

# Conserving America the Beautiful

## The 30-by-30 Goal and Its Historical Roots

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**I**n May 2021, the Biden administration released its preliminary report, *Conserving and Restoring America the Beautiful* (Report), offering the initial framework for implementing the administration’s “goal of conserving at least 30 percent of our [nation’s] lands and waters by 2030” (30-by-30). This 30-by-30 goal was a staple of the Biden presidential campaign. Furthermore, then-Representative Deb Haaland, now Secretary of the Interior, suggested that it be included in the 2020 Democratic Party Platform. See David Shiffman, *An Ambitious Strategy to Preserve Biodiversity*, *Sci. Am.*, Oct. 4, 2020. As articulated in the platform, the party “will protect wildlife habitats and biodiversity, slow extinction rates, and grow America’s natural carbon sinks by conserving 30 percent of our lands and waters by 2030.” *Id.*

One week after his inauguration, President Biden signed Executive Order 14008 (Jan. 27, 2021), *Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad*, giving the first glimpse into how the administration was converting the 30-by-30 party platform plank into national policy. President Biden directed the Departments of the Interior, Agriculture, and Commerce and Council on Environmental Quality (Departments) to issue the Report “recommending steps the United States should take, working with State, local, Tribal, and territorial governments, agricultural and forest landowners, fishermen, and other key stakeholders, to achieve” the 30-by-30 goal.

In this article, we examine the 30-by-30 goal and the Report’s preliminary framework to assess their potential role in and influence on conservation efforts in the United States on public, Tribal, and private lands and waters. We also explore 30-by-30’s historical antecedents to forecast the implementation direction for and potential success of these conservation policy initiatives.

### Origins of 30-by-30

On October 29, 2010, the United Nations Environment Programme Convention on Biological Diversity called for

protecting at least 17% of the world’s land and 10% of its oceans by 2020. In 2016, conservation biologist Edward O. Wilson warned, in his book *Half Earth: Our Planet’s Fight for Life*, that only by committing half of the planet’s surface to nature might humankind stave off a mass extinction crisis of 90% of the life on Earth. Following Wilson’s warning, a growing number of scientists began advocating for nations to commit to conserving 30% of their lands and oceans by 2030 as a step toward ultimately achieving Wilson’s proposal by 2050.

In 2019, the Center for American Progress (CAP) embraced the 30-by-30 concept in its paper *How Much Nature Should America Keep?* The CAP Paper advocates for the United States to design and implement conservation objectives and strategies at the local and regional levels; uphold Tribal sovereignty, and support and honor American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian communities; yield a more equitable distribution of nature’s benefits; support private landowners, working water-fronts, and private sectors; measure a wide range of enduring but not necessarily permanent solutions; and support, fund, and widely share science. These same concepts and text echo throughout the Report.

Following the CAP Paper, Senator Udall in 2019 introduced Senate Resolution 372, calling on the federal government to establish a goal of conserving at least 30% of the nation’s lands and oceans by 2030. On February 6, 2020, then-Representative Haaland introduced parallel House Resolution 835. Numerous states, including California, Hawaii, Maine, New Mexico, and South Carolina, have introduced or adopted similar initiatives or policies. Similarly, legislators have introduced related proposals in South Carolina, New York, Nevada, and Michigan. Mayors from 70 cities in 29 states and Washington, D.C., have issued letters in support of locally led conservation efforts pursuing 30-by-30 goals. Today, more than 70 countries have pledged their commitment to a 30-by-30 goal through the

High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People—from Angola to United Kingdom. High Ambition Coalition, *HAC Member Countries* (2021).

