



# FUNDING NEEDS FOR WILDLIFE, WORKING LANDS, AND RECREATION IN MONTANA

JULY 2019



# MONTANA'S OUTDOOR HERITAGE

Land, water, and wildlife are critical to long-term economic development and community identity in Montana. As Montana's population grows and diversifies, and as more people recreate in Montana's great outdoors, stewardship of farms and ranches, wildlife habitat, parks and trails, and access to rivers and land requires thoughtful planning and investment.

- **71% of Montanans consider themselves conservationists<sup>10</sup>**
- **95% of Montanans say outdoor recreation is important to their quality of life<sup>1</sup>**
- **81% of Montanans support conservation of wildlife migration corridors<sup>10</sup>**

Montana's outdoor way of life bridges east and west, urban and rural. Working lands and recreation are an essential part of the heritage of Montana's small towns and rural places. High quality of life—driven by access to the outdoors—makes the state's cities competitive nationally for new businesses and employees. The outdoor recreation industry creates new opportunities to diversify and support all of Montana.

But resources to protect our outdoor heritage and access to the outdoors are limited and have not kept pace with growing demand. Funding needs for working lands, wildlife conservation, and recreation in the state exceed federal, state, and private budget allocations and are not being met. For example, between 2010 and 2017 visitation at Montana's state parks increased by 40% while park budgets decreased by 2%.<sup>3, 4, 5</sup> Montana is one of fourteen states without statewide funding programs for conservation or recreation.

The federal government plays a crucial role in funding working lands, wildlife management, parks and trails in Montana, through programs like the Land and Water Conservation, the

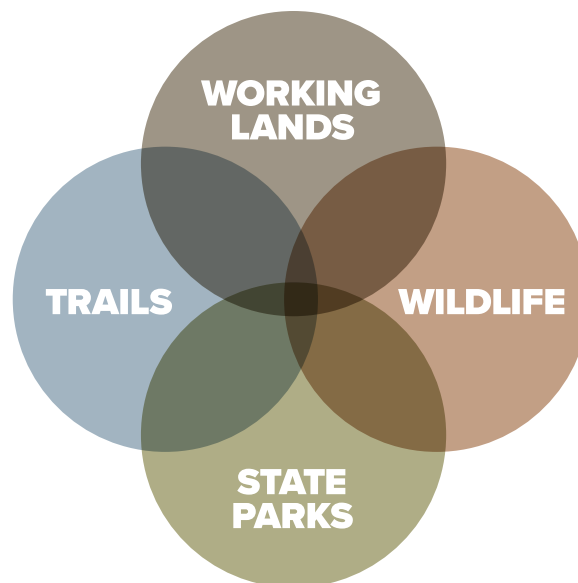


Farm Bill, and the Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act. Access and habitat protection on national forests and other public lands also depend on reliable funding for land management agencies like the US Forest Service, National Park Service, and Bureau of Land Management.

However, federal funding doesn't cover all of Montana's needs. Many of Montana's conservation needs are not on federal land, such as the protection of working farms and ranches, local trails, and state wildlife management areas. Some federal sources can be unpredictable from year to year. Finally, federal funds often require matching funds from state, local, and private sources.

**Funding needs for working lands, wildlife conservation, and outdoor recreation across the state are not being met.**

The following pages summarize the non-federal investment needs for working lands, wildlife, parks and trails around Montana based on available data.



Goals for working land conservation, wildlife habitat, state parks, and trails often align and overlap. Funding can stretch farther when projects achieve multiple objectives.



**IS MONTANA DOING ENOUGH TO MAINTAIN ITS OWN OUTDOOR HERITAGE AND BUILD A LEGACY FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS?**



**MONTANA IS CHANGING.**  
POPULATION GROWTH, INCREASED VISITATION,  
AND NEW DEVELOPMENT AFFECT OUR LANDS,  
WILDLIFE, AND OUTDOOR INFRASTRUCTURE.

