep up with Texas' growing population. While Texas has added almost 200,000 acres since then, we are far behind our goal. Similarly, the report found "there is a need to provide more local parks in all categories (cities, counties, and special districts)." Federal funding is critical to Texas meeting these needs. Approximately 40% of LWCF is dedicated for "stateside" funding, which the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department uses for state parks and to make grants for local park acquisition and development.

The passage of this bill through the Senate couldn't come at a more crucial moment. As the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic drags on, people are increasingly looking towards the outdoors for their physical and mental health. And at a time when the country can feel so divided, it is important for members of Congress to come together and pass legislation that is popular and meaningful to the general public.

We urge you to take up and approve this conservation measure -- without adding amendments that could jeopardize the bipartisan balance that has been struck -- as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

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