### The Administration's 30-by-30 Goal

In the Report's "Opening Letter to America," the administration states its aims to address "the need to do more to safeguard the drinking water, clean air, food supplies, and wildlife upon which we all depend; the need to fight climate change with the natural solutions that our forests, agricultural lands, and the ocean provide; and the need to give every child in America the chance to experience the wonders of nature." Report, *supra*, at 6. The Report identifies three specific threats to the nation's lands, waters, and wildlife: (1) diminishing nature, with scientists "sounding the alarm about a catastrophic extinction crisis" threatening the planet's biodiversity and the health of the natural systems that supply food, water, and other vital resources; (2) climate change's impact on ecosystems and the disruption that has caused across the country; and (3) inequitable access to the outdoors resulting from discrimination and segregation in housing, transportation, conservation, and natural resource policy. *Id.* at 8–9.

While lacking in detail due to its preliminary nature, the Report provides certain guidelines, like emphasizing "conservation" rather than "the related but different concept of 'protection' or 'preservation.'" *Id.* at 10. It outlines eight core principles for achieving and measuring progress toward 30-by-30, including that conservation efforts must be locally led and designed and regionally balanced across "all lands and waters, not solely on public lands," with a commitment to collaboration and inclusiveness. *Id.* at 13–16. The Report emphasizes that private property rights are to be respected and voluntary stewardship efforts of landowners and fishers supported. Similarly, as outlined in the earlier CAP Paper, it states that the conservation efforts and visions of state and Tribal governments are to be supported, and Tribal sovereignty, treaty, and subsistence rights and freedom of religious practices are to be honored.

The Report's principles recognize that many uses of the nation's lands and waters, including as working lands, can be consistent with the long-term health and sustainability of natural systems. The Report recommends that conservation should build on existing tools and strategies with an emphasis on flexibility and adaptive approaches, benefit all Americans, and include nonbiological considerations, such as its capacity to purify drinking water, cool the air for a neighborhood, or provide safe outdoor recreation. It further explains that conservation and restoration approaches should create jobs, support healthy communities, and be guided by science, including the use of Indigenous and Traditional Ecological Knowledge.

On August 10, 2021, the White House established the America the Beautiful Interagency Working Group (Working Group), made up of members of the Departments, to measure and track progress toward 30-by-30. The Working Group must determine how the 30% goal can be measured in a clear and straightforward manner and create the American Conservation and Stewardship Atlas (Atlas) for tracking information on conservation efforts. It is also tasked with preparing an initial

report detailing currently conserved lands and waters. Annual, publicly available updates are to be published, including progress, assessment, and review of the identified principles. At this point, neither the Atlas nor any America the Beautiful project reports have been released.

Ultimately, it will be up to the Working Group to determine how much of the nation's lands and waters already qualify as being effectively "conserved." The National Geographic Society has estimated that conserving an additional 440 million acres is needed to meet the 30% goal. Sarah Gibbens, *The U.S. Commits to Tripling Its Protected Lands. Here's How It Could Be Done*, Nat'l Geographic, Jan. 27, 2021. A U.S. Geological Survey evaluation reported that the nation is currently protecting about 23% of its coastal waters but only about 12% of its lands. See U.S. Dept't of Interior, *Fact Sheet: President Biden to Take Action to Uphold Commitment to Restore Balance on Public Lands and Waters, Invest in Clean Energy Future* (Jan. 27, 2021). But that evaluation emphasized "protection," while the 30-by-30 goal seeks "conservation."

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Although approximately 28% of the nation's lands are owned by tribes or federal, state, or local governments, many of those lands are utilized for development purposes—ranging from extraction to renewable energy—and may not qualify as being conserved, thereby requiring the conservation of additional privately owned lands to achieve the 30% goal. The federal government will need to work closely with private landowners by incentivizing voluntary stewardship efforts on private lands to ultimately realize the 30% goal. However, concerns over the conservation of private lands have resulted in early criticisms of 30-by-30 as being a private "land grab" and the specter of federal overreach. William Padmore, *As Ricketts Convinces Counties to Oppose 30x30, Critics Say He's Spreading Fear, Disinformation*, Neb. Pub. Media (July 5, 2021). In response, Kansas representatives and senators introduced bills in the state House and Senate seeking to limit the executive branch's ability to infringe upon farmers' private property rights and recognizing the importance of historical stewardship and conservation efforts by farmers and ranchers. See Jacqui Fatka, *Legislation Pushes Back on Biden's 30x30 Plan*, FarmProgress (Oct. 1, 2021). Other states are contemplating similar legislation in opposition.

