



Legislative & Policy Update – June 2020

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The [Council of Western State Foresters \(CWSF\) Legislative & Policy Update](#) provides information on issues of importance to CWSF. Policy and legislative updates are found on the CWSF webpage [here](#). Please note that the items highlighted in these updates are only a selection of the issues CWSF and the Western Forestry Leadership Coalition (WFLC) are monitoring. Keep an eye out for our monthly newsletter that will provide summaries on other key legislative and programmatic issues. If you have not yet subscribed, you can do so [here](#). For more information, please contact Danielle Okst, Associate Policy and Grants Director at dokst@westernforesters.org.

The Great American Outdoors Act was debated and passed the Senate this month, now it moves to the House. CWSF members recently appeared in several wildfire hearings to describe the challenges of preparing for and actively fighting wildfires during the coronavirus pandemic. A transportation bill that provides money to the USDA Forest Service for road maintenance and grants to improve access to forest facilities has moved to the House for consideration.

The Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA)

The GAOA ([S. 3422](#)) was introduced by Senators Cory Gardner (R-CO) and Joe Manchin (D-WV) on March 9. S. 3422 combines the Restore Our Parks Act ([S. 500](#)) and the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) Permanent Funding Act ([S. 1081](#)). It aims to reduce the \$20 billion maintenance backlog on public lands through creation of the National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund as well as permanently fund the LWCF. This month, [Representative Joe Cunningham \(D-SC\)](#) introduced the House companion bill [H.R. 7092](#). After debate, where no amendments were considered to protect the bipartisan support behind this bill, the Senate passed the GAOA by a vote of 73-25. This bill would permanently and fully fund the LWCF with \$900 million annually. LWCF utilizes earnings from offshore oil and gas leasing to support nationwide recreation and conservation areas through programs including the Forest Legacy Program, which may see increases as a result of this legislation. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) is expected to bring the Senate-passed version to a floor vote before the July 4 break. The National Association of State Foresters (NASF) and other members of the Forest Climate Working Group sent a [letter](#) in support of the GAOA.

Wildfire Hearings

The Senate Energy and Natural Resources (SENR) Committee held a hearing on “[Wildfire Management in the Midst of COVID-19](#)” on June 9. Witnesses for the hearing included [George Geissler](#), Washington State Forester representing NASF, [Norm McDonald](#), Director of Fire and Aviation for Alaska Division of Forestry, [John Phipps](#), State and Private Forestry Deputy Chief for the USDA Forest Service, and [Amanda Kaster](#), Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Lands and Minerals for the US Department of the Interior. The SENR Committee usually holds a hearing to look at the wildfire outlook for that year, but this year the focus of the hearing was on issues facing state and local firefighters as they work to adjust procedures during the

pandemic and readjust based on feedback from the field. Mr. Geissler described this process as “building a bridge as we cross it.” Mr. Geissler also described the challenges faced by some state forestry agencies as they simultaneously engage in supporting COVID-19 response efforts and fight wildfires. He urged the Committee to consider the effects of the pandemic on state budgets and the critical need to maintain emergency response capabilities in light of impending budget cuts.

The House Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands held a virtual forum to “[Examine Coronavirus Impacts on Wildland Fire Operations and Vulnerable Communities.](#)” Panelists for the forum included Laura McCarthy, State Forester for the New Mexico State Forestry Division, Thom Porter, Chief of California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, Mike Morgan, Director of the Colorado Division of Fire Prevention and Control, and Dr. Kimiko Barrett, Community Planning Assistance for Wildfire Program Coordinator for Headwaters Economics. Laura McCarthy described the change in wildfire operations, from adjusting to online training to testing and tracking cases of COVID-19, and voiced her support for [increases to State Fire Assistance \(SFA\) and Volunteer Fire Assistance \(VFA\)](#) funding to support these and other increased costs. SFA and VFA are vital programs that support state and local agencies, which respond to [nearly 80%](#) of fires across jurisdictions.

The Investing in a New Vision for the Environment and Surface Transportation (INVEST) in America Act

Last week, the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee held a [markup](#) of the INVEST in America Act ([H.R. 2](#)). The \$494 billion highway and transit bill would increase the mandatory funding available to the USDA Forest Service for road maintenance to \$50 million annually, an increase of 40%. The bill would also establish a Rebuild Rural Grant Program to “improve transportation safety, including on high-risk rural roads, on Federal lands, and at vehicle-wildlife crossings; improve state of good repair, including on off-system bridges; and improve access to jobs and services in support of rural economies, including to a forestry facility.” After more than 24 hours of debate, the bill was approved by the House Committee and now moves to the full chamber for consideration. The House is anticipated to take it up in early July. A section-by-section is [available](#) as well as a [bill summary](#).