

Land, water conservation proposal heads to full House for final consideration

Written by gallupsun
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Representatives of a broad coalition of New Mexico organizations released the following statement March 9 after the House Appropriations & Finance Committee's strong bipartisan vote of 17-1 with a "do-pass" recommendation on Senate Bill 9: The Land of Enchantment Legacy Fund, that would create the state's first dedicated and long-term funding stream for land and water conservation. SB9 passed the full Senate Feb. 14 with a 33-7 vote. It now heads to the full House of Representatives for consideration, with a final appropriation amount to be determined as part of the larger budget bill known as House Bill 2.

"We're grateful that bipartisan members of this committee and House leaders are seeing SB9 as an investment in New Mexico's future, because that's exactly what it is," Kay Bounkeua, New Mexico State Senior Manager, The Wilderness Society, said. "Providing long-term support for programs like the Outdoor Equity Fund is the right thing to do for our communities and will result in even more transformational experiences for New Mexico youth. As the bill moves to the House floor, we call on leaders in both parties to support an even higher appropriation for the Enchantment Legacy Fund so all our communities can benefit from these programs equitably."

Keegan King, from the Native Land Institute, explained how important conservation is.

"Conservation is vital for the health of our planet and the well-being of all its inhabitants, both present and future," King said. "This historic investment in the Enchantment Legacy Fund reflects a commitment to being responsible stewards of the earth, preserving its natural wonders, and safeguarding its delicate balance for generations to come. The HAFC committee's overwhelming bipartisan vote in support of this important legislation clearly indicates the critical need to invest in conservation efforts."

King also emphasized that tribal communities need to be involved in conservation efforts.

"It is crucial that tribal communities, who are experts in this field, receive the necessary resources and funding to continue their essential conservation work," King said. "To ensure that all communities, including tribal communities, can benefit from the opportunities presented by the Enchantment Legacy Fund, we must strive for greater funding. This will enable our communities to increase efforts toward conservation and ensure that we can all work together to create a better future for our planet and its inhabitants."

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The Land of Enchantment Legacy Fund is made up of two finance mechanisms: an expandable fund, which will allocate dollars to existing state programs beginning in FY2024, and a permanent fund, which will gain interest over time and be distributed through the expandable fund each year for the next several years. Advocates have called for at least \$350 million in combined funding to ensure the program has the necessary resources to gain sufficient interest and reach all 33 counties and tribal communities.

The Land of Enchantment Legacy Fund would invest in existing state programs to protect New Mexico communities from wildfire, flood and drought, safeguard urban and rural water supplies, support rural and agricultural communities, and grow outdoor recreation economy. The bill is sponsored by Sens. Steven Neville, R-N.M., Peter Wirth, D-N.M., and Rep. Nathan Small, D-N.M., building on the vision laid out by Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham in her executive budget recommendation.

The Fund is a bipartisan product of five years of negotiations among a broad coalition of legislators, state agencies, community stakeholders and non-governmental organizations.