## Historical Roots of America the Beautiful and the 30-by-30 Goal

Many parts of 30-by-30—including addressing climatic conditions and providing more equitable outdoors access—have roots in the 1930s New Deal and President Johnson’s 1960s Great Society environmental conservation programs.

One of the New Deal responses to an unprecedented drought combined with economic depression leading to the Dust Bowl on the Great Plains was the Prairie States Shelterbelt Project. See, e.g., E.W. Renshaw, *The Plains Shelterbelt*, 18 Idaho Forester, 1935, at 13; Exec. Order No. 6,793 (July 11, 1934). Conceived by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, this program planted over 200 million trees and shrubs in shelterbelts to reduce wind erosion and protect crops from wind damage on 30,000 farms across Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, and North Dakota. The federal government—through the Works Progress Administration and Civilian Conservation Corps labor—provided the trees and shrubs, and private landowners and farmers assumed the long-term maintenance of the shelterbelts on their properties.

## The equity considerations of 30-by-30 harken back to those same Great Society concerns for “equal social access.”

The Shelterbelt Project was an adaptive response to climatic conditions. Its goal was to moderate and alter those conditions to “in combination influence wind and moisture and thereby prove beneficial to the growing crop.” Renshaw, *supra*, at 13. As Ferdinand Silcox, the U.S. Forest Service Chief, said at the time, the Shelterbelt Project was “the largest project ever undertaken in the country to modify climate and agricultural conditions in an area that is now consistently harassed by winds and drought.” Douglas Brinkley, *Rightful Heritage: Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Land of America* 288 (2016). Also, the Shelterbelt Project employed a federal agency, the U.S. Forest Service, as a facilitator of a collaborative program with private landowners, acquiring leases and easements for the shelterbelts on private farmlands, instead of as a regulator or federal land manager. The federal government recognized the need for “whole-hearted cooperation with the landowner” and found that once the elements of the program were understood and explained, “an amazing spirit of cooperation was found to exist in the various states” involved. Renshaw, *supra*, at 14.

Thirty years later, President Lyndon Johnson identified as part of his Great Society conserving a “Beautiful America,” similar to the phrasing used in the current Report. See Pres. Lyndon Johnson, Remarks at the University of Michigan, 1 Pub. Papers 704–05 (May 22, 1964). In a message to Congress,

President Johnson stated that the program must be

a creative conservation of restoration and innovation. Its concern is not with nature alone, but with the total relation between man and the world around him. . . . It means not just easy physical access [to nature], but equal social access for rich and poor, [African American] and white, city dweller and farmer.

Pres. Lyndon Johnson, Special Message to Congress on Conservation and Restoration of Natural Beauty, 1 Pub. Papers 155–65 (Feb. 8, 1965).

President Johnson’s Beautiful America proposals thus emphasized the need to include the Great Society’s conservation and environmental protection benefits in the nation’s cities as well as the countryside, including “creating areas of recreation and beauty for our metropolitan area population” through the Open Space Land Program and the Land and Water Conservation Fund. *Id.* The equity considerations of 30-by-30 harken back to those same Great Society concerns for “equal social access.” President Johnson’s programs led to a remarkable portfolio of legislative and conservation achievements, including the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, National Trails System Act, Wilderness Act, and the addition of 50 national park system units including Redwoods and North Cascades national parks and Padre Island National Seashore.