# WORKING LANDS

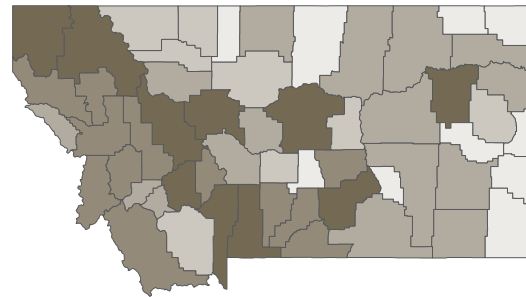
## UNMET NEED: \$12.4+ MILLION/YEAR\*

Montana's private working lands—farms, ranches, and forests—comprise more than half of the state and are an essential piece of the state's natural resource legacy.<sup>6</sup> These lands contain prime agricultural soil, corridors connecting wildlife habitat, and can provide access to public land. They create a buffer between wildfire and our communities. And they can protect and improve downstream water quality. As our state's population grows, the pressure to develop private land will continue to grow. Since 1990, 1.3 million acres of Montana's open space has been converted to housing.<sup>7</sup> Rapid development of private lands limits the economic viability and productivity of family farms and forests.

Thanks to the vision of watershed collaboratives, tribal and state forest stewardship programs, and private landowners, Montana is a national leader in working land conservation with programs to mitigate wildfire risk, reduce wildlife conflicts, and conserve prime soils. More than 2.5 million acres of working farms and ranches, wildlife habitat, timber lands, and river corridors have been protected through voluntary conservation easements.<sup>8</sup>

However, funding for conservation agreements is limited and highly competitive. In 2019, Montana landowners, in partnership with nonprofit land trusts, submitted more than \$33.6 million in proposals for federal and state conservation funding programs, but only \$21.2 million were approved, leaving a \$12.4 million funding gap.<sup>9</sup> This funding gap does not include the wildlife conservation and conflict reduction programs that occur on private land and help to keep working lands viable.

### Open Space Converted to Housing



Since 1990, 1.3 million acres of Montana's open space has been converted to housing.

Source: *Headwaters Economics*. 2018. <https://headwaterseconomics.org/economic-development/local-studies/montana-home-construction/>

- Since 1990, the acreage converted to housing in Montana is equal to the total acreage in Montana managed by the National Park Service.<sup>7</sup>
- In western Montana, the number of houses in areas of high wildfire hazard has doubled since 1990.<sup>11</sup>



**\$8 MILLION PER YEAR:**  
**THE ESTIMATED COST OF ADMINISTERING MONTANA'S 2,300 CONSERVATION EASEMENTS—TYPICALLY COMPLETED BY NONPROFIT LAND TRUSTS.<sup>12</sup>**

- \* \$12.4+ million/year: includes Montana's unfunded applications to the following programs: 2019 Natural Resources Conservation Service Agricultural Land Easement; 2019 Montana Conservation Trust; 2019 US Forest Service Forest Legacy Program; 5-year average to the National Forest Foundation.<sup>9</sup>
- Not quantified: watershed collaboratives; wildlife conflict reduction programs; tribal and state forest stewardship opportunities; projects that would not meet the criteria of existing funding programs; assistance for transaction expenses for conservation easements.

# WILDLIFE

## UNMET NEED: \$15+ MILLION/YEAR\*

Wildlife is a defining characteristic of Montana—62% of Montanans participate in wildlife-associated recreation such as wildlife watching, hunting, and fishing. Montana ranks in the top five states for hunting and fishing participation.<sup>1</sup>

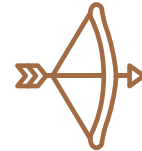
Managing wildlife requires collaboration among state and federal agencies, nonprofits, and private landowners. Investments in habitat protection and improvement protect our hunting and fishing heritage and the economic benefits it generates.

Wildlife management is funded largely by hunting and fishing licenses and federal excise taxes on firearms, archery equipment, and fishing gear. Montana's wildlife faces threats from invasive species such as zebra mussels and diseases such as Chronic Wasting Disease. New funding could help address species of concern and ensure that FWP can maintain robust game management.

