



WESTERN CONSERVATION PRINCIPLES

*An alternative proposal to conserve and restore America's
landscapes*

*The Senate and
Congressional
Western Caucuses*

Western Conservation Principles

Conservation is synonymous with our western ethos. Westerners take pride in managing our lands, waters, and natural resources for the betterment of the environment, wildlife, surrounding communities, and current and future generations. Those who are closest to the land—whose quality and way of life depend upon healthy ecosystems—care most about the land and know best how to maintain its legacy, conservation, and uses for years to come. We have decades of proof that conservation and working lands are not mutually exclusive but are, in fact, integrated with multiple-use, sustained yield, and responsible development.

The Biden Administration called to place at least 30% of our lands and waters in conservation status by 2030. While the Administration has since tried to rename this effort the *America the Beautiful* initiative, the issue remains that the ambiguous “conservation status” has yet to be defined, and even if it were to be defined, it is clear the Administration does not know what percentage of lands and waters are currently meeting this status. Furthermore, according to the U.S. Geological Survey, over 30% of our federal lands already have permanent protection from conversion and a mandated management plan to maintain a primarily natural state. These factors combined make the *America the Beautiful* initiative ring hollow.

The Senate and Congressional Western Caucuses are concerned with the initiative to place 30% of our lands and waters in conservation status – not because we oppose conservation, but because our western heritage and conservation principles can and should be applied to 100% of our public lands and waters. We propose a holistic approach to conservation based on restoring healthy and resilient landscapes versus yet-to-be defined land statuses.

These western conservation principles are based on collaborative, innovative, and time-tested approaches that leverage local expertise, creative tools, and dedicated partners to achieve well-balanced, tangible outcomes. These principles are rooted deep in western values with successes that manifest in multiple-state sage-grouse strategies and plans, the recovery of wildlife species like the gray wolf, land management planning process, and innumerable other locally-led success stories. It is in the best interest of our environment, wildlife, and rural economies to maintain this conservation mindset when facing all natural resource planning and decision-making.

In this report, we propose an alternative approach to the Biden Administration’s *America the Beautiful* initiative based on these principles and values. Our proposal is a holistic, outcome-based approach and relies upon objective land health standards to be achieved through leveraging existing tools, resources, and partnerships and the collaboration of a diverse set of stakeholders. It recognizes the complexities and challenges of working together to achieve meaningful and measurable results.

Conserving What We Own

The Senate and Congressional Western Caucuses believe conservation is a conservative principle, but it is unwise to pursue on state and private land what we have failed to carry out on the land we own. We

must focus on the vast restoration and management needs of our public lands and waters instead. Furthermore, the Senate and Congressional Western Caucuses strongly support private property rights and believe there's evidence these lands thrive best unfettered by federal bureaucracy. While acknowledging the conservation successes and continuing to support existing voluntary collaborative programs occurring on private and state lands, we propose conservation efforts target the substantial management needs on our public lands and waters.

The Healthier Alternative

Pursuing a preservationist approach relying upon a subjective “conservation status” fails to reassure Westerners and rural communities that this initiative isn't a guise to restrict use or access on public land. Furthermore, it fails to reassure the nation we are taking seriously our responsibility to manage and restore our lands and waters. Instead of seeking to place lands in “conservation status,” the Senate and Congressional Western Caucuses propose setting out to increase the percentage of public lands and waters that meet established management objectives and land health conditions and are implementing best management practices and other mitigation strategies. This means focusing on issues plaguing our lands and waters like invasive species; overgrown, diseased, and infested forests; and post-wildfire restoration. We believe the best way to do this is not simply through more funding, but through thoughtful, deliberate improvements to existing programs, systems, and processes, removing regulatory burdens blocking responsible management, and leveraging the expertise, resources, and collaboration of private and public partners.

Land health standards, adaptive management, and best management practices are collaboratively-developed, site-specific, science-driven, objective metrics, which land agencies already routinely assess and report upon. The Senate and Congressional Western Caucuses present these much clearer, stronger, measurable, and proven indicators of conservation occurring on public lands instead of relying on a “conservation status” that ignores the critical dimension of the human-land interaction that cultivates conservation.