The 30-by-30 goal also echoes Aldo Leopold’s land ethic, developed in the 1940s in his essays in *A Sand County Almanac* (1953). As Leopold—a U.S. Forest Service forester, forest supervisor, researcher, and later professor of wildlife management—wrote: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.” *Id.* at 262. “The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.” *Id.* at 239. This same concept of conserving portions of the integrity and stability of the biotic community underlies the 30-by-30 goal.

## Insights and Possible Paths Forward

Given its preliminary nature, early criticisms, ambitious approach to climate change adaptation, and historical roots, what are the prospects for 30-by-30? The unique present circumstances—including widespread public recognition of the real and potential adverse effects from climate change—together with an administration receptive to current public perspectives and willing to prioritize addressing climate change present a rare “policy window.” This occurs when a subject moves from being a policy alternative to being on the active decision agenda for public policy makers, generally as the result of critical events and a fortuitous combination of circumstances, an apt description for 30-by-30. See Richard Haeuber, *Setting the Environmental Policy Agenda: The Case of Ecosystem Management*, 36 Nat. Res. J. 1, 8–9 (1996).

President Biden’s recent remarks on climate change reflect his recognition of this policy window and commitment to building on the prior climate policies of the Obama administration. In his statements on the western states’ wildfire situation,

the president acknowledged the “reality” of “a serious global warming problem,” one that is “not going to get any better than it is today.” See Remarks by President Biden in Briefing with Federal and State Fire Agency Officials (Sept. 13, 2021). Similarly, in 2015 President Obama said that among other climate change impacts were the potential for “[w]armer, more acidic oceans and rivers, and [that] the migration of entire species” could be affected. Remarks by the President at the GLACIER Conference—Anchorage, AK (Aug. 31, 2015). Indeed, President Obama pronounced then that “[c]limate change is already disrupting our . . . ecosystems” and “will accelerate changes to the way that we all live.” *Id.*

The 30-by-30 goal’s land conservation efforts reflect other contemporary observations by a former National Park Service director and science advisor of needed conservation strategies, including to “protect, connect, and grow the network of protected areas across the American land- and seascape.” Gary Machlis & Jonathan Jarvis, *The Future of Conservation in America* 53 (2018). As Machlis and Jarvis note:

Climate change and its ecological consequences require that existing protected areas be augmented, protecting key adjacent lands and waters to plan for range shifts and new seasonal migration patterns. In addition, there are essential land and waters not yet protected and certain ecosystem types . . . not fully represented in the current network [of protected areas].

*Id.*

Additionally, the words used and positions taken by the administration matter, even if no formal federal legislation or congressional proposals follow. The 30-by-30 goal itself encourages other levels of government, institutions, and individual landowners and citizens to take steps towards supporting the principles and measures underlying 30-by-30. This incremental change is demonstrated, for instance, by the number of state and local government initiatives that have already joined the 30-by-30 goal and are implementing their own supporting programs. See, e.g., *New Mexico Governor Joins U.S. Conservation Challenge*, Idaho Press, Aug. 26, 2021, at A11. Other organizations, such as local land trusts and conservancies, are also taking action consistent with 30-by-30. For example, an Idaho land trust intends to “partner with farmers, ranchers, forest landowners, tribes, government officials and others” to make local land conservation effective. See Ltr. from Eric Grace, Exec. Dir., Land Trust of the Treasure Valley, to author (Aug. 2021); Eli Franco-vich, *Frenzied Real Estate Market Imperils Land Conservation in Idaho*, Washington, Idaho Press, Sept. 29, 2021, at B1.