The Montana Wildlife Futures Group evaluated funding needed to supplement that provided by hunters and anglers and ensure the long-term survival of all of Montana's wildlife—game and nongame. Habitat conservation projects require about \$8.5 million annually. Ongoing education, research, land acquisition, and conflict resolution programs (for example, the Blackfoot Challenge and range-rider programs) require another \$6.5 million annually.<sup>13</sup>



In 2017,  
**anglers spent \$919.3 million in more than 3.3 million angling days**



In 2017,  
**hunters spent \$389.2 million in more than 2.6 million hunter days**

- In a recent survey, **68% of Montanans said loss of wildlife habitat was a serious problem in the state.**<sup>10</sup>
- **The sale of hunting and angling licenses fund 77% of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks' current fish and wildlife management budget.**<sup>13</sup>

\* \$15 million/year: includes terrestrial habitat protection through land acquisition and conservation easements; aquatic habitat protection through maintenance of in-stream flows, restoration, and water quality protection; human-wildlife conflict resolution through livestock depredation programs; species conservation through monitoring, research, and management; and wildlife conservation education and recreation, including development of infrastructure.<sup>13</sup>

• Not quantified: anticipated lost revenue from declining licensing fees; increasing funding needs for invasive species management; costs for sustaining existing programs.



**\$150,000+**  
**COST TO BUILD A FISHING ACCESS SITE<sup>14</sup>**



**\$3,000-\$5,000**  
**COST OF DESIGNING AND INSTALLING INTERPRETIVE KIOSK<sup>14</sup>**

# STATE PARKS

## UNMET NEED: \$25.7+ MILLION\*

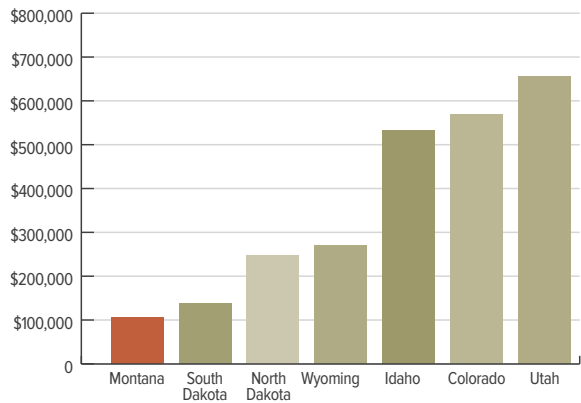
Montana's 55 state parks showcase our natural and historical heritage across the state and host 2.5 million visits every year.<sup>5</sup> State parks are popular with residents: 53% of Montanans surveyed in 2018 had visited a state park during the previous 12 months.<sup>16</sup>

State parks also benefit nearby communities. Visitors from outside the state spend more than \$122 million in Montana each year, creating 1,600 jobs.<sup>17</sup>

Montana has more parks than any other state in the region, but other states fund and staff their parks and recreation and historic sites at a much higher level than Montana. On average, Montana's state parks budget and number of employees per park are 73% lower than neighboring states.<sup>3</sup>

Despite their growing popularity, Montana's state parks are consistently underfunded and suffer from a \$25.7 million maintenance backlog.<sup>5</sup> This does not address future recreation needs of a growing population, only past unmet obligations. Underfunding has also led to missed opportunities to improve facilities, acquire land to expand and add new parks, maintain and improve campgrounds, and create educational programming. SB 24, a trails and recreational facilities grant program passed in 2019, will help address some needs for parks, but will not meet all of it.

State Parks Operating Budget Per Site



Sites include state parks, historical sites, and other recreation areas managed by state parks departments in each state.

Source: Montana Environmental Quality Council, 2012. <https://leg.mt.gov/content/Publications/Environmental/2013-state-parks.pdf>

- Visitation to state parks has increased **40% over the last decade.**<sup>5</sup>
- Trails are the top amenity identified by state park users, across day and overnight users, age categories, and mountains and plains visitors.<sup>16</sup>

\* \$25.7 million: includes \$22.1 million of infrastructure needs at 34 of 55 state parks included in the 2015 Facility Condition Inventory and \$3.6 million in structural improvements at four state parks.

- Not quantified: System needs to meet the obligations to growing population and increased use; understaffed facilities; unmet educational programming needs; missed acquisition opportunities; construction of new trails, boat ramps, and campgrounds.



