

A narrow path for Biden's ambitious land conservation plan

New "America the Beautiful" report offers few specifics on how to protect 30 percent of U.S. lands and waters by 2030

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Months after President Biden set a goal of conserving 30 percent of the nation's land and waters by 2030, the administration Thursday laid out broad principles — but few details — for achieving that vision.

The new 22-page document from the Commerce, Interior and Agriculture Departments highlights one of the Biden administration's central challenges: Having committed to bold environmental goals during their early days in power, officials now face the more uncertain and contentious task of figuring out how to follow through on those ambitions.

The "America the Beautiful" report outlines steps the U.S. could take to safeguard key areas on land and in the sea to restore biodiversity, tackle climate change and make natural spaces more accessible to all Americans.

"This is the very first national conservation goal we have ever set as a country," White House National Climate Adviser Gina McCarthy said in a call with reporters. "It really reflects the urgency with which we have to respond to a global extinction crisis, the climate crisis and the deep racial and economic disparities that too often dictate who has access to nature."

But the new report doesn't identify specific places for enhanced protection, define what level of conservation would be required for an area to count toward the administration's 30 percent goal or indicate how much federal funding would be needed to make Biden's vision a reality.

This ambiguity is partly by design. Some environmentalists said that it would be impractical to make that assessment at this point, and that it will take time to muster the kind of grassroots support needed to achieve such a sweeping conservation goal.

“I see it as a starting point that’s telling us this is the direction we want to go in, and this is how we want to do this work to ensure we’re going to get the best outcomes,” said Ali Chase, senior policy analyst at the Natural Resources Defense Council. “In terms of just trying to bring the country around to a conservation ethic, I think it’s pretty significant.”

The report is less a road map than a vision statement, painting a picture of accessible parks, ranchlands that double as wildlife corridors and farms that could also store carbon instead of releasing it into the atmosphere. It lays out guiding principles for the program — utilizing scientific research, pursuing projects that create jobs — and calls for a “voluntary and locally led” approach to conservation, in which the federal government provides support and guidance to efforts led by landowners, cities, states and tribes.

As part of the effort, the government will launch and maintain an “American Conservation and Stewardship Atlas” to track the amount of protected land and water, and the Interior Department will be required to publish annual reports on the progress being made.

Brenda Mallory, chair of the Council on Environmental Quality, said the acreage of protected areas is just one metric for measuring success. Progress will have to be judged, she said, “in the lives of people and the health of ecosystems rather than solely by scale.”

At the moment, roughly 12 percent of U.S. land and 11 percent its freshwater ecosystems enjoy some level of official protection. A much larger portion of U.S. ocean waters is safeguarded, in part because in 2016 President Barack Obama expanded the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument — first established by President George W. Bush — to encompass more than 582,000 square miles of land and sea.

Many private landowners and commercial users of public lands, such as ranchers, fishers and hunters, are leery of Biden’s attempts to more than double that conserved area.

“The devil’s in the details, and it’s yet to be worked out,” Trout Unlimited president Chris Wood said in an interview.

He added that landscape restoration on private land — even more so than designating new federal protections — will be key.

“The effect of a changing climate — fire, droughts and floods — don’t respect those boundaries.”

Interior Secretary Deb Haaland said that the report came out of dozens of conversations with scientists, farmers, hunters and outdoor-recreation businesses as well as city, state and tribal officials, and that the agency will solicit more feedback in the months to come. Meanwhile, she said, “The Interior Department is getting to work.”

The department also hopes to stand up the Civilian Climate Corps, Haaland said, which would employ Americans in reforestation and restoring degraded landscapes. The agency this week proposed opening more than 2 million acres of public lands for hunting and fishing opportunities. And in the coming days, the National Park Service will announce \$150 million in new funding to build parks in underserved communities.

Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo said that in the coming days the agency will be expanding the National Marine Sanctuary System and the National Estuarine Research Reserve program, which protects the places where rivers flow into the sea.

One of the looming questions is how Biden can reconcile the new conservation target, which has received relatively little publicity, with his better-known plans to tackle climate change.

