THE WESTERN ROAD TO 30

HOW WESTERN STATES ARE CONTRIBUTING TO THE BOLD CAMPAIGN TO PROTECT 30% OF AMERICA BY 2030

APRIL 2021

TYLER MCINTOSH, JESSE PRENTICE-DUNN, HANNAH RIDER, LAUREN BOGARD
The Western Road to 30

Introduction
- Protecting 30% of America by 2030
- 30x30 in the West
- Components of meaningful change

State Conservation Areas
- What are state conservation areas?
- Why state conservation areas?
- What are states doing?
  - State Snapshots
  - Acquisition
  - Takeaways

Conservation Funding
- What is conservation funding?
- Why conservation funding?
- What are states doing?
  - Dedicated funding streams
  - Budget allocation
  - Ability to leverage federal funds
  - Takeaways

State Trust Lands
- What are state trust lands?
- Why state trust land conservation?
- What are states doing?
  - Takeaways

Voluntary private land conservation
- What is private conservation?
- Why private conservation?
- What are states doing?
  - Easement funding
  - ConServation tax incentives
  - Transparency and impact
  - Expanding the toolbox
  - Takeaways

Promoting ecological connectivity
- What is ecological connectivity?
- Why ecological connectivity?
- What are states doing?
  - Designations
  - Research and communication
  - Easements and acquisitions
  - Regulations
  - Non-land-protection measures
  - Takeaways

Protections For Waters
- Why inland water conservation?
- What are states doing?
  - Takeaways

Conclusion

Acknowledgements

Appendices
- A. Restoration Program Examples
  - Nevada Tahoe Program
  - RESTORE Colorado
  - Idaho Habitat Improvement Program
- B. Federal Easement Funding
- C. Compiled Takeaways
  - State Conservation Areas
  - Conservation Funding
  - State Trust Lands
  - Voluntary Private Land Conservation
  - Promoting Ecological Connectivity
  - Water
INTRODUCTION

To view an interactive version of this report, please visit WesternRoadTo30.org.

PROTECTING 30% OF AMERICA BY 2030

The American West is home to iconic natural landscapes and varied ecosystems that support wildlife, strong local communities, and economies. However, nature is under threat. Natural areas throughout the country are being rapidly lost to development and degradation, by as much as a football field of land every 30 seconds. This rapid loss of natural space is resulting in a mass extinction, further exacerbated by climate change; animal populations have declined by 60% in the past few decades.

With global biodiversity collapsing, scientists have shown that protecting and restoring natural areas is the most effective way to slow extinctions and retain resilient ecosystems. Studies show that animal and plant abundance is much higher in protected areas, and conserving more land will allow species to adapt to the changing climate. Conserving and restoring natural lands is also critical to stabilizing the climate and reducing the risk of the most severe impacts of climate change.

To combat the dual climate and biodiversity crises and prevent the collapse of natural systems, scientists are urging that we conserve 30% of America’s lands and waters by 2030—the 30x30 goal. As America works toward the 30x30 goal, Western states can lead the way with state-sponsored conservation efforts and funding, implementing creative solutions to promote, support, and continue the incredible work already being done all across the West.

30x30 isn’t only about protecting nature, it is also about supporting local communities. Protected areas are correlated with significant public health benefits to nearby communities, including better mental health and lower risks of disease and obesity. Research has also shown that protecting watersheds is the most cost-effective strategy to ensure access to clean drinking water.

By drawing visitors and creating opportunities to enjoy nature close to home, outdoor recreation and tourism can provide rural communities that may otherwise be dependent on the boom and bust cycles of energy development an opportunity to diversify their economies. Protected natural areas near communities can provide a competitive advantage for hiring and retaining workers, supporting faster rates of job growth and higher levels of per-capita income.

The 30x30 initiative intends to bring together locally-led campaigns, voluntary private conservation, and cooperative efforts from many levels of government while respecting private landowners, Tribal nations, and existing user groups.

For the purposes of preserving biodiversity through a broad and diverse coalition of locally-led efforts, “protection” must be broadly defined. Scientists have found that measures such as private land conservation and protection of working landscapes, flexible conservation programs, and “other effective area-based conservation measures” (OECMs) have significant conservation benefits, and therefore should play a role in reaching the 30x30 goal. At the same time, more stringent and traditional land protection mechanisms and designations such as national conservation areas, state and national parks, and wildlife refuges can also play a role.
30X30 IN THE WEST

The encouraging news is that the United States is uniquely positioned to meet the 30x30 goal. Nearly 60 percent of lands in the continental U.S. are still in a mostly natural condition or could be restored, making it one of the top five countries for retaining lands in their natural state.

