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On October 2, the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources held a hearing and reported favorably on legislation (S. 569) that would permanently reauthorize the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). Created in 1965, the LWCF directs federal royalties from offshore oil and gas drilling to conservation and public recreation efforts. Although Congress was unable to pass a reauthorization bill before funding for the LCWF expired on September 30, the authority to carry out the program does not expire. Oil and gas revenue from offshore drilling will be diverted into the general Treasury instead of the LCWF until lawmakers reinstate it.

This action came three weeks after the House Committee on Natural Resources passed their version of the bill (H.R. 502) on September 13. Both the House and Senate versions have bipartisan support and aim to permanently reauthorize the LWCF. However, the two bills have some key differences, setting up hurdles to their final passage.

The Senate bill, introduced by Energy and Natural Resources Committee Ranking Member Maria Cantwell (D-WA), would ensure full funding for the LWCF at its annual authorized level of \$900 million. The program has been appropriated at about half of this authorized amount in recent years. However, Chairman Rob Bishop (R-UT-1) said that mandatory funding for the LWCF, as featured in the Senate version of the bill, could destroy its chance of passage in the House because of long-term budgetary concerns. The House version, introduced by Natural Resources Committee Ranking Member Raul Grijalva (D-AZ-3), does not dedicate annual funding to the LWCF, meaning Congress would have to continue to appropriate funds for the program each year through their annual budgeting process.

Neither chamber took further action on the bill before entering a month-long recess on October 12. Chairman Bishop has said he expects passage before the end of the year. He also hopes to pass it as part of a “broader legislative lands package” that would include the Restore Our Parks and Public Lands Act (H.R. 6510) to address the backlog of infrastructure projects in national parks.

Sources: E&E News; Government Publishing Office; Library of Congress; U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Natural Resources.