Western Conservation Priorities

The Senate and Western Congressional Caucuses support a holistic approach to conservation on our public lands. Oftentimes, it is action – rather than inaction and “protection” status – that will achieve conservation outcomes. Our landscapes are suffering from stalled agency decisions and/or lack of proactive efforts. A ten-year initiative to conserve and restore our public lands needs to address shortfalls in the following focal areas:

Forest Health

According to the U.S. Forest Service, 63 million acres of the National Forest System and 54 million acres of Department of the Interior lands are at high or very high hazard for wildfire, 80 million acres are in need of restoration, 75.3 million acres are designated as Insect and Disease Areas, 48% of watersheds are functioning at risk or impaired, 7.1 million acres of federal land burned in wildfire last year, and around 4 million acres are in need of reforestation. With over

50% of national forests designated as Roadless or Wilderness Areas, our forests are a perfect case study on why increasing protected acreage will not suffice to accomplish conservation goals and, in fact, can – and have – resulted in the unintended consequence of devastating land health outcomes. **The Senate and Congressional Western Caucuses believe any serious, nationwide conservation effort should include a strategy to streamline, expedite, and increase active forest management to restore the health of our forests and watersheds.**

Invasive Species

Invasive species impact over 100 million acres of land, and estimates show they have contributed to the decline of nearly 42% of threatened and endangered species and cost nearly \$120 billion annually. Invasive species jeopardize agriculture operations, water quality, wildlife habitat, native species, and increase the risk of wildfire. The Western Governors Association established the Invasive Species Advisory Group in 2016 to provide technical assistance and coordination to tackle this issue, but little has been done by the federal government to supplement and support this work. **The Senate and Congressional Western Caucuses believe any holistic conservation campaign should include plans to control, prevent, and eradicate harmful invasive species.**

Wild Horses & Burros

The Bureau of Land Management determined 26,770 animals is the Appropriate Management Level for wild horse and burro populations. The number of animals on Bureau of Land Management land is more than triple that amount at 95,114. Meanwhile, nearly 50,000 animals are managed in off-range facilities or pastures—an unsustainable situation both fiscally and for the species. A recently released study further confirmed that overpopulated herds were negatively impacting the greater sage grouse. **The overpopulation of wild horses and burros has led to degraded rangelands and water sources negatively affecting other wildlife, livestock, and the surrounding environment, and we urge the Administration to utilize every tool available to address the situation on our rangelands.**

Superfund Sites

Nowhere is the Environmental Protection Agency's mission more crystallized than the Superfund Program. Since its inception, several Superfund sites have been restored through collaboration and dedication, but dozens more communities await actions as they deal with the environmental and public health risks, liability, and stigma associated with Superfund sites. The Environmental Protection Agency reports 1,327 Superfund sites on the National Priorities List and an additional 48 sites proposed for the priorities list. **We encourage the Environmental Protection Agency to work with federal land management agencies, states, companies responsible for cleanup, tribes, and local communities to ensure sites receive the full attention and resources they deserve for complete remediation.**

Visitation

Senate and Congressional Western Caucus Members are encouraged to see record-breaking visitation to our cherished National Parks, National Forests, National Monuments, and other

public lands. With increased visitation comes more economic opportunities for our western counties but also more strain on park infrastructure, trails, and gateway communities. **A comprehensive conservation plan should incorporate a strategy to leverage the funds made available in the Great American Outdoors Act to support long-term public land infrastructure and encourage visitation to both our larger and our smaller National Parks alike.**

Abandoned Mine and Orphan Well Reclamation

There are estimated to be nearly 500,000 abandoned mines in the United States costing an estimated \$54 billion to reclaim. While many non-profit and private entities want to clean up these sites, liabilities and red-tape prevent Good Samaritan work from taking place. Additionally, a GAO report found that there were around 300 orphaned oil and gas wells on public lands under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Land Management. These sites present risks to public safety and the environment. **Senate and Congressional Western Caucus Members support restoring these areas by leveraging private, state, local, and tribal partners and removing administrative, regulatory, and liability burdens that can impede this critical conservation restoration work.** We also call on the Biden Administration to recognize that mineral development, which necessarily must increase to support our renewable energy ambitions, and conservation are not mutually exclusive and that reclaimed lands often support more wildlife than surrounding areas.