A broad range of community leaders, tribes, and organizations across the country have rallied behind the 30x30 effort, including 150 local elected officials from Western states, city councils and county commissions, and over 50 federally recognized tribes. Shortly after coming into office, President Biden signed an executive order establishing a national 30x30 target, and six states have taken steps toward establishing or meeting state 30x30 goals. Nevada lawmakers recently introduced the first 30x30 resolution in the interior West. In all Western states, there is bipartisan interest and support for 30x30 and investment in conservation, providing a unique opportunity to address the concerns and aspirations of voters across the West.

But what could 30x30 actually look like in the West? The answer to this question must consider that there are stark differences between Western states, each with its own landscapes, natural environments, political considerations, and suite of stakeholders and landowners. As a result, different tools, partnerships, pathways, and priorities can be part of the 30x30 initiative in each individual state.

In the West, local communities, landowners, and governments have been doing conservation work for generations. Although operating under very different contexts, Western state governments have worked to support conservation through funding and varied initiatives. Now, states have the opportunity to up the ante, increasing support for communities and locally-led conservation efforts and propelling us along the road to reaching the 30x30 goal.

There are numerous locally-led conservation efforts already underway across the West, and many opportunities exist to support these efforts. Here, we examine the tools and resources used by eight state governments to engage in conservation activities across six subject areas, and the ways in which these efforts can contribute to reaching 30x30. We highlight opportunities for growth, lessons learned, and examples of incredible work already happening in communities across the West. The six conservation subject areas included are:

- Conservation Funding: Funding for conservation projects is an essential part of acquiring land and executing restoration projects in order to reach the 30x30 goal. States must ensure that dedicated funding sources are available to protect their lands and waters.
- State Conservation Areas: Each state in the West has its own patchwork of conservation lands, including lands managed by the state for wildlife habitat, recreation, and protecting significant natural resources.
- Protections for Waters: Conserving streams, rivers, and lakes provides sweeping benefits for Western communities, from clean drinking water to critical habitat for a broad range of wildlife.
- State Trust Lands: Each Western state owns trust lands—lands specifically granted from the United States to each state for the purpose of generating revenue for public institutions. While trust lands are managed under significant constraints, Western states have opportunities to enact creative
programs to generate revenue while still conserving these lands for future generations.

- Promoting Ecological Connectivity: Efforts to promote ecological connectivity and incorporate connectivity considerations into land protection are key to creating a conservation network that supports biodiversity.
- Voluntary Private Conservation: Private landowners are essential to stewarding the West’s ecosystems. States have the opportunity to support the voluntary conservation efforts of landowners and rural communities through private conservation programs.

**COMPONENTS OF MEANINGFUL CHANGE**

Regardless of state context, there are certain components of enacting just and meaningful change that should be integrated into efforts to reach the 30x30 goal. The initiative should prioritize equitable access to the outdoors, tribal sovereignty, and functional ecosystems.

In order to provide benefit to all Americans, it is critical that the 30x30 effort results in equitable access to the outdoors. Historically, the benefits of environmental and land protections have been disproportionately distributed, and communities with lower income and higher percentages of people of color have lacked many of the health and economic benefits that accompany access to nature. With the 30x30 effort, there is an opportunity to change that status quo and ensure that all Americans have access to the outdoors by prioritizing accessibility efforts and land protections in areas that serve all demographics. A key option for improving equitable access to nature is enhanced urban conservation efforts, due to the high concentration of Americans living in city environments.

Access to nature can mean many things; another aspect is recreational access to protected areas. The vast majority of protected areas within the United States allow hunting, fishing, and outdoor recreation. If done correctly, conserving more land can benefit hunters and anglers and improve recreation access while also protecting the fish and wildlife populations that hunting and fishing traditions rely on.

The 30x30 effort must respect the sovereignty of tribal nations and engage in meaningful and collaborative consultation efforts with tribal communities. Public lands and protected areas exist on land historically occupied by Native Americans and forcibly taken by the U.S. government. While past land management and conservation efforts have wrongly ignored the connection of tribes to their traditional lands, research has shown that upholding tribal sovereignty helps support nature: across the globe, indigenous people successfully conserve land and biodiversity, with those lands less likely to be degraded by human activities. Conservation efforts moving forward should include opportunities for co-management partnerships and collaborations with tribal nations, meaningful consultation with indigenous leaders, and support for indigenous stewardship priorities while guaranteeing tribal access to cultural landscapes.

At the end of the day, the 30x30 goal is driven by the scientifically-backed finding that it is necessary to protect at least 30% of nature by 2030 to prevent ecological collapse and safeguard the natural systems that support all life on the planet. In order to achieve this end, landscapes and conserved or restored areas must be intentionally protected...
in pursuit of functional, connected, and ecologically representative protected area networks. Conservation efforts must take into account ecosystem connectivity, key habitat for wildlife survival, and changing climate regimes to ensure they are protecting an ecologically functional 30% of America.