While there is initial opposition to and criticism of 30-by-30, such resistance is not unprecedented in the history of American conservation and does not diminish the prospects for 30-by-30. The 1930s Shelterbelt Project had its opponents and continually struggled to obtain congressional funding; however, the program succeeded when President Roosevelt ultimately moved it to the Works Progress Administration where the executive branch had more control of its funding allocation. Brinkley, *supra*, at 292. As Machlis and Jarvis note, “conservation

progress is necessarily incremental rather than revolutionary. Successes are punctuated with disappointment; setbacks follow advances.” Machlis & Jarvis, *supra*, at 80–81. To the extent 30-by-30 is an evolution of the earlier New Deal and Great Society programs that achieved conservation successes despite initial opposition, the success of those programs bodes well for 30-by-30’s effective implementation. And as President Biden is generally viewed as a traditionalist and institutionalist who believes in effecting change through incremental actions, while also answering to progressive interests within his own party, the 30-by-30 goal that builds upon these past programs may be a natural fit for the current administration. At the same time, President Biden does not enjoy the broad support in Congress that Presidents Johnson and Roosevelt did for their conservation programs. See, e.g., Carl Hulse, *Biden’s Big Vision Collides with His Small Majorities*, N.Y. Times, Oct. 2, 2021.

From a public policy implementation perspective, certain key factors suggest the potential for implementation of 30-by-30 to succeed based on present socioeconomic considerations (the policy window) and other factors. See Daniel A. Mazmanian & Paul A. Sabatier, *Implementation and Public Policy* 22 (1983). There is a threshold level of public and sovereign (i.e., other nonfederal government institutions, Tribal interests, and local entities) support pursuing measures to adapt to and ameliorate adverse climate effects. The attitudes and resources of constituency groups support 30-by-30, demonstrated by the endorsements and support from groups listed in the Report. E.g., Report, *supra*, at 4–5. Similarly, there is the commitment from and leadership skill of the implementing officials in the federal departments and agencies tasked with overseeing the 30-by-30 goal. *Id.* at 6–7.

In other areas, the overall tractability of the problems underlying climate change issues may make it difficult for 30-by-30 to address them successfully.

In other areas, the overall tractability of the problems underlying climate change issues may make it difficult for 30-by-30 to address them successfully. Climate change processes and effects are a global issue; no suite of efforts in the United States alone would be enough to achieve adaptive or mitigative benefits at a global scale. See, e.g., Lisa Friedman, *John Kerry’s Sales Pitch to Save the Planet*, N.Y. Times, Sept. 22, 2021. For 30-by-30, there are a myriad of technical difficulties, including the science of connecting the effects of land and water conservation activities to ameliorating climate change effects. And the broad reach of 30-by-30 necessarily implicates a large diversity of target

group behavior. See Mazmanian & Sabatier, *supra*, at 22. While many aspects of the overall 30-by-30 proposal—including its equity goals and increasing urban residents’ access to nature and open space—may be “hard to pull off,” the administration’s proposed collaborative approach, eschewing an exclusively federal response, articulates a pathway toward the 30-by-30 goal without federalizing the entire policy. Telephone interview with Marie Kellner, Conservation Programs Dir., Idaho Conservation League (Sept. 17, 2021).

There is no specific implementing legislation for 30-by-30, which could affect whether its widespread objectives will be met. On the other hand, this may allow for flexibility in its implementation, such as the dexterity with which President Roosevelt shifted funding support for the Shelterbelt Project. Also, 30-by-30 ultimately may be supported by several different legislative proposals and programs, as were the Great Society conservation programs, where a broad range of legislative measures implemented the overarching policy vision. See, e.g., Nat’l Park Serv., *Lyndon B. Johnson and the Environment*, at 1.

On balance, 30-by-30 is a nascent policy already having on-the-ground impacts on land and water conservation measures to support federal agency efforts and initiatives at the state, Tribal, and local levels. The history of other large-scale public conservation efforts, even those aiming to address climatic conditions, shows they found success despite initial setbacks and ongoing opposition. This history suggests that 30-by-30 may have an impact on altering, or at least informing, land and water conservation trends in the United States. Whether those measures will be sufficient to provide significant climate change adaptation remains to be seen. But as Marie Kellner of the Idaho Conservation League recently noted, “it gives hope for the future.” 

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