**\$400,000-\$1,000,000**  
COST TO CONSTRUCT A  
10-UNIT CAMPGROUND<sup>14</sup>



**\$20,000**  
COST TO INSTALL A VAULT TOILET<sup>14</sup>

# TRAILS

## UNMET NEED: \$7.1+ MILLION\*

Trails benefit communities by increasing business, improving public health, and increasing property values. Trail use and visitation has climbed in Montana with 72% of Montana households using trails each year.<sup>1</sup> Nearly 30% of Montanans over age 15 participate in motorized recreation.<sup>1</sup>

Trails around the state are managed by federal, state, local, and private organizations. However, federal budgets have been declining. The U.S. Forest Service budget, for example, has dropped by \$36 million (40%) over the last decade.<sup>18</sup> The federal funding decline means trails on federal lands are not being built or maintained sufficiently. A matching state funding source could help federal dollars go farther.

The two largest federal programs—the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) and Recreation Trails Program (RTP)—awarded \$2.9 million in grants to Montana in 2018 for projects such as trail access and trail construction. However, more than \$1 million of requests to RTP were not funded in 2018 alone. From 2014 to 2018, there was a \$6.8 million gap between trail projects proposed to RTP and funding awarded.<sup>19</sup>

Other funders are also seeing more proposals than can be funded. Over the last five years, proposals to the National Forest Foundation for trail-related work were double the funding available, leaving a \$300,000 gap.<sup>20</sup>



- **Montanans are more likely to participate in day hiking than the average American.<sup>2</sup>**
- **Recreation with off-highway vehicles and snowmobiles increased more than 200% in Montana since 2000.<sup>1</sup>**
- **A state study about popular outdoor activities noted that the top needs in the state's six regions included bicycle lanes, walking/jogging/biking paths, hiking trails, interpretive trails, and off-road ATV trails.<sup>1</sup>**

\* \$7.1 million: includes the sum of grants not awarded by the Recreation Trails Program from 2013-2018 (\$6.8 million) and the sum of grants not awarded by the National Forest Foundation from 2014-2018 (\$300,000).

• Not quantified: Technical assistance for grant applications, deferred maintenance, trail needs that do not meet federal program requirements.



**\$25,000+**  
**COST PER MILE OF NEW TRAIL**  
**CONSTRUCTION, NOT INCLUDING**  
**THE COST OF LAND OR EASEMENT<sup>21</sup>**



**\$1,000-\$5,000**  
**COST PER MILE PER YEAR**  
**FOR TRAIL MAINTENANCE<sup>22</sup>**





# **WOULD A STATEWIDE SOLUTION HELP MONTANA?**



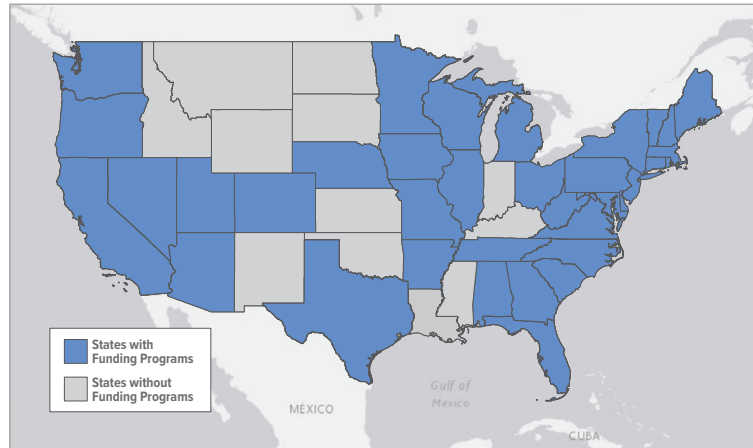
# LESSONS FROM OTHER STATES

Thirty-six states have adopted programs to creatively invest in conservation or outdoor recreation and ensure that outdoor opportunities meet growing demand, are sustainable, and are accessible by all communities—from the biggest cities to the smallest towns.<sup>23</sup>

State programs for working lands, conservation, and recreation range in size from a few hundred thousand dollars to hundreds of millions each year. They generate funds from a variety of sources, including bonds, lottery proceeds, sales taxes, and oil and gas revenue. Many programs distribute funds to state parks or other state agencies, as well as to local governments, private landowners, and nonprofit organizations through grant programs.