STATE CONSERVATION AREAS

Protecting 30% of America by 2030 will require a wide variety of land protection mechanisms, from vast national parks to urban parks and greenspaces. Every level of government has a role to play in reaching the 30x30 goal, and state governments are uniquely positioned to protect additional natural areas while benefiting local economies and increasing access to recreation.

WHAT ARE STATE CONSERVATION AREAS?

State conservation areas are parcels of land managed by state agencies for conservation, wildlife habitat, and recreation. In the West, types of conservation areas depend on the patchwork of federal, state, and private land, as well as the needs and priorities of the state. Here are the different types of state-managed protected land in the West:

- **State parks**—State park systems are ubiquitous across the West, providing open space for visitors and local communities alike. State parks are often located closer to population centers than national public lands, and feature opportunities for recreation, gathering outside, and education.
- **Wildlife areas**—Every state in the West has its own version of protected wildlife habitat. These parcels are managed for the benefit of wildlife, often including active management such as stream restoration and invasive plant removal. In many states, hunting and fishing is a priority in these areas.
- **Fish Management Areas**—Areas protected for fish management are similar to wildlife habitat, conserving wetlands and streams and often including hatcheries.
- **Natural Areas**—State Natural Areas preserve significant natural features, from geologic formations to rare plants.
- **Other**—States across the West have a variety of other designations, including recreation areas, historic parks, and trails. These are generally managed similarly to state parks, prioritizing recreation and access to the outdoors.

WHY STATE CONSERVATION AREAS?

State conservation areas allow for agencies to execute the vision and priorities of residents of the state. The 30x30 initiative must be a grassroots, locally-led effort, and state parks and conservation areas can bring these local priorities to fruition.

The COVID-19 pandemic emphasized the importance of state parks for local communities. As the pandemic limited safe indoor activities, people across the West turned to the outdoors for recreation and safe ways to spend their time. In 2020, visitation to state parks soared in almost every state in the West. Colorado and Utah had the highest state park visitation, with 18.3 million and 10.6 million visitors respectively. Wyoming had the largest increase in state park visitation, an increase of 36% from 2019.

State parks are an important tool in closing the “nature gap”—the unequal distribution of nature in the U.S. based on racial and socioeconomic factors.
Strategically-planned state parks can work to close that gap, especially if states prioritize proximity to communities that have traditionally lacked adequate access to the outdoors.

Sidebar: Lewiston Wildlife Habitat Area, ID—In Idaho, the Lewiston Wildlife Habitat Area exemplifies how land protected for wildlife habitat can play a dual role in providing accessible trails and nature viewing opportunities in close proximity to urban and suburban communities. The 5-acre area hosts over 115 species of birds, as well as deer, coyote, raccoon, rabbit, skunks, amphibians, and reptiles. The paved path through the habitat is wheelchair accessible, ensuring that everyone can enjoy it.

WHAT ARE STATES DOING?

STATE SNAPSHOTS

Arizona: Arizona’s conservation lands, managed by Arizona State Parks and Arizona Game and Fish, consist of state parks, state historic parks, and state natural areas, as well as a state recreation area, a state wildlife area, and a state fish hatchery. While just 0.27% of the state is managed by these agencies, Arizona’s state parks and natural areas hosted nearly 3 million visitors in 2020. Arizona’s Heritage Fund contributes to Game and Fish, but no longer funds State Parks. Current funding comes from general fund allocations and grants.

- State Parks: 22
- Wildlife:
  - State Wildlife Area: 1
  - State Fish Hatchery: 1
- Other:
  - State Natural Areas: 3

Colorado: Colorado’s land management agency, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, manages over 5 million acres of state parks, wildlife areas, and fish units. Colorado’s state parks have the highest visitation in the West, hosting more than 18 million visitors in 2020—a 23% increase compared to 2019. Colorado is working to expand its state park system, and is currently going through a planning process on how to execute this vision. Half of the agency’s funding comes from licenses, passes, fees, and permits, while the rest is from federal and state grants and loans, lottery revenue through Great Outdoors Colorado, donations, registrations, severance tax, and small general fund allocations. In addition to state-owned land, Colorado Parks and Wildlife enters into management agreements with other agencies and willing landowners to protect areas of public or private land that contain unique and significant natural features. Ranging from geologic features to habitat for rare or endangered plants and animals, Colorado has 95 Natural Areas covering 178,275 acres.