Checkerboard and Landlocked Management

6.35 million acres of public land across 11 western states are surrounded by private land, presenting management and access challenges to federal, state, and private landowners. Oftentimes, public access points exist through easements and other avenues, but land agencies have not made this information available. Only 5,000 of the 37,000 recorded easements at the U.S. Forest Service are publicly available in a digital format. Landlocked and checkerboard management patterns pose a challenge to land management, and difficulties in accessing and managing these federal acres pose a risk to the health of neighboring private and state land. **The Senate and Western Congressional Caucuses support finding a solution to improve the health and effective management of these isolated and scattered federal lands and enhancing public access, including through the digitization of maps and easements while preserving private property rights.**

Biodiversity & Species Recovery

Biodiversity in our plants, wildlife, and other ecological components can enhance air and water quality and create more resilient, adaptable populations and ecosystems. However, it is often compromised by natural shifts in the environment and anthropogenic factors, including invasive species, disease, wildfire, climate change, pollution, habitat degradation, and over-use which can lead to species extinction. The definition of “conservation” within the Endangered Species Act includes the description: “to bring any endangered or threatened species to the point at which the measures provided in the [Endangered Species Act] are no longer needed.” Yet many of the over 2,300 species listed as endangered and threatened do not even have a recovery plan, only 3.7% of species have ever recovered, and yet significant resources are often expended on species that have met recovery goals but have yet to be delisted or on duplicative

consultation requirements with no conservation benefit. Placing more land in “conservation status” will not do anything to recover these species. We must look to states, counties, landowners, and private entities as partners, not targets, in species management. **Members of the Senate and Congressional Western Caucuses encourage the Biden Administration to abide by the definition of conservation under the Endangered Species Act, utilize transparent and science-based processes in listing and critical habitat determinations, and work with state, local, tribal, and private partners to encourage species recovery and conservation efforts.**

Promoting & Protecting Water Infrastructure

As we face another drought, we feel strongly about the importance of clean, reliable water in the West. Most of the Bureau of Reclamation’s facilities are 60-100 years old, and the total replacement value is estimated to be \$99 billion. In early 2020, Reclamation estimated its five-year extraordinary maintenance and rehabilitation needs were \$3.8 billion. The scope and scale of these challenges speaks volumes to the unreliability of our water systems throughout the West. Not all of these costs would – or should – be incurred at the federal level, and collaborative tools like title transfers can help address cost and management needs. Resilient water systems are the lifeblood of our rural communities, farms, and ranches, but they are also critical for our environment and clean energy supply. Degraded water infrastructure can harm fisheries, wildlife habitat, soil health, and exacerbate the impacts of climate change. **The Senate and Congressional Western Caucuses believe addressing water reliability, storage, and supply is fundamentally tied to western conservation.**

Tools to Conserve & Restore America’s Landscapes

The Senate and Congressional Western Caucuses agree that many challenges plague our public lands. If we are to restore healthy and resilient landscapes, we must maximize the conservation benefits provided by activities like grazing, hunting, logging, and mineral development. We also must leverage the expertise of our local partners including through the use of existing shared stewardship authorities and seek policies that further enhance these tools. We need an all-hands-on-deck, collaborative approach if we are to reach our conservation ambitions, which should include:

Full Use of Our Tools

Western land users are the original conservationists. No one knows better the importance of stewarding our resources and achieving sustainable yield and healthy landscapes than those whose livelihoods depends on them. From reducing invasive species and restoring native grasses to reducing the risk of uncharacteristic wildfires and improving wildlife habitat and populations, every use of our land presents an invaluable tool for conservation. However, the scope and scale in which these tools are currently able to be deployed fails to maximize their value due to a pervasive “D.C. knows best” mentality. Furthermore, lack of access to our public lands, regulatory frameworks, inflexible top-down land-use policies, and external factors jeopardize their long-term sustainability. **We urge the Biden Administration to pursue policies that increase the use of these conservation tools and ensure we do not lose our longest-standing partners in land stewardship.**

