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NEWS RELEASE

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Contact: Jodi Stemler, Outdoors America – 703-915-1386

Senate Bill Would Fulfill Longstanding Promise for Conservation and Recreation Program

WASHINGTON, DC – Senators Jeff Bingaman (D-NM) and Max Baucus (D-MT), today introduced legislation to permanently provide \$900 million to the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), the federal government’s main program to protect land and provide outdoor recreation opportunities.

The legislation, S. 2747, is supported by a broad coalition of conservation and recreation organizations.

“Even in difficult economic times, open space protection and outdoor recreation are top priorities for Americans. Two out of three American voters continue to offer strong support for public investments in conservation – and that support has held steady despite the economic downturn and in this week's elections, 64 percent of state and municipal ballot initiatives authorizing land conservation funding passed,” stated Mark Tercek, President and CEO of The Nature Conservancy. “Senator Bingaman and Senator Baucus clearly understand this, and are taking that crucial step towards making a dependable investment in the future of this country's communities.”

The LWCF, created in 1965, has helped protect land at some of America’s most famous and popular places including our country’s iconic national parks, national forests, wildlife refuges and National Landscape Conservation System Lands where millions of Americans recreate; beaches on the Gulf Coast and Atlantic seaboard; as well as cultural and historic places like Civil War battlefields and Native American sites.

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The program also includes grants to support state and local parks. Those grants help develop park facilities and recreational amenities – creating jobs and supporting the quality-of-life factors that allow communities to attract employers and a strong work force.

“We get to protect places like La Cienega Area of Critical Environmental Concern and Petroglyph National Monument at the same time that we improve parks, trails, ball fields, and pools – that’s a win for everyone. It’s heartening to see Senator Bingaman taking steps to fully fund this program and enrich our communities,” said New Mexico House Majority Leader Kenny Martinez.

Every year, \$900 million goes into the fund from oil and gas leases on federal lands. But Congress has often spent the money for other purposes and only once in the history of the fund has all the money gone for the original intent of the LWCF. This year, the fund saw its greatest allocation in many years at more than \$300 million – but that is still only one third of what it is supposed to be.

Because only a fraction of the funds dedicated to the purpose have actually been spent, there is a backlog of more than \$30 billion worth of lands that federal agencies would like to protect. In addition, states say they have a huge unmet need for local parks and recreation resources totaling more than \$27 billion in eligible projects.

“The irony is that billions of dollars are collected every year from existing offshore oil and gas leasing revenues – the designated revenue stream for LWCF – and yet that money is regularly diverted for other purposes,” stated Will Rogers, President of The Trust for Public Land. “We need to make sure the money is spent for the purposes for which it was originally collected and to ensure that our children and grandchildren have a place to play.”

Federal and state public lands as well local parks and recreation facilities greatly enhance communities’ quality of life, which in turn helps large and small localities to attract new residents and businesses and to generate tourism-related jobs and revenues. Outdoor recreation including hunting, fishing, camping, climbing, hiking, paddling, backcountry skiing, mountain biking, wildlife viewing, and other activities contributes a total of \$730 billion annually to the economy, supporting 6.5 million jobs (1 of every 20 jobs in the U.S.) and stimulates 8 percent of all consumer spending according to the Outdoor Industry Foundation.

“The outdoor industry has long held a goal of ensuring every child in America has access to a trail or park within one mile of their home. Many studies show that this type of commitment to our nation's recreation infrastructure would easily pay for itself in the resulting reduction in health care costs and the increase in the mental well-being of our children,” said Frank Hugelmeyer, president of Outdoor Industry Association.

The Land and Water Conservation Fund Coalition is an informal partnership of national, state and local conservation and recreation organizations working together to support full and dedicated funding for LWCF.

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