- State Parks: 42
- Wildlife:
  - State Wildlife Areas: 350
  - State Fish Units: 16
- Other:
  - State Natural Areas: 95

Idaho: Idaho’s conservation areas, managed by the Department of Parks and Recreation and Idaho Fish and Game, consist of state parks (including state recreational trailways) and wildlife management areas. 7.7 million people visited Idaho’s state parks in 2020, an 18% increase from 2019. Funding for managing these lands comes from general appropriations, revenue from hunting license fees and tag fees, oil and gas reserve funds, and donations. Past land acquisition has been through general fund allocations.
State Parks: 30
Wildlife:
  ○ Wildlife Management Areas: 31

**Montana:** Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks manages the state's 55 state parks—the largest number of state parks in the West—as well as two types of protected wildlife habitat. Wildlife Management Areas protect habitat at the landscape level, while Wildlife Habitat Protection Areas generally preserve smaller parcels that are important to wildlife. Like many states, Montana experienced an uptick in state park visitation in 2020, with a 30% increase to 3.4 million people. Funding for Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks comes from hunting and fishing license revenue, Habitat Montana, grants, and general funding. The largest source of state parks' funding is vehicle registration fees.

  ● State Parks: 55
  ● Wildlife:
    ○ Wildlife Management Areas: 67
    ○ Wildlife Habitat Protection Areas: 13

**New Mexico:** In New Mexico, state parks and wildlife areas are managed by New Mexico State Parks and the Department of Game and Fish. New Mexico State Parks has established an intention to expand the state park system through their Next Generation of Adventure initiative, however New Mexico has not yet acquired new state park land since this goal was created. Funding comes from general appropriations, donations, and the New Mexico Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department through the Heritage Conservation Act.

  ● State Parks: 35
  ● Wildlife:
    ○ State Game Commission Lands: 41

**Utah:** Utah's state conservation areas are managed by the Utah Department of Natural Resources’ State Parks and Division of Wildlife. Utah's state parks have the second highest visitation in the west, with 10.6 million visitors in 2020. Funding comes from general fund allocations and inputs into a wildlife trust fund.

  ● State Parks: 44
  ● Wildlife:
    ○ Wildlife Management Areas: 135

**Wyoming:** Wyoming's state parks and wildlife areas are managed by Wyoming Game and Fish Department and Wyoming State Parks, Historic Sites, and Trails. Wyoming saw the largest increase in state park visitation in 2020, growing 36% to 5.8 million visitors. Funding comes from the general fund and the Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resources Trust Fund.

  ● State Parks: 12
  ● Wildlife:
    ○ Wildlife Habitat Management Areas: 44
  ● Other:
    ○ State Historic Sites: 28

**ACQUISITION**

Despite widespread popularity and high visitation, most Western states do not have an
established mechanism for adding new state conservation areas. **Colorado, Utah, and New Mexico** included expanding their state park systems in each states’ most recent planning reports. The rest of the states have not established expansion goals or have instead directed agency focus to maintaining and managing current state lands.

**Colorado** has made expanding the state park system a priority. The newest state park—Fishers Peak in southern Colorado—was acquired in 2019 through collaboration between state and local agencies and nonprofit organizations. Building on its success, Colorado Parks and Wildlife created a community-driven process to gather input on expanding the state park system. After establishing criteria, including providing nature-based recreation, conserving natural resources, and providing community value, Colorado Parks and Wildlife is now accepting nominations from the public. **New Mexico** and **Utah** set intentions to expand their state park systems in recent planning processes. However, funding challenges seem to have paused acquisition efforts.

In other states, past funding for land acquisition has come through general budget requests or donations. However, state budget problems in recent years and legislatures in some states that do not prioritize conservation efforts have led to little progress in land acquisition in these states.

**Sidebar: Fishers Peak State Park, CO**—Fishers Peak State Park is a model of local partnership and collaboration, established in a way that will not only support conservation but benefit all stakeholders in the region. In 2019, the park was acquired through the combined efforts of The Nature Conservancy, the Trust for Public Land, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, and the city of Trinidad, in addition to help from Colorado’s Great Outdoors Colorado program. Combined with protected areas it connects to in New Mexico, the addition of this park creates 55 square miles of conserved open space. The area is home to over 850 species of wildlife, and will host a wide variety of outdoor recreation opportunities in southern Colorado.]

**TAKEAWAYS**

Rising visitation is expected to continue on public lands, including state parks and wildlife areas. To keep up with demand and provide outdoor opportunities for residents and visitors alike, state agencies should look for ways to expand state park systems, prioritizing accessibility and proximity to communities that stand to benefit the most from nearby nature. Establishing goals and planning processes is a great starting point, but supporting this with dedicated funding is vital to ensure the state’s conservation priorities are executed.

