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By Phil Taylor

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In a bright spot in an otherwise bleak appropriations bill for conservationists, the House last night approved an amendment to boost funding for federal land acquisition by \$20 million.

The amendment from Rep. Charlie Bass (R-N.H.) would transfer the money from the office of the Interior secretary, increasing the Land and Water Conservation Fund to more than \$80 million.

It was adopted by voice vote, despite objections from Rep. Jim Moran (D-Va.) that the proposal would hamper Interior's ability to collect offshore oil and gas revenues needed to fund LWCF.

"It's a small price to pay for what could be done with those funds," Bass said in a floor speech. "A \$68 million appropriation just plain doesn't do it."

The fund -- which is used to purchase new lands from willing sellers, place private lands into conservation easements and assist states in promoting recreation -- is authorized at \$900 million, but would have seen its lowest funding in more than 40 years under the original House bill.

Conservationists and many sportsmen have urged increased support for the fund, which they argue preserves habitat, improves access and boosts rural economies. The Obama administration requested full funding in fiscal 2012 to implement its Great Outdoors initiative to connect Americans, mostly youth, to nature.

Rep. Mike Simpson (R-Idaho), the House's top appropriator for lands agencies, said he supports the fund but argued that the country doesn't have the money to pay for it.

Moran also raised objections to taking the money from the Interior secretary's office, which includes the newly established Office of Natural Resources Revenue to collect royalties from offshore oil and gas drilling, which funds LWCF.

"The offset used would in fact harm other programs," he said.

In March, government accountability officials warned Simpson and Moran's subcommittee that Interior has done a poor job tracking production of oil and gas from public lands and waters and has likely cost taxpayers billions of dollars in lost royalties (Greenwire, March 1).

"If you take away ability to collect those royalties ... you could very well be costing the government much more than \$20 million," Moran said.

Simpson said the issue will need to be resolved when the bill is conferenced with the Senate.

A later amendment by Rep. Doug Lamborn (R-Colo.) to completely eliminate land acquisition funding and divert the savings to deficit reduction was rejected on a voice vote.