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Western Rivers Conservation Campaign

Applying Organization	American Whitewater	Application Date	5/14/2026
Applying Contact	Thomas O'Keefe	Status	Submitted
Record Type	Member Collective	Created By	Thomas O'Keefe, 5/4/2026, 11:49 PM
		Create Account	<input type="checkbox"/>

Project Overview

Project Name	Western Rivers Conservation Campaign	Requested Amount	\$50,000.00
Project/Campaign Name	Western Rivers Conservation Campaign		
Type of Project	Designation	Project Multiple Locations	
Project Location (State or Territory)	CA	Longitude	123°24'24.4"W
Latitude	40°24'47.7"N		

Organization Details

Organization Name	American Whitewater	Primary address for organization	P.O. Box 63 Springfield, Oregon 97477 United States
Contact Name	Thomas O'Keefe	Contact Title	Senior Director of Policy and Science
Contact Email Address	okeefe@americanwhitewater.org		
Annual Operating Budget	\$2,510,140.00	Tax Status/Organization Type	501c3 Organization
Staff Size	13	Main Phone	877-748-3777
Total Membership	7,000	Organization Website/Social Media Feed	https://www.americanwhitewater.org/
BIPOC-led	No	C-Suite Staff	

Grant Details

Awarded Amount		Awarded Date	
Funding Program			
Primary Project Type		Secondary Project Type	
Term Start Date		Term End Date	

Proposal Questions

Mission/History Of Organization	Founded in 1954, American Whitewater's mission is to protect and restore America's whitewater rivers and to enhance opportunities to enjoy them safely. For more than 70 years, we have	Location Details	American Whitewater's Western Rivers Conservation Campaign focuses on protecting more than 1,500 miles of rivers and surrounding public lands across the Western United States
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worked to conserve free-flowing rivers, improve public access, and advance responsible recreation through advocacy, stewardship, education, and partnerships. American Whitewater has played a leading role in protecting and restoring rivers nationwide through Wild and Scenic River designations, dam removals, hydropower reform, recreation infrastructure improvements, and river access initiatives. We represent a nationwide community of boaters, outdoor enthusiasts, and conservation advocates and work closely with local communities, Tribes, land managers, recreation businesses, and partner organizations to ensure rivers remain healthy, accessible, and protected for future generations.

through Wild and Scenic River designations, National Conservation Areas, and related public land protections. Priority landscapes include the Olympic Peninsula in Washington, the Gila watershed in New Mexico, the Owyhee Canyonlands in Oregon, the Dolores River corridor in Colorado, the Greater Yellowstone region in Montana, and Northern California river systems included in the PUBLIC Lands Act. All of these landscapes have bills that have been introduced in Congress this session in at least one chamber and have the potential to be signed into law over the next year.

These landscapes contain some of the most ecologically significant and recreation-rich river systems in the country. Rivers proposed for protection support cold-water fisheries, intact riparian habitat, wildlife migration corridors, and climate refugia that become increasingly important as temperatures warm and hydrology shifts. The Olympic Peninsula contains one of the largest remaining temperate rainforests in the continental United States, with rivers supporting salmon, steelhead, elk, and old-growth forest ecosystems. The Gila River watershed includes the nation's first designated wilderness and one of the last free-flowing desert river systems in the Southwest. Oregon's Owyhee Canyonlands protect dramatic high desert canyons, sagebrush ecosystems, and habitat for bighorn sheep, raptors, and native fish. The Dolores River corridor links canyon ecosystems and recreation resources across western Colorado. Montana headwater systems support some of the most intact cold-water fisheries in the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem.

These rivers are also nationally important outdoor recreation destinations supporting boating, fishing, hiking, camping, wildlife viewing, hunting, and backcountry travel. Their protection helps sustain local economies and preserves opportunities for people to connect with public lands and waters. What makes these efforts unique is the opportunity for durable federal river protections backed by broad local support. These proposals have been developed over years through collaboration among Tribes, local governments, the hunting and fishing community, conservation organizations, recreation groups, and businesses. Together, these campaigns represent the next generation of river and public land conservation efforts in the American West that will create meaningful landscape-scale conservation outcomes.

