

Baucus introduces bill to boost open space funding

By DANIEL PERSON Chronicle Staff Writer

A fund designed to conserve and expand open space across the country could get a huge boost by a bill introduced by Sen. Max Baucus.

The Democrat has teamed up with Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M., to introduce legislation that would fully fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which channels royalties from offshore oil and gas drilling toward parks, easements and wildlife refuges.

The fund was created in 1965, and in 1977 Congress authorized \$900 million in royalties to go to land conservation. But lawmakers have rarely hit that mark. Instead, royalties have gone toward deficit reduction and other areas.

The bill Baucus is co-sponsoring, which was introduced in the U.S. Senate Friday, would make the \$900 million annual funding mandatory, insulating it from royalties being diverted elsewhere, according to the senator's office.

Deb Love, Northern Rockies director for Trust for Public Land in Bozeman, said the bill would ease the strain on the fund, which is drawn upon by agencies at every level of government.

"They're fighting over scraps," Love said Tuesday.

Because the fund goes toward public places, its impact is visible around Bozeman.

An official with the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks estimated in 2006 that 90 percent of the recreational facilities built in Montana over the past 40 years used LWCF funds.

Around Bozeman, \$30,000 went toward creating Kirk Park, \$9,000 has gone toward Bogert Park and \$50,000 helped buy 10 acres for Sundance Springs Park.

The fund has helped the government buy and conserve land in the Centennial Valley, according to the Nature Conservancy, and FWP has drawn from the LWCF for improving Missouri Headwaters State Park and fishing accesses at Bozeman Pond and Cameron Bridge, among other things.

However, the funding has been inconsistent.

Last year, \$155 million was appropriated, while offshore oil and gas royalties totaled \$12 billion.

"We have this one opportunity right now," Love said about land conservation. "We have land prices at the lowest they've been in decades, an administration that believes in the power of parks and public lands and a public that has voted to pay for open space and conservation."

Love said her group wants to get mining claims north of Yellowstone National Park into public hands and eliminate checkerboard ownership in the Swan Valley, both projects that would be eligible for the fund.

Bebe Crouse with the Nature Conservancy said conservation easements on the Rocky Mountain Front are in high demand, as well as in the Centennial Valley.

President Barack Obama has pledged \$400 million for the fund this year.

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