Where land acquisition opportunities are unavailable due to funding constraints or current ownership, establishing voluntary partnerships with other agencies and private landowners can be an important intermediate conservation measure. Agencies can lend important resources and expertise to protect significant habitat and natural resources.

As the country makes progress toward reaching 30x30, states can lead the way by protecting conservation areas while benefiting communities and increasing access to recreation. State conservation efforts can bring to life the priorities of local communities and build grassroots momentum for the bold 30x30 conservation goal.
CONSERVATION FUNDING

Ensuring adequate and reliable funding is an integral piece of supporting conservation efforts across the country. In the U.S., funding for conservation comes from all levels of government, from federal agencies to local initiatives. Conservation is funded by a variety of sources, including allocations from state general funds, established dedicated revenue streams, and grants and matching federal funds. Building on successful methods and filling gaps in state-level funding will be an important part of advancing the 30x30 goal.

WHAT IS CONSERVATION FUNDING?

At the state level, conservation funding enables state agencies to acquire and manage land, leverage federal grants that require matches, and provide support for community-level conservation efforts. Funding allocation and methods vary across Western states, since there is a wide range of responsibilities and opportunities. Demand for funding can depend on the percentage of land managed by the federal government within a state, which can be as high as 80%, as in Nevada, as well as the types of land and waters under state management, from state parks to wildlife management areas.

In the West, states have developed a variety of creative solutions to support conservation funding. Many of the tools used to generate conservation funding are not limited to conservation projects alone. Often, funding sources can be used for recreation access in addition to land acquisition or protected land management.

WHY CONSERVATION FUNDING?

Funding is often the primary barrier facing new conservation projects, such as those that include acquisition or restoration. Over the past two decades, state and federal investment in conservation has been steadily declining, even as the $887 billion outdoor recreation economy, which is supported by public lands, is stronger than ever. The 2021 Conservation in the West poll from Colorado College found that 92% of voters across eight Western states support finding money to protect land, water, and wildlife, despite state budget challenges.

Traditionally, a major source of conservation funding in the U.S. comes from the Pittman-Robertson and Dingell-Johnson Acts, which levy taxes of between 3% and 12% on hunting and fishing equipment, with revenue directed to state wildlife agencies. The entire budget of Wyoming’s Department of Game and Fish, for example, comes from hunting and fishing revenue. Sportsmen and women have been footing the bill for conservation for nearly a century, but as recreation trends shift, it’s no longer feasible to rely on these funding streams alone.

Conservation funding can be used to expand equitable access to nature. Implementation of conservation projects can have a significant and lasting impact when funding sources consider who benefits as a result. New Mexico’s Outdoor Recreation Division created a first-of-its-kind Outdoor Equity Fund that makes targeted investments to help more low-income youth, families, and people of color enjoy the outdoors. Similarly, Great Outdoors Colorado, the organization that implements the portion of Colorado’s lottery funds directed towards conservation and environmental stewardship, prioritizes equity and access in their grant-making process.
What are states doing?

Dedicated Funding Streams

Many of the most successful state-level conservation funding programs are the result of dedicated funding streams. This means that programs and agencies that receive these funds do not have to rely on annual budget allocations that can be impacted by budget changes and shifting legislative priorities from year-to-year.

Colorado has the strongest dedicated funding sources in the West, the largest of which is Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO). The program receives a portion of state lottery revenue to invest in conservation and recreation access projects throughout the state. Since 1992, GOCO has funded over 5,000 projects that span every county in the state, conserving 1.2 million acres. Half of the funding received by GOCO goes to Colorado Parks and Wildlife, helping to fund their activities, including management and acquisition of state land or conservation easements. The rest is administered in grants to local governments and land trusts to execute projects that align with GOCO’s values, including resource conservation, developing youth connections to the outdoors, stewardship, and equity. While funding varies from year to year, it has remained relatively stable over time. Colorado also has a Habitat Stamp, which costs $10.40 annually for anyone purchasing a hunting or fishing license. Funding from this program supports wildlife habitat in the state through acquisition and conservation easements.

Arizona’s Heritage Fund also uses lottery proceeds to fund conservation in the state. Created by ballot initiative in 1990, the original program designated $20 million of lottery revenue divided evenly between the Arizona State Parks Department and the Arizona Game and Fish Department. However, in 2010, legislation eliminated the state parks allocation in order to balance the budget. Although the state parks program was reauthorized in 2019, full funding has yet to be restored.

Nevada also has a strong funding mechanism in the form of a conservation bond program, originally instituted in 2001 and reauthorized in 2019. The original program, called “Question 1,” provided $200 million for conservation easements and land acquisition, as well as recreation management and trail development. After initial funding was nearly exhausted, the Nevada legislature passed AB 84 in 2019, which allocated another $200 million to sustain the bond program for another ten years. While not all projects are limited to conservation, at least $35 million is earmarked for grants to state agencies and local organizations for land acquisition.

