

Happy trails, funding fails

As milestone is celebrated, money for public lands in flux

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Owen Chavez and his mom Erin Callahan, who live near Albuquerque, watch a bighorn sheep in this to-be-built section of the Río Grande Trail. About 60 miles of the trail in Taos County were dedicated Tuesday (Oct. 2). Meanwhile, in Washington, D.C., the future of an important source of funding for outdoor recreation seems in question despite recent movement to save it.

When a bighorn sheep strutted up to 9-year-old Owen Chavez Tuesday (Oct. 2) along the edge of the Río Grande Gorge, it was one of only a handful of times he was so close to such a wild animal in such a wild place.

Chavez and his family were taking part in a scouting expedition for the Río Grande Trail, the proposed 500-

mile path that would follow the Río Grande through New Mexico and that, when built, could be a jewel among hikers and mountain bikers.

Though Tuesday was a major milestone for the trail with the governor dedicating over 60 miles of it in Taos County, the future of an important source of federal funding for outdoor recreation seems in question.

For more than 50 years, the Land and Water Conservation Fund has been pumping money into communities across the country to boost outdoor recreation, an industry that's vital to rural outposts like Taos where skiing, fishing and hiking are key links in the economy.

The fund has been especially important to the Taos area recently. When the Río Grande del Norte National Monument was created in 2013, most of it was made up of land already under the care of the local Bureau of Land Management office. But in the last five years, the monument has picked up thousands of acres with money from the conservation fund.

The LWCF is responsible for “some pretty core areas of the monument,” said Río Grande del Norte manager John Bailey. These areas include over 70 acres at the end of County Road 110, where the Rock Slide Trail leads down into the Orilla Verde area; the Taos Valley Overlook trails, the most popular spot for BLM recreation in this part of New Mexico; and wild areas around Ute Mountain and Cerro Montoso.

“We’ve been blessed with a lot of publicly supported projects” since the creation of the monument, Bailey said.

But even though the LWCF is popular with both Republicans and Democrats in Washington,

D.C., the fund is caught in a turbulent moment.

Congress created the fund

in 1964. Money comes into the fund mostly via revenue from offshore oil drilling. The fund is authorized to get \$900 million annually.

However, Congress must appropriate money for the fund each year, and the fund has never received the full amount. Usually the fund has only received one-fourth to about one-half its authorized amount.

Some of that money goes directly to federal agencies like the BLM to pay for land acquisitions. The Center for Western Priorities, an environmental advocacy organization based in Colorado, reports the LWCF contributed roughly \$6 million to the Carson National Forest for the purchase of Miranda Canyon and about \$5.5 million to the BLM for the monument acquisitions.

The rest of the LWCF goes to states in the form of matching grants. In New Mexico, approximately \$37.8 million of LWCF money has gone to state parks and other open spaces, according to the New Mexico Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department website.

But the fund has been in jeopardy more than once.

In 2015, the LWCF lapsed because Congress did not act before a critical funding deadline. Despite three years of some members of Congress trying to reform the way the fund is allocated and attempting to pair it with other public lands legislation, the same thing happened again when the LWCF expired Sunday (Sept. 30).

Groups like the Center for Western Priorities have been sounding the alarm bells in recent weeks, warning that if Congress didn’t renew the LWCF, communities would miss out on important revenue.

“The more time passes without the funds being properly placed in that fund, the more it’ll impact the kinds of things we’re trying to do to make sure this outdoor conservation is taking place,” Gov. Susana Martinez, a Republican, told during Tuesday’s dedication of the Río Grande Trail.

At the same time as the Río Grande Trail celebration — happening on the half-century anniversary of the passage of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act and the National Trails System Act — there was a movement to restore the fund in Washington.

The Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources approved a bill that would permanently reauthorize the LWCF and, for the first time in its history, fund it at the full amount: \$900 million.

Sen. Martin Heinrich, D-N.M., sits on the committee and both he and Sen. Tom Udall, D-N.M., are co-sponsors of the bill. “I will continue to do everything in my power to permanently and fully fund LWCF to ensure that the outdoor places we all treasure will be protected for future generations to enjoy,” Heinrich said in a statement after the committee vote.

To revamp the fund and make it immune to partisan appropriations, the bill would still have to pass the full Senate.

At Tuesday’s trail dedication, Deputy Secretary of the Interior David Bernhardt said President Donald Trump and Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke have strong leadership qualities when it comes to conservation. Bernhardt also told The Taos News that Zinke is a “strong supporter of the LWCF.”

However, during the 2018 budgeting process earlier this year, Zinke proposed cutting almost all money from the fund.