



# CONTINENTAL DIVIDE TRAIL COALITION

**Testimony to the U.S. House of Representatives Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies provided by Amanda Wheelock, Policy & Communications Manager, on behalf of the Continental Divide Trail Coalition**

**February 6, 2020**

Chairwoman McCollum, Ranking Member Joyce, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the Continental Divide Trail Coalition, a non-profit organization with the mission to complete, promote, and protect the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail (CDT). We greatly appreciate your support in the FY 2020 Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies appropriations bill for the CDT and the entire National Trails System through your increased investments in and attention to specific needs of the 30 national trails administered by the U.S. Forest Service, the National Park Service, and the Bureau of Land Management. We also appreciate your continuing efforts to increase appropriations for the Land and Water Conservation Fund and thank you for supporting LWCF investments in trails.

LWCF is often referred to as America's best conservation program. It's no wonder why, with projects funded in every county in the country<sup>1</sup> and a long, long list of internationally-renowned parks and local treasures protected in perpetuity. When the LWCF was created, your predecessors in Congress called for \$900 million of federal oil and gas leasing revenues to be dedicated annually to the fund. Yet almost every year since, Congress has broken that promise, diverting much of this funding to other uses. Imagine what we could have protected together with the \$22 billion diverted from LWCF over the past 55 years:<sup>2</sup> recreation opportunities in local, regional, and national parks; wildlife habitat and pristine headwaters; and trail networks spanning from remote forests to downtown bike paths. Places, for example, like the Continental Divide Trail.

Administered by the U.S. Forest Service, the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail traverses five states as it wends its way from Canada to Mexico along the spine of the Rocky Mountains. It connects the Sky Islands of southern New Mexico to 14,000' peaks in Colorado to the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, one of two remaining intact ecosystems in the lower 48. It connects people living along its 3,100-mile corridor around the protection of a shared resource, and it connects people from all over the world around their love of the trail. And when it is finally completed, it will connect an unbroken corridor of more than 2 million acres of public land for wildlife to safely traverse along their migration routes.

Originally designated by Congress more than 40 years ago, the CDT is just one example of the broken promise of LWCF. Despite decades of work by dedicated federal land management agency personnel, non-profit partners, volunteers, and residents of trailside communities, the CDT remains incomplete due to gaps in protected public land ownership along its corridor. Without LWCF funding, there is no realistic way to fund the willing sales necessary to create a protected public corridor, leaving what should be a world-class recreational resource with no path to completion.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Interior, *LWCF*, <https://www.doi.gov/lwcf>.

<sup>2</sup> LWCF Coalition, *Fund LWCF*, <https://www.lwcfcoalition.com/fundlwcf>.

**That is why the Continental Divide Trail Coalition respectfully requests \$900 million for the Land and Water Conservation Fund in FY 2021** – because we believe that resources like the CDT deserve the protection via LWCF that they were promised. But I hope you don't just take my word for it. 98% of small business owners along the CDT support Congress providing dedicated, full funding for LWCF.<sup>3</sup> And last year, more than 200 business owners along the trail signed open letters urging their Senators and Representatives to provide LWCF with full, permanent funding. That's because protecting public land isn't just good for our health, ecosystems, and wildlife – though it is indeed good for all those things – but also because it's a sound investment.

Between 2012-2017, the five CDT states all saw their outdoor recreation economies outpace their states' overall GDP by a factor of at least 1.5.<sup>4</sup> In Wyoming, outdoor recreation GDP increased by 15% over this period, while the state's overall GDP actually decreased. This growth is critical for business owners and their employees in rural Western communities. When we surveyed small business owners in 32 towns along the CDT last fall, 88% of them reported economic growth in their community over the last five years that was specifically due to use of the trail.<sup>5</sup> And this isn't isolated to those we think of as working in the "outdoor" industry, for while some of those surveyed own hotels or gear shops, others are graphic designers, healthcare providers, and even barbers.