The Habitat Montana program, passed through legislation in 1987, directs big game hunting license revenues to protecting wildlife habitat and expanding sportsmen and women access in the state. The program is a public-private partnership that works to protect land through conservation easements, and land acquisition if necessary. Funding from this program has been used to expand existing Wildlife Management Areas and acquire new ones. Habitat Montana generates between $5 and 6 million annually for conservation, as well as around $750,000 for maintenance work.

In Wyoming, the Wildlife and Natural Resources Trust Fund works to protect wildlife habitat throughout the state by leveraging other sources of funding. The trust was originally funded via legislative appropriation, and now operates on revenue from account earnings. On average, every dollar from the trust fund is matched by $6 from other
Sources. Projects include land acquisition and habitat management, preservation of open space, and active management such as prescribed burns and invasive plant mitigation.

Several other states have dedicated funding streams on a smaller scale for wildlife habitat improvements. While the funds raised in these programs do not go directly to land and water conservation, habitat improvements support biodiversity, a key element of the 30x30 goal, and these programs present opportunities to scale funding to include broader conservation efforts. In Wyoming, the legislature created a specialty license plate and Wildlife Conservation Account to fund conservation efforts related to transportation infrastructure. As a result, around $300,000 has been raised for over and underpasses, signage, and other projects to reduce wildlife–vehicle collisions and protect wildlife. Wyoming hunting and fishing licenses must also be accompanied by the purchase of a conservation stamp, the cost of which was increased from $12 to $21 in 2021; the increase may raise $1.2 million each year for sportsmen and women access, as well as around $250,000 for wildlife conservation efforts such as wildlife crossings. In Utah, the Wildlife Habitat Account receives revenue from licenses, permits, stamps, and certificates of registration that funds habitat management. Permits to hunt and fish on any public land in New Mexico must be accompanied by the purchase of a Habitat Stamp, which funds projects like protecting water sources for wildlife or rebuilding rock formations in streams to protect fish habitat. The Habitat Stamp Program raises around $900,000 annually for habitat improvement projects that benefit wildlife, watershed health, and public land users. Montana recently legalized recreational marijuana and the ballot measure directed 50% of the tax revenue towards conservation, an estimated $18 million boost for public lands in the state in the first one to two years. However, Montana Governor Greg Gianforte is attempting to redirect tax revenue to drug treatment and economic development, departing from the direction approved by voters, so whether the revenue is ultimately directed towards conservation remains to be seen.

**Budget Allocation**

There is variation across states in their funding levels for conservation agencies and programs through the general state budget allocation process. This process is vulnerable to budget cuts and shifting priorities within the legislature and governor’s office. In some cases, this can boost conservation funding; Colorado’s Governor Jared Polis has made expanding the state park system a goal and suggested allocating funding for that purpose in his 2021 budget. In many cases though, relying on annual appropriations has led to dwindling conservation funding. In 2020, many states in the West saw budgets negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Decreased conservation funding was exacerbated in states that rely on fossil fuel production, such as Wyoming and New Mexico, given that revenue from those activities helps fund conservation. While the needs of each state are different, some states, including Wyoming, Arizona, and Idaho, do not allocate any general funds for conservation and land management agencies, leaving them to rely on other sources, such as specialty taxes and dedicated revenue streams.

As states face budget cuts in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, it may seem that funding for private conservation is a low priority; in fact, the opposite is true. With the recent passage of the Great American Outdoors Act, the Land and Water Conservation Fund...
(LWCF) has more funding available than in the past, ready to be matched by state dollars. Without dedicated funding to match LWCF grants, states will be leaving money on the table that they desperately need to revitalize their economies and invest in the future.

**ABILITY TO LEVERAGE FEDERAL FUNDS**

An important piece of state-level conservation funding is the ability to leverage federal grants. Programs such as the Land and Water Conservation Fund require matching funds for projects, and the ability to provide those can bring millions of federal dollars into the state for land acquisition and conservation projects. States with dedicated funding sources, like Colorado and Nevada, can use those sources to attract LWCF and other grants, but other states risk missing out on federal investment in public lands and conservation.

New Mexico created the New Mexico Natural Heritage Conservation Act, a fund that was established to be able to leverage federal grant opportunities. In 2010, the Act designated $4.8 million to be administered by the Department of Energy, Minerals, and Natural Resources. However, the funds have all been used and the program has not been replenished. In Utah, the LeRay McAllister Critical Land Conservation Fund matches grants for conservation at a ratio of 9:1, bringing over $223 million in conservation dollars into Utah since 1999. However, since the program relies on legislative appropriations, funding has dwindled over the past decade.