Final Success

Final success is the enactment of durable federal protections for more than

Impact on Climate and Biodiversity

Protecting free-flowing rivers and surrounding public lands across the

1,500 miles of rivers and associated public lands across the Western United States through Wild and Scenic River designations, National Conservation Areas, and related conservation legislation.

West will strengthen climate resiliency, conserve biodiversity, and improve landscape connectivity at a regional scale. The rivers included in these proposals support intact aquatic and riparian ecosystems that are increasingly important as climate change alters snowpack, streamflow timing, wildfire patterns, and water temperatures. Wild and Scenic River protections help preserve natural hydrologic function, maintain floodplain connectivity, and prevent new dams or major river alterations that fragment ecosystems. Healthy river corridors provide cold-water refuges for native fish and sustain wetlands and riparian vegetation that support birds, amphibians, pollinators, and large mammals. In arid landscapes, these river corridors are particularly critical because they provide reliable water sources and migration pathways for wildlife.

Many proposed protections connect existing wilderness areas, national forests, Tribal lands, and other protected public lands. On the Olympic Peninsula and in the Greater Yellowstone region, protected rivers strengthen connectivity across globally significant temperate ecosystems. In Oregon and New Mexico, river protections connect large blocks of public land that support wildlife movement across climatic gradients. The Dolores River canyons include two of Colorado's largest unprotected biodiversity hotspots, while Northern California river protections would strengthen integrated conservation across one of the West's most biodiverse landscapes and an important salmon stronghold.

These landscapes also improve climate resilience for human communities. Intact watersheds improve water quality, moderate flooding, reduce erosion, protect drinking water, and support more resilient fisheries and recreation economies. Protecting undeveloped river corridors reduces future pressures from extractive development and fragmentation while preserving natural carbon storage in forests, wetlands, and healthy soils.

Importantly, these protections create durable conservation outcomes that persist across political administrations. By securing long-term federal protections now, we can help ensure that these river systems continue functioning as connected ecological corridors and climate refuges for future generations.

American Whitewater's primary role is to coordinate across the river protection campaigns where we serve in a leadership capacity. Our strategy is to advance multiple river protection bills simultaneously so they are positioned for enactment as part of a broader public

Expected Economic & Recreational Impact

Protected rivers and public lands support strong local economies and vibrant communities across the West while ensuring continued public access to high-quality natural landscapes. The rivers included in these proposals are nationally significant destinations for

Strategy & Timeline For Final Success

boating, fishing, hiking, camping, hunting, wildlife viewing, and other outdoor recreation activities. Wild and Scenic River designations and related public land protections help sustain recreation-based economies by protecting the natural character and water quality that attract visitors and support outdoor businesses. Local communities benefit from spending at outfitters, restaurants, lodging providers, campgrounds, gear shops, and other recreation-related businesses. Equally important, protected public lands and waters provide close-to-home recreation opportunities that improve quality of life, support public health, and help communities recruit and retain employers, workers, and families seeking year-round access to outdoor recreation and natural amenities. Many of these landscapes are already recognized for their recreation value, and long-term protections would provide certainty that public access and recreation values will remain protected over time. These designations also help federal land managers prioritize recreation planning, river access improvements, habitat restoration, interpretation, and stewardship investments.

The project will protect and maintain public access to more than 1,500 miles of rivers and associated public lands across six Western states. In many rural communities, outdoor recreation and protected public lands provide important economic diversification and long-term community resilience, while also ensuring access for local residents and visitors alike.

lands package. Final success will secure durable federal protections through Wild and Scenic River designations, wilderness designations, and related conservation measures that protect river corridors and surrounding watersheds across the Western United States. American Whitewater staff and members are deeply connected to many of these river systems and communities, allowing us to translate river conservation into recreation, economic, and community benefits that resonate with congressional offices and stakeholders across party lines.