Most state programs leverage the public investment of dollars with partnerships, matching contributions, and prioritization of projects where multiple, overlapping goals can be met.<sup>24</sup> The most robust state funding programs have transparent processes, dedicated funding sources, and prioritize demographic and geographic diversity.

States with Funding Programs for Conservation or Recreation



The programs' details vary between states, but they share common elements that contribute to their success. Many programs prioritize geographic and demographic diversity by funding statewide programs as well as local priorities through grants to local governments and nonprofits.

Sources: *The Trust for Public Land, Conservation Almanac, 2019. www.conservationalmanac.org; Headwaters Economics, 2017. https://headwaterseconomics.org/economic-development/state-recreation-funding/*

## State programs reflect residents' priorities:



**AVG: \$28.2 M/yr**  
**Washington** uses general appropriations and has funded more than 810 capital projects such as small community parks, state park acquisitions, and long distance, multi-phased trails.



**AVG: \$125 M/yr**  
**Colorado** uses lottery proceeds to focus on engaging youth and reaching underserved communities, in addition to funding open space and wildlife conservation.



**AVG: \$49 M/yr**  
**Minnesota** expanded a sales tax to fund multiple priorities, including habitat conservation, new public access for hunting and fishing, parks and trails, and arts and cultural heritage.

# STRATEGIES THAT WORK

Although each state program is unique, the most successful state programs incorporate common strategies to establish, design, and administer a funding program.<sup>23</sup>

## Be Inclusive

- Invest in a range of outdoor opportunities, including new access and infrastructure, maintenance of existing resources, and educational programming. Avoid being too prescriptive so that the program can adapt to changing socioeconomic and ecological needs.
- Incorporate demographic and geographic diversity in the program design so communities of all sizes in every county can benefit. Programs can help rural and underserved communities with technical assistance, modified match requirements, or quick reimbursement programs.

## Do More With Less

- Leverage resources by prioritizing projects that achieve multiple objectives or that bring in some form of match (cash, in-kind, or volunteer time) so the state investment yields a greater benefit.
- Incentivize planning to encourage more robust projects that align with statewide goals. Some state programs provide technical planning assistance to communities, helping make projects stronger and increasing local capacity.

## Be Accountable

- Measure and mark program accomplishments with searchable databases and maps, trail and park signage, and regular reports so the public knows how the program benefits their outdoor experience and the state's conservation heritage.
- Engage citizens from start to finish. Inclusion of citizens from diverse communities from the program inception to implementation helps ensure that it meets the public's expectations, has a fair and transparent process, and stays relevant.

**Montanans value the land, water, wildlife, and recreational opportunities of the Big Sky state. As Montana changes and grows, stable funding at the statewide level can ensure these resources benefit more people across more communities and are protected for future generations.**



# METHODS

This report uses data collected from several publicly available sources, cited below. The dollar amounts in each category represent what is known currently about funding needs for conservation and recreation in Montana, but they require two caveats.

First, these numbers do not provide an exhaustive accounting of unmet needs. For example, we know more than \$1 million in trail-related grant applications are not awarded each year, but this does not account for the applications not submitted because a local match was not available or a community could not provide up-front funding. For this reason, the funding needs provided in this report are low estimates of total need.

Second, the unmet needs for each category cannot be summed to one number. In some cases, the needs for individual categories overlap (e.g., working land conservation and wildlife habitat protection).

Additionally, the funding need estimates in some categories are annual and in other categories they are total, long-term estimates.

## FUNDING SOURCES EVALUATED

- Forest Legacy Program
- Land and Water Conservation Fund
- Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks Budgets
- National Forest Foundation
- Natural Resource Conservation Service Agricultural Conservation Easement Program
- Montana Fish & Wildlife Conservation Trust
- Recreational Trails Program
- USDA Forest Service Budget

Unmet funding needs for wildlife conservation were derived from a January 2019 report by the Montana Wildlife Future Group. Public access is not estimated separately because it is accounted for in the other four categories.

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Headwaters Economics published this report in partnership with the Montana Outdoor Heritage Project. The Montana Outdoor Heritage Project is a coalition of volunteers and outdoor organizations seeking public input and solutions to enhance funding for private and public lands conservation, wildlife management, and outdoor access and recreation in Montana.

<https://montanaheritageproject.com>