[Sidebar: Since 1965, the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) has been a widely popular and effective tool for conservation in the U.S. Each year, the LWCF receives a portion of royalties from offshore oil and gas drilling revenue, which is used for national public land projects and state and local conservation grants. After decades of insufficient allocations, the LWCF was permanently reauthorized in 2019 and guaranteed full funding at $900 million annually in 2020, two major conservation wins that passed with strong bipartisan support. The state and local grants program matches funds to complete local conservation and recreation priorities, and LWCF dollars have supported projects in every county of the U.S.]

**TAKEAWAYS**

In every state, the demand for conservation funding outweighs what’s available. Many states are facing tough choices for how to allocate limited resources, but even so, relying on variable general fund allocations from year-to-year for conservation is unsustainable and risks missing out on federal investment and revenue from the growing outdoor recreation economy.

Dedicated funding sources, passed through legislation or constitutional amendments, have proven to be the most effective way to maintain conservation funding despite impacts to general state budgets. Programs like Colorado’s GOCO and Nevada’s conservation bond have the highest impact, but smaller revenue streams, like dedicated taxes or specialty license plates or stamps, can direct hundreds of thousands of dollars towards conservation every year, as long as the legislation is clear in specifying its priorities and ensuring funds are explicitly directed to conservation.

With the harsh reality of dwindling budgets, states should look to leverage federal funding by setting aside funds to match grants, as well as direct funds to capitalize on the economic opportunities of the outdoor...
recreation economy. State parks, new trails, and improved access points can bring important benefits to local communities, generate tax revenue for local communities, and help the country reach the 30x30 goal.

**STATE TRUST LANDS**

Reaching the goal of protecting 30% of American lands and waters by 2030 will require action at the federal, state, and local levels. Notably, Western states own significant swaths of land, presenting opportunities for both economic development and conservation.

**WHAT ARE STATE TRUST LANDS?**

Upon being granted statehood, Congress granted each Western state ownership of a portion of the lands within its borders. Now known as state trust lands, these tracts were designated to financially support public institutions, particularly schools. Based on a series of laws from the 18th century, states were given a patchwork of evenly spaced parcels of land—rather than a contiguous area—creating a now infamous “checkerboard” pattern of land ownership. Today, states, primarily across the West, hold roughly 46 million acres of land in trust, an area larger than the state of Washington.

Given their economic support mission, state trust lands are not “public lands” in the traditional sense, and public access is generally restricted. Rather, states manage their trust lands to generate revenue, leasing parcels for grazing, agriculture, logging, as well as drilling and mining. Additionally, states frequently identify trust land parcels to be sold altogether for development.

**WHY STATE TRUST LAND CONSERVATION?**

State trust lands cover vast swaths of the West, including wide ranges of ecosystems and habitat. Conserving portions of state trust lands can provide connectivity with already conserved landscapes, protect critical habitat for species facing impacts from development, and strengthen local economies by providing expanded recreational access.

**WHAT ARE STATES DOING?**

While all agencies overseeing state trust lands are mandated to manage their lands for the financial benefit of certain institutions, many states are taking action to conserve some of their lands. Increasingly, states are looking to innovative solutions to manage their lands for conservation, whether through conservation leases, easements, recreational permits, or other programs.

In Colorado, voters established a “Stewardship Trust,” allowing up to 300,000 acres of state trust lands to be temporarily conserved. While these lands may be leased for economic activities, such as grazing, mining, and drilling, the designation ensures that natural values are conserved. Additionally, more than 30,000 acres of state trust lands are enrolled in Colorado Parks and Wildlife’s Colorado Natural Areas program, which aims to conserve key landscapes and habitat. Colorado’s State Land Board has also implemented Stewardship Action Plans to conserve key habitat for the greater sage-grouse and the Lesser Prairie Chicken.

State trust land agencies in virtually all Western states have conducted land exchanges, helping to consolidate management of broader landscapes. Utah’s Trust Lands Administration has conducted numerous land exchanges, allowing for
conservation of more than 560,000 acres since 1998, including 377,000 acres within Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. Utah land managers have also enacted several “stewardship projects” to protect natural and cultural resources, such as the iconic Great Hunt petroglyph panel within the state’s Nine Mile Canyon. Elsewhere across the West, states including Wyoming, New Mexico and Montana have also conducted land sales and exchanges to consolidate land management and recreational access.

In 1998, Arizona voters passed a resolution dedicating funding to conserve state trust lands facing development pressure near urban areas. Under the state’s Growing Smarter State Trust Land Acquisition Program, grant funds were provided for cities to lease or purchase state trust lands to preserve open space. The program has been used to conserve a range of landscapes across the state, such as Scottsdale’s McDowell Sonoran Preserve, a popular recreation destination. While annual appropriations for the program have since ended, the Trust Land Acquisition Program can serve as a model for adoption by other states. Additionally, Arizona’s State Land Department partners with Natural Resource Conservation Districts to direct funding towards conservation projects on state lands with the goal of benefiting agriculture and grazing.