Last month, for example, the president announced the United States would slash its greenhouse gas emissions between 50 and 52 percent by the end of the decade compared with 2005 levels. The goal of eliminating planet-warming emissions from fossil fuels is backed by roughly two-thirds of registered voters, according to a December poll by George Mason University and the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication. But the administration has yet to spell out specific reductions that would need to take place in key sectors of the economy.

Broadly speaking, Americans also support the idea of conserving 30 percent of the nation's land and water by the end of the decade. Recent polls from left-leaning Center for American Progress and Natural Resources Defense Council found large majorities of respondents favor the plan, often abbreviated as "30x30." Bipartisan coalitions of 70 mayors and more than 400 state and local elected officials have declared support for the goal, as have environmental groups, hunting and fishing organizations, and tribal leaders.

Scientists have identified land and water conservation as a vital mechanism for protecting biodiversity and addressing climate change. The 30x30 target puts the United States on par with a group of more than 50 "high-ambition" nations that have pledged to set aside at least that much land for nature.

But when it comes to determining which land to conserve and how it should be protected, the issue becomes much more fraught.

The America the Beautiful campaign proposes increasing that protected area through a hodgepodge of policies, including creating new parks in nature-deprived communities, supporting tribally led management projects and boosting programs that fund conservation efforts on private land.

But the lack of specifics in the report worried American Farm Bureau Federation President Zippy Duvall.

“AFBF appreciates that the report acknowledges concerns we have raised and recognizes the oversized contributions of farmers and ranchers to conservation while feeding the world,” he said in an email. But his members are still seeking reassurance that their property rights will be respected and access to public lands for grazing will be maintained.

Meanwhile, conservative groups have voiced fervent opposition to what some call “the 30x30 land grab.” Multiple GOP-led Western counties have issued resolutions opposing the goal. And in March, more than 60 members of the Congressional Western Caucus — all Republicans — signed a letter expressing skepticism about Biden’s approach, which they said displayed “dangerous thoughtlessness.”

Biden’s plans to expand renewable energy — which calls for a major expansion of large-scale solar and wind farms onshore, in addition to offshore wind — could also pose a challenge for his conservation goal.

Princeton University’s recent Net Zero America study, for example, projects that wind and solar projects will occupy roughly 230,000 square miles by mid-century — more than the states of Arizona and Colorado combined.

Jessica Wilkinson, senior policy adviser for energy and infrastructure at the Nature Conservancy, said in an email that when it comes to addressing climate and conservation: “Our science shows, that we can be successful on both fronts. We do, however, need to get the right policy signals in place now.”

Heather Zichal, chief executive of the American Clean Power Association, said in an interview that her group’s members were confident these tensions could be reconciled.

“If in 2028 what we’re having is a conversation about aggressive deployment of renewable energy versus protection of biodiversity, that will be a really good day for America,” Zichal said. “Mostly because that means we’ll have listened to what the science tells us we need to do to ensure a habitable planet for future generations.”

Though specific policy mechanisms are not included in Biden’s conservation plan, it coincides with other steps from his administration to protect biodiversity. The Fish and Wildlife Service on Thursday also proposed reversing a Trump-era rule change that would make it more difficult to hold firms liable for accidentally killing birds in the course of their operations.

Biden is reviewing whether to overturn dozens of other conservation policies adopted under his predecessor, including ones scaling back the boundaries of Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monuments in Utah and the sale of oil and gas leases on the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge's coastal plain.

Delivering on both the administration's conservation and climate goals, however, will require the cooperation of state, local, tribal officials as well as private landowners.

Wilkinson noted that about 90 percent of the renewable energy build-out is likely to happen on private lands.

While large-scale solar and wind farms take up a significant amount of space relative to a nuclear or gas-fired power plant, a 2016 article published in PLoS One noted that the disparities between renewable and fossil fuels even out after a number of decades because extractive industries exhaust the resources in one place and have to relocate. Renewable projects, by contrast, can operate indefinitely in the same site. And other forms of renewables, such as rooftop solar, have a much smaller footprint.
