

ENVIRONMENT

GOVERNMENT + POLITICS

## **‘Once-in-a-generation investment’: Idaho state parks receive record funding for improvements**

All 30 Idaho state parks to benefit from \$140M in combined state and federal funding

BY: **CLARK CORBIN** - OCTOBER 6, 2023 4:30 AM





📷 State officials celebrated the opening of Bruneau Dunes Observatory on June 1. The observatory is one of several projects benefiting from record funding levels for Idaho state parks. (Courtesy of Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation)

A record influx of state and federal funding is paying for a \$140 million transformation of Idaho state parks that officials say will benefit Idahoans and visitors for generations to come.

Two funding sources have come together to create what one state legislator calls a once-in-a-generation opportunity to invest in and protect Idaho state parks.

The funding includes:

- \$45 million through the federal American Rescue Plan Act that President Joe Biden signed into law in March 2021.
- \$95 million through [Senate Bill 1196](#), which the Idaho Legislature passed earlier this year and Gov. Brad Little signed on March 30. The funding comes through transfers from the state's general fund to the parks and recreation fund and was created by the [record budget surplus](#) the state of Idaho accumulated at the end of fiscal year 2022.



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The money is being spread around the state, with all 30 state parks set to benefit.

Between the two funding sources, money is going toward buying a hot springs to add to the state parks portfolio, paving a scenic Eastern Idaho trail that is situated where railroad tracks used to run and opening a new observatory that allows the public to use telescopes to scan the dark skies for free.

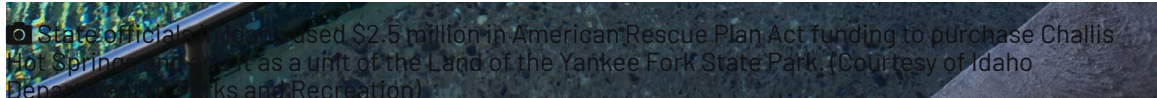
### **What projects will the funding support in Idaho parks?**

Renovated restrooms, up to 450 new campsites over the next 10 years, additional boat ramps, parking, trail improvements and









State officials have used \$2.5 million in American Rescue Plan Act funding to purchase Challis Hot Springs and operate it as a unit of the Land of the Yankee Fork State Park. (Courtesy of Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation)

electrical and water upgrades are all on the way in a series of projects that will be rolled out over the next several years, officials said.

The money couldn't be coming in at a better time. Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation spokesman Craig Quintana said there has been record visitation at state parks, with an average of about 7.4 million visitors over each of the past three years.

“Our parks are being used heavily, and that is increasing the wear and tear on facilities,” Quintana said. “So we’re so thankful the Legislature and governor took notice that there were needs.”

At least \$70 million from the state surplus money is going to

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### **Funding at work: Three projects benefiting from the influx of funding for Idaho State Parks.**

**Challis Hot Springs:** State officials used \$2.5 million in American Rescue Plan Act money to purchase Challis Hot Springs from the Hammond family and operate the hot springs as a unit of the nearby Land of the Yankee Fork State Park. The purchase included a campground with about 50 spaces and ensures public

address deferred maintenance projects that had been backed up for years at the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation. There is also funding for capital projects to expand access to parks and build new projects.

Quintana said the maintenance backlog built up in the great recession during lean budget years and the state had never been able to get on top of it until now.

“It was a sign that we were stretched beyond our means, and our facilities had suffered over the years when we were living hand-to-mouth and not keeping up,” Quintana said. “Our focus was keeping the doors open and the lights on, which was a bad place to be.”

Rep. James Petzke, a Meridian

access to the hot springs will continue.

**Ashton-Tetonia Trail:** The state will use funding to pave over the 30-mile [Ashton-Teton Trail](#) which opened in 2010 along the former Teton Valley Branch of the Union Pacific Railroad. The trail is gravel now, but paving it will expand accessibility to the trail, which offers picturesque views of the Teton Range and passes over three historic trestle bridges.

### **Bruneau Dunes**

**Observatory:** State officials celebrated the opening of the [Bruneau Dunes Observatory](#) at Bruneau Dunes State Park on June 1. Federal American Rescue

Republican who voted in favor of Senate Bill 1196, said he was proud to support the bill as someone who loves public lands and state parks.

“I believe the quantity and quality of public lands access we have in Idaho is something that is truly unique and great,” Petzke said in a telephone interview. “The chance to support a once-in-a-generation investment in our parks was a pretty easy decision for me.”

### **Bill was part of bipartisan effort to improve state parks**

The state parks funding was a true bipartisan effort. Little included it in his budget proposal. Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation Director Susan Buxton met with legislators about the backlog of deferred maintenance in state parks and the record usage at those parks. Legislators from both parties sponsored the bill and voted for the bill, with the Idaho Senate voting 25-10 to pass Senate Bill 1196,

Plan Act funding helped pay for the facility, which allows members of the public to tour the observatory and use the collection of telescopes for free on Friday and Saturday evenings from June through October. Plans are in the works to expand the observatory with a new planetarium.

The public can follow the progress on all of the different projects at state parks on the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation’s [development projects website](#).



and the Idaho House of Representatives following up with a 55-15 vote to pass it.

“I’m excited about it and proud of the fact the Legislature did this,” Petzke said. “The Legislature gets beat up in the press all the time, and I get it. But this is an example of one of the really good things that happened this last session.”

Sen. Rick Just, a Boise Democrat and retired Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation employee, sponsored the bill in the Idaho Senate.

“I worked for the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation for about 30 years myself, and we had been trying to get funding for a number of years for deferred maintenance projects and had some success on a smaller scale. But this was an opportunity to get the largest funding bill in state parks history,” Just said in a telephone interview, referring to Senate Bill 1196.

Although some projects will take years and many are still in the design phase, the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation’s development bureau is managing 93 active projects totaling \$75 million, bureau chief Melanie Schuster said.

“It’s amazing,” Schuster said in an interview this week. “People don’t know about these places and then they go and are blown away by the variety of what we have to offer. Each park is so unique. Some

offer recreation, boating and hiking opportunities. Some offer scenic views and some offer history. It's such a variety."



📷 The public is invited to view the skies through the collection of telescopes at Bruneau Dunes Observatory for free on Friday and Saturday nights from June to mid October, weather permitting. (Courtesy of Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation)

The money is vital because Idaho doesn't have a long-term dedicated funding source for conservation and the state had a long maintenance backlog that was exacerbated by the increase in public usage, said Rialin Flores, executive director of Conservation Voters for Idaho.

Supporting public lands and state parks is a winning issue politically

in Idaho, no matter what side of the aisle a policymaker is on, Flores said.

“This is a win for many folks and a benefit for rural communities across the state that are located close to our state parks,” Flores said.

“It helps make sure Idaho is a place where future generations will want to live and grow up and raise their families because of those special experiences we have in the outdoors.”