Key campaign activities include:

- Direct engagement with congressional offices, committee staff, and agency personnel.
 - Coordinating advocacy among local partners, outdoor businesses, Tribes, recreation groups, and national organizations.
 - Organizing field visits, paddling trips, and community events for policymakers and staff that elevate local voices.
 - Providing technical expertise on river values, recreation economics, geospatial analysis, and conservation policy.
 - Supporting communications strategies that build public support for river protections.
 - Assisting with legislative strategy, coalition coordination, and negotiations tied to larger public lands packages.
- Our activities are designed to combine on-the-ground constituent engagement with sustained policy expertise and coalition coordination in Washington, DC to help congressional offices advance durable bipartisan conservation outcomes. Our strategy recognizes that public lands legislation often advances incrementally over multiple Congresses before moving as part of negotiated legislative packages. Success depends on maintaining momentum, strengthening bipartisan support, and ensuring proposals remain active within committee processes.

Over the next 12–18 months, we anticipate important opportunities for progress on long-standing conservation priorities. During the remainder of the 119th Congress, we will focus on committee engagement, bipartisan relationship-building, coalition coordination, and positioning legislation for inclusion in a negotiated public lands package. Legislative windows at the end of a congressional session are often brief and require advocates to be organized, engaged, and prepared to respond quickly.

We are also preparing for opportunities that may emerge early in the 120th Congress. In Northern California, recent redistricting significantly expanded Representative Huffman's district into Siskiyou and Modoc counties, creating

the first meaningful opportunity in decades to advance new Wild and Scenic River designations and related land protections across a large public land landscape in far Northern California. As current Ranking Member of the House Natural Resources Committee and a potential future Chair in the 120th Congress, Representative Huffman is uniquely positioned to help shape broader public lands legislation. We will coordinate with his office, local partners, Tribes, and stakeholders to lay the groundwork for expanded river and watershed protections with the intention of making this central to a future public lands package.

American Whitewater has a strong track record advancing bipartisan river protections. We played leadership roles in successful efforts to protect East Rosebud Creek in Montana in 2018 and later helped secure passage of the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act in 2019. Those efforts, signed into law by a Republican president, demonstrated the effectiveness of combining locally grounded advocacy with national coalition coordination and bipartisan outreach.

Potential challenges include congressional gridlock, competing legislative priorities, and opposition from interests concerned about future land use restrictions or extractive development. We address these challenges by building broad coalitions that include recreation businesses, local governments, conservation groups, hunters and anglers, and community leaders who can effectively communicate the economic, recreational, and cultural benefits of river protection.

Because many of these campaigns already have bipartisan support, prior committee action, or previous House passage, we believe the next year presents a meaningful opportunity to secure durable protections across multiple Western landscapes.

Outdoor businesses are highly effective advocates for conservation because they communicate the economic importance of protected landscapes to policymakers. Their support demonstrates that river protection is not only an environmental priority, but also an investment in recreation economies, quality of life, and rural development.

Businesses can support these efforts through sign-on letters, meetings with congressional offices, public communications, district events, storytelling campaigns, and coalition advocacy. One of our most effective approaches is field outings with Members of Congress during the summer. When these outings include

Key Decision Makers

Key decision makers include members and staff of the House Natural Resources Committee and Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee and members representing affected states and districts. In the 119th Congress, this includes Chairman Westerman and Ranking Member Huffman in the House and Chairman Lee and Ranking Member Heinrich in the Senate. We regularly engage committee staff from all four offices and serve as a trusted source of technical and policy expertise.

Representative Vasquez and Representative Zinke, founders of the Public Lands Caucus, have emerged as important bipartisan partners interested

Working With Business Community

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in advancing paired Wild and Scenic River legislation in New Mexico and Montana. Supporting and strengthening bipartisan relationships like these will be central to success.