These people live in communities like Steamboat Springs, CO, and Silver City, NM. While on the surface, these towns can feel worlds apart – one a world-famous ski town in the snowy Colorado mountains, the other situated where forest turns to desert in southern New Mexico, named for the metals that sustained it for so long – they are connected by the thread of the Continental Divide Trail, and have more in common than you might think. Both are mid-sized communities with vibrant downtowns. Both are on the path of establishing themselves as year-round destinations and fantastic places to live due to their access to public lands. And both await access to new public land so that their local sections of the CDT can be routed off of dangerous roads.

Just outside of Steamboat Springs, the CDT travels for 15 miles along the shoulder of Highways 14 and 40, high-speed roads heavily trafficked by tourists, truckers, and oil and gas producers heading to and from the bustling North Park basin. What could be a spectacular trail through aspen forests and historic rangeland is instead a dangerous highway road walk, tempting no one but the most determined of thru-hikers to experience this section of the CDT. Residents of Steamboat Springs, which became a CDT Gateway Community in 2018, want dearly to see this section of the CDT completed. The Yampa Valley Community Foundation has provided funding to CDTC to support our work to close this gap. Big Agnes, a gear company based in Steamboat, rallied their staff to relay all 750 miles of the CDT in Colorado to raise awareness of the trail and the need for its completion. And just this month, when we called on our members and partners to provide feedback on CDTC's draft strategic plan, multiple people asked that we make the completion of the trail at Muddy Pass an even higher priority for our organization (a tough request to incorporate, as it is already our highest priority for acquisition along the entire length of the trail).

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<sup>3</sup> Continental Divide Trail Coalition, *Small Business Survey: Fall 2019*, <https://continentaldividetrail.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Small-Business-Survey-WEB.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Headwaters Economics, *The Outdoor Recreation Economy by State*, <https://headwaterseconomics.org/economic-development/trends-performance/outdoor-recreation-economy-by-state/>

<sup>5</sup> Continental Divide Trail Coalition, *Small Business Survey: Fall 2019*, <https://continentaldividetrail.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Small-Business-Survey-WEB.pdf>

Steamboat Springs resident Kathleen Lynch perhaps said it best:

*“It’s so much more than a trail to the people who live here. It feels so much a part of what defines us as a community here that protecting it is inherent to what we believe in.”*

BLM and U.S. Forest Service staff are supportive, as is the Colorado State Land Board (construction of the CDT in this area would also open up thousands of acres of state land to public access). Potential routes and willing sellers have been identified. The community has made it clear that they want to see this project completed, and many local residents stand willing and ready to volunteer to build the trail. All that is required is funding, which is why **we respectfully request \$2.8 million of LWCF funding in FY 2021 for the BLM to acquire land that will help move the CDT off of the highway and onto a protected corridor fitting of this National Scenic Trail.**

More than 1,300 miles south along the CDT lies Silver City, which became the first official CDT Gateway Community in 2014. This town of 10,000 is home to a diverse mix of people, a bustling arts scene, and a fast-growing trail network. It’s home to Richard and Carol Martin, who have maintained almost 30 miles of the CDT for more than a decade. And it’s home to Martyn Pearson, co-owner of the Gila Hike and Bike, a knowledge and gear hub for tourists and locals alike. Martyn is a powerful champion for the CDT, and has spoken to why he wants to see LWCF fully funded:

*“The Land and Water Conservation Fund is vital to protecting New Mexico’s public lands and outdoor recreation opportunities, and those places in turn have a huge impact on our local businesses and tourism economy. It isn’t a political issue to me whether or not outdoor access should be a priority – it just is.”*

Silver City has benefited from LWCF investment before. In 2016, 605 acres along Upper Bear Creek were added to the Gila National Forest, protecting a mile of the CDT and opening up access to more than eight miles of the creek. In a letter of support for the project, Michael Morones, who was Mayor of Silver City at the time, wrote, “the Continental Divide Trail is an important economic resource for our area, and protecting land along the trail is crucial to our well-being.”