Shared Stewardship

Federal land agencies have several mechanisms through which to partner with state, tribal, and other stakeholders to respond to challenges on the landscape and pursue common conservation interests. Authorities, such as Good Neighbor Authority and Stewardship Contracting and partnerships with service organizations like the Conservation Corps, maximize the amount of work we are able to accomplish. The Senate and Congressional Western Caucuses support strengthening, refining, and promoting the use of these authorities, increasing these partnerships, and finding innovative mechanisms for replicating this type of collaborative work. The concept of shared stewardship should be replicated in wildlife recovery efforts. **The Senate and Congressional Western Caucuses call on the Biden Administration to return management to states when wildlife species have met recovery criteria, as is the case with the gray wolf and grizzly bear.** We also support pursuing policies to give states a more prominent role in species recovery to better facilitate transitioning management authority post-recovery and prevent litigation that causes confusion and challenges on the ground.

Leverage Public-Private Partnerships

Senate and Congressional Western Caucus Members realize that finite resources will always be a barrier to addressing the health of our lands, but that creative conservation financing solutions exist and should be fully utilized. Forest resiliency bonds and ‘A to Z’ projects have proven to be a successful method of leveraging private investment to accomplish much-needed work, and the Senate and Congressional Western Caucuses support removing liabilities for Good Samaritans and other deterrents that prevent non-profits and private entities, including those not responsible for past contamination, from cleaning up abandoned mines and degraded streams. Voluntary conservation agreements and similar partnerships with surrounding landowners and industries can play a critical role in achieving conservation outcomes. **Members of the Senate and Congressional Western Caucuses call on the Biden Administration to seek out opportunities to leverage public-private partnerships and other creative financing agreements across all conservation landscapes.**

Reporting and Monitoring

In order to better manage lands we own, we need a better understanding of the current state of our lands and waters. Federal land agencies should digitize and make publicly-available mapping and other public land data, including research and mapping related to federal mineral resources. Agencies should monitor and report on landscape health to determine if land management objectives and health standards are being met and if not, whether positive progress is being made toward that end. They should also monitor and assess the effectiveness of best management practices and adaptive management strategies. **We believe this objective assessment of our land is the best indicator of conservation efforts underway on all of our lands regardless of what the land is being managed for—be it Wilderness, recreation, energy, grazing, timber, or wildlife.**

Streamline Processes

It is no surprise that unpredictable and inflexible multi-year permitting and environmental review processes delay and undermine the economic feasibility of important water, infrastructure, timber, energy, mining, grazing, coastal restoration, and conservation projects. It is important to realize, however, that these inundated processes also have real impacts on our environment and the integrity of environmental analysis. Many of the projects delayed by the current regulatory framework are time-sensitive, and delays can have detrimental impacts on the surrounding ecosystem. Furthermore, the environmental review can take so long that conditions on the ground have changed between the time the analysis was initiated and the time it is finally completed. To further compound these issues, federal agency decisions are too often litigated, triggering elongated delays and more federal dollars to “re-do” analysis only to eventually come to similar decisions. Federal land agencies have several regulatory and statutory tools to streamline these processes and should employ these tools whenever appropriate. **The Senate and Congressional Western Caucuses support further action to increase the efficiency and integrity of permitting and environmental review processes.**

Litigation Reform

Despite several opportunities for stakeholders to provide input, raise objections to projects, and participate in iterative reviews of federal agency analysis, many groups choose to pursue their agenda solely in the courts and often at the expense of taxpayers. This not only causes undue delays to time-sensitive conservation projects, but it costs agencies hundreds of thousands if not millions of dollars to complete more analysis. This tactic has also created a system for land agencies to prepare “litigation-proof” planning documents versus documents that are focused on the intended purpose and needs of the issue that are responsible, comprehensive, and understandable for the public. Conservation does not happen in the courtrooms; restoring the integrity of our environmental review processes will require reforms to prevent serial litigation that only seeks to impede and prevent important conservation projects. **Members of the Senate and Congressional Western Caucuses believe that we can protect access to the courts while preventing the current abuses experienced.**

