

## Clinton, Congress agree on plan to protect public lands

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(10-06) 02:55 EDT WASHINGTON (AP) -- President Clinton and Congress agreed on a six-year, \$12 billion plan to protect public lands and expand conservation efforts, but still have miles to go to finish their budget work for the new year.

The Senate voted 83-13 on Thursday to send Clinton an \$18.8 billion Interior Department bill for fiscal 2001 establishing the massive land conservation program and making a \$1.2 billion down payment on it. With the House having already approved the measure, it now goes to Clinton for his promised signature.

Even so, of the 13 spending measures for the fiscal year that began Sunday, the Interior bill is among only four that lawmakers have readied for Clinton. And of those, Clinton has threatened to veto one that finances energy and water projects because of a dispute over water levels on the Missouri River.

Over the next few days, congressional leaders were hoping to complete six more bills covering transportation; agriculture; veterans, housing, environmental and science programs; the Treasury Department; the District of Columbia's budget; and Congress's own operations.

The Senate voted 95-1 Thursday to keep federal agencies open through Oct. 14 while budget talks continue, another bill Clinton will sign. The first temporary extension expires Saturday morning.

The new program for purchasing fragile lands, maintaining parks, preserving wildlife and other conservation initiatives marks a major victory for Clinton, who has made expanding public parklands a priority.

It was far smaller than a \$45 billion, 15-year program that passed the House but was bogged down by Westerners in the Senate. Even so, the measure would more than double last year's federal conservation spending.

Amid burgeoning federal surpluses, the overall Interior bill was \$3.9 billion bigger than last year's measure, \$2.4 billion more than Clinton had requested and more than \$3 billion larger than earlier House and Senate versions.

Barely a month before Election Day, it was loaded with hometown projects for lawmakers from every state. That ranged from \$288,000 for wolf recovery efforts in Idaho to \$487,000 to restore a carriage barn at the home of the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, which is now a national historic site in Cambridge, Mass.

**"This is our business ... to see to it that the lands and historic sites and facilities of the United States of America are properly maintained," said Sen. Slade Gorton, R-Wash.**

**But Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., a frequent critic of such spending, did not see it that way and released a 20-page list of "objectionable" projects.**

**"The spigot is on," he complained.**

**The Clinton administration succeeded in removing language from the Interior bill that would have exempted New Hampshire's White Mountains from planned Forest Service protections. Also deleted was a section that would have blocked consideration of removing Snake River dams in Washington state to help struggling salmon populations.**

**But Western commercial interests won their own victories. These included permission for some ranchers using federal lands to renew grazing permits without environmental reviews, and money to enable loggers to remove debris from some national forests.**

**The bill also contained \$105 million for the National Endowment for the Arts, \$7 million more than last year and the agency's first significant increase since the GOP took control of Congress six years ago.**

**Separately, officials familiar with a tentative agreement on a nearly \$109 billion measure financing housing, veterans, environmental and science programs said the measure would slow Environmental Protection Agency plans to move against urban air pollution.**

**A provision in the bill would bar EPA until June from officially citing cities and counties for being in violation of new, stricter air quality standards. Such a listing could lead to restrictions on construction and other forms of development in a community.**

**A lower court overturned the 1997 standards last year, and the Supreme Court is expected to rule on them next year. Last June, the House approved language by Reps. Mac Collins and John Linder, both Georgia Republicans, that would have forbidden the EPA from listing communities until October.**

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**On the Net:**

**Information on the Interior bill, H.R. 4578, may be found at <http://thomas.loc.gov>**

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