However, there is more work to be done. Currently, the CDT passes directly through Silver City in the midst of a 19-mile road walk. Lack of access to a small section of private land has kept the trail from being rerouted around town, off of the road, and onto public land in the area. Knowing that the CDT is vital to the town’s renaissance as an outdoor recreation destination, residents have advocated for completion of this local section for almost two decades, and the town has already begun to invest in things like the construction of the Silver Spur Trail, which will connect the future CDT route to downtown. But their dollars and hopes rest on funding for the project.

The residents of Steamboat Springs, Silver City, and countless towns like them – these are the people who are negatively impacted when LWCF isn’t fully funded.

#### Funding for Annual Operations

LWCF is a critical program, but it’s not the only resource we need to protect and maintain our nation’s trails. Funding for the National Trails System enables public-private partnerships that benefit all Americans, as these trails are constructed and maintained in large part each year by volunteers. Since the founding of the Continental Divide Trail Coalition in 2012, for example,

CDTC and other government partners working on the CDT have directly received approximately \$2.6 million in federal funding appropriated for the trail. Those organizations have turned \$2.6 million into more than 300,000 volunteer hours valued at \$7,277,566, and an additional \$2,158,697 of private funding. *That's a 256% return on federal funding in value added to our public lands.*

Like the CDT, many trails in our National Trails System remain incomplete, and increased funding is necessary to help close these gaps, in large part by funding the construction and maintenance of new sections of trails. As we see our land management agency partners struggle year after year to adequately manage our lands and trails with fewer and fewer staff, we firmly believe that Congress must restore proper appropriated funding that has been cut over the decades, which our agency partners desperately need. However, in recognizing the political realities of the day, we hope to provide realistic recommendations that, at minimum, maintain current funding. **As such, the Continental Divide Trail Coalition respectfully requests the following to serve as annual operations funding for each of the 30 National Scenic and Historic Trails in FY 2021:**

- U.S. Forest Service: \$100 million for trails construction and maintenance (CMTL) with \$9.886 million of it as a separate budgetary item specifically for the administration of 6 national trails – including \$2 million for the CDT - and \$1.3 million to manage parts of 16 trails administered by the NPS or BLM
- National Park Service: \$16.426 million for administration of 23 trails and for coordination of the long-distance trails program by the Washington office. Construction and Maintenance: \$686,041 for the Ice Age Trail, \$75,000 for the Arizona Trail, and \$200,000 each for the Pacific Crest and Pacific Northwest Trails
- Bureau of Land Management: \$2.812 million to administer three trails and for coordination of the National Trails program and \$7.14 million to manage portions of 13 trails administered by the Park Service or the Forest Service and for operating five National Historic Trail interpretive centers. Construction: \$1 million for the Iditarod Trail. Maintenance: \$300,000 for the Iditarod Trail, \$100,000 for the Arizona Trail, and \$300,000 for the Pacific Crest Trail

Dedicated funding for these trails helps ensure that Congress' desire to create and maintain quality visitor experiences is met, and that these long-distance trails which span multiple administrative units and agencies are appropriately managed, with funding distributed across units and agencies based on trail administration and management responsibilities. This funding is necessary to support agency staff, partners, and volunteers alike in building and maintaining these crown jewels of our nation's trails. In 2019, for example, dedicated CDT funding was used to construct and maintain four miles of trail in New Mexico's Carson National Forest, officially opening more than 100 miles of CDT built over the last decade in partnership between the U.S. Forest Service, CDTC, and New Mexico Volunteers for the Outdoors. It was also used to enable CDTC volunteers to control erosion along the CDT in highly-trafficked areas of Yellowstone National Park, mitigate wildfire damage outside of Lincoln, MT, and train more than 30 new volunteers who collectively adopted over 200 miles of the CDT that they will maintain on behalf of the U.S. Forest Service and CDTC.

Your continued investment in the CDT and all of our National Trails System will ensure that these innovative public-private partnerships continue to provide value for trailside communities, recreationists, volunteers, land management agencies, and the American public. Thank you for your time today, and for your consideration of these important requests.