The likelihood of securing support varies by proposal and political conditions, but many priority bills already have bipartisan co-sponsors, prior committee consideration, or previous House passage. Our strategy focuses on gaining momentum and identifying opportunities for negotiated public lands packages that can advance multiple proposals together.

Key legislation includes the Wild Olympics Wilderness and Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, M.H. Dutch Salmon Greater Gila Wild and Scenic River Act, Greater Yellowstone Recreation Enhancement and Tourism Act, Malheur Community Empowerment for the Owyhee Act, Oregon Recreation Enhancement Act, Smith River National Recreation Area Expansion Act, Dolores River National Conservation Area and Special Management Area Act, and the PUBLIC Lands Act in California.

Elevate Voices

These river protection campaigns are rooted in long-term collaboration with local communities, Tribes, recreation groups, and regional partners. Many proposals have been developed over years through locally driven stakeholder processes that include Tribal governments, rural communities, business owners, conservation organizations, and recreation interests.

American Whitewater works to ensure that local voices remain central to advocacy efforts and public communications. We support community leaders by helping coordinate advocacy, providing technical expertise, facilitating congressional engagement, and elevating local perspectives during legislative processes. Community members are often the most effective advocates because they can directly communicate the cultural, economic, recreational, and ecological importance of these landscapes.

We also recognize the importance of Tribal stewardship and cultural connections to rivers and public lands. Several of the landscapes included in this campaign overlap with areas of deep cultural significance to Indigenous communities. Where Tribes are engaged in support of conservation efforts, we work collaboratively and respectfully to amplify Tribal priorities and leadership.

American Whitewater's broader work to expand access to rivers through programs such as Diversify Whitewater also informs our conservation approach.

business leaders, they are especially impactful, bringing local economic credibility and bipartisan influence while demonstrating broad community support. The Conservation Alliance member companies also help elevate public awareness of river conservation campaigns through their customer networks, media platforms, and outdoor communities.

Measurable On-Ground Outcomes

- Advance legislation representing more than 1,500 miles of proposed Wild and Scenic Rivers and related protected river corridors through committee action, expanded bipartisan support, and legislative package inclusion.
- Secure additional local government, Tribal, recreation business, and community endorsements for priority river protection proposals.
- Increase durable protections for connected public land landscapes associated with proposed river designations, including wilderness, conservation area, and recreation management provisions.
- Strengthen long-term protection for critical fish and wildlife habitat, intact riparian ecosystems, and climate-resilient river corridors within priority landscapes.
- Build durable bipartisan support for maintaining public ownership, conservation, and investment in America's public lands and waters by elevating constituent, community, and outdoor recreation business voices supporting lasting conservation and recreation policies.

We recognize that access to healthy public lands and waters has not historically been equitable and that conservation outcomes are stronger when more communities see themselves represented in outdoor spaces and public land advocacy.

By connecting river protection to community well-being, recreation access, cultural values, and local economies, we help build broader and more durable support for conservation across diverse constituencies.

TCA Funding Plan

Support from The Conservation Alliance will provide critical capacity to sustain coordinated advocacy for river and public land protections during the transition between the 119th and 120th Congresses. Funding will support policy engagement, coalition coordination, travel for meetings with congressional offices and partners, strategic communications, GIS and technical analysis, and field engagement opportunities that help build bipartisan support for conservation legislation. We view The Conservation Alliance support as an important partnership between the outdoor recreation business community and the recreationists who enjoy these places. Support from The Conservation Alliance and its member companies reinforces the economic and community benefits of protecting public lands and waters while elevating influential business voices with policymakers. This funding will help ensure priority river protection proposals remain active and positioned to advance as legislative opportunities emerge.

Confidential Items

At this time, we do not anticipate that any portion of this proposal must remain confidential. Some aspects of legislative strategy and coalition discussions may evolve during the course of the campaign, but the overall goals, priorities, and conservation outcomes described in this proposal may be shared publicly during the review process.

Other Relevant Application Details