Audit Existing Programs

The federal government allocates billions of dollars annually to maintain federal land agency operations and support conservation programs. Many of these programs have had remarkable success and lasting conservation benefits. Unfortunately, that is not the case for all of these federal programs. An assessment on the effectiveness of existing federal programs is needed to ensure alignment with their original mission and to verify these funds are leveraged for the best rate of return on investment and going to where they are most needed. **We believe fiscal stewardship and land stewardship are interrelated.**

Conclusion

The Senate and Congressional Western Caucuses believe that America’s original conservationists—those whose heritages and livelihoods are tied to our lands and resources—along with state, local, and tribal partners who are closest and depend the most on the land, are best equipped to champion this initiative. We support using every tool at our disposal to address the numerous challenges on our public lands. We believe that conservation efforts on public lands should be determined by assessing land health versus simply placing land into “conservation status.” We know firsthand that protective land designations do not necessarily mean healthy landscapes. Healthy and resilient landscapes are the cornerstone of our western, rural way of life, and we call on the Biden Administration to refocus its conservation efforts with this in mind.

Senate & Congressional Western Caucus Members



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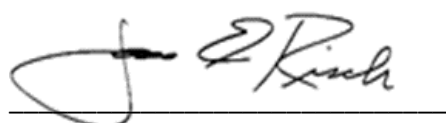
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Member of Congress



John Barrasso, M.D.
United States Senator



Kevin McCarthy
House Republican Leader



James E. Risch
United States Senator



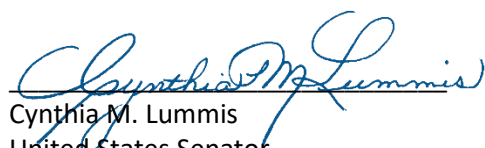
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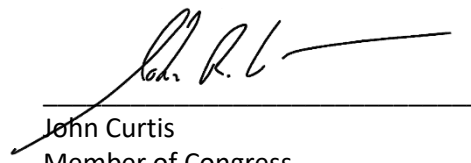
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Cynthia M. Lummis
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John Curtis
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John Hoeven
United States Senator



Mitt Romney
United States Senator



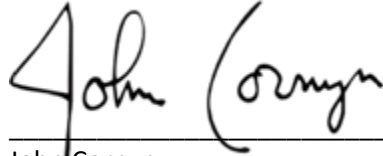
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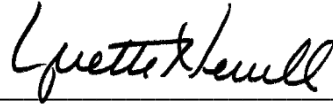
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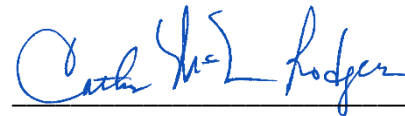
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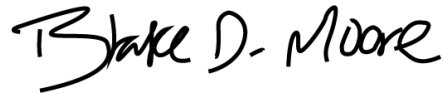
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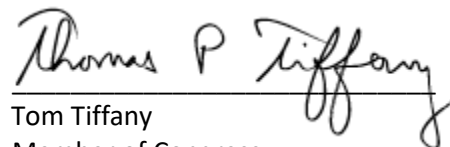
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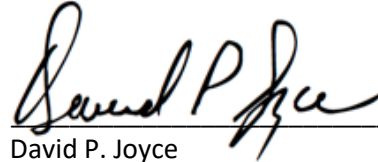
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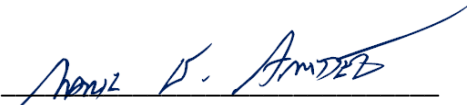
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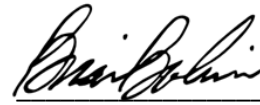
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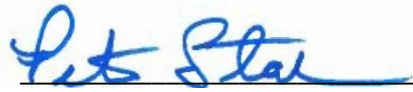
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