Idaho’s Department of Lands allows applications to lease state trust lands for conservation, particularly recreation and wildlife habitat. Currently, roughly 20 conservation leases are managed by the state’s Department of Fish and Game for wildlife management. Notably, conservation organizations are currently opposing a plan to sell state lands near McCall, Idaho, a recreation hotspot, instead hoping to establish a conservation or recreation easement to strengthen the region’s tourism economy.

**TAKEAWAYS**

Western states manage significant swaths of trust lands, primarily for the economic benefit of state schools and institutions. While these agencies are constrained by certain mandates, the opportunity exists for innovative programs to conserve state trust lands for future generations. In particular, state agencies can identify ways to establish conservation leases, permits, and programs to conserve key habitat and cultural resources, while still generating revenues. Additionally, states should continue to identify opportunities for land exchanges to consolidate land ownership and provide for the conservation of broader landscapes.

**VOLUNTARY PRIVATE LAND CONSERVATION**

Across the West, vibrant communities of landowners with a strong land stewardship ethic are essential to safeguarding the West’s varied ecosystems and open spaces. Voluntary actions by these landowners can be central to the ongoing effort to protect 30% of America’s lands and waters by 2030. States can build on community-led efforts and support rural communities by investing in programs that promote voluntary conservation.

**WHAT IS PRIVATE CONSERVATION?**

The primary form of long-term private land conservation is conservation easements, which are incredibly popular across the West. Conservation easements are voluntary, permanent agreements by a landowner to give up or limit further development rights on a property, preserving their right and access to the land while protecting the property's...
conservation value. Owners are typically paid for placing their land under easement, or receive other incentives such as tax credits.

To create conservation easements, landowners contract with either a government agency or a nonprofit organization called a land trust. The agency or land trust acquires and holds the easement, meaning that they assume responsibility for ensuring that the easement terms are upheld and for stewarding the land.

Easement programs have been incredibly successful at conserving land while supporting landowners and providing them financial flexibility. Other non-permanent forms of private conservation focus on habitat restoration, providing ecosystem services, and promoting landscape connectivity, all of which also benefit biodiversity.

**WHY PRIVATE CONSERVATION?**

Private lands will play a key role in ensuring that the 30x30 effort results in protected landscapes with functional ecosystems. Currently, only 3% of protected areas are on privately owned land, resulting in the development of private lands at a disproportionately high rate. The loss of private lands is particularly alarming due to the fact that natural private lands often contain key habitat: the things that make them good habitat—such as water, soil, and topography—also make them attractive for development or agricultural use. Such habitat is key to the survival of many species, and will be essential to protecting ecologically functional landscapes.

Private conservation is also a way to center the 30x30 effort toward benefiting local communities and locally-led conservation efforts and priorities. In addition to saving places and species, conservation easements ensure that agricultural lifestyles and culture remain vibrant, tying conservation into the existing fabric of local communities. Indeed, the ability to place land under easement is in many ways the ultimate expression of private land rights and family decision-making. By prioritizing voluntary private conservation, states can direct capital to local communities, increase financial flexibility for struggling landowners, and support agricultural economies while also achieving conservation goals.

**WHAT ARE STATES DOING?**

**EASEMENT FUNDING**

States can support long-term land protections by providing funding for conservation easements. Most conservation-minded landowners are driven by their stewardship ethic and desire to avoid having land fenced, developed, and stripped of water rights. However, families also need to be compensated for development rights in order to make voluntary private conservation a reality, usually through payment from a land trust or government agency for the value of the conservation easement. Easement incentives and payments also provide financial flexibility for struggling landowners, infusing communities with funds without sacrificing their agricultural character.

Many high-impact easement funding programs are federal, such as the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP). Federal programs are incredibly popular, and are often unable to meet landowner demand, pointing to the need for increased federal investment. Most of these programs also require matching funds—state funding is often used as a match to leverage federal dollars. Without dedicated funding to match easement
grants, states will lose out on resources that could help revitalize their economies.

Economists have determined that conservation easements have extensive economic benefits for states and communities. In Colorado, state investments in over 2.5 million acres of conservation easements have driven a $4-$12 return for taxpayers, while researchers established that leveraged funds in Wyoming also more than quadrupled their investment value over a ten-year timeframe.

Colorado, Montana, Wyoming, and Utah have strong sources of funding for easements. Colorado has significant funding in the form of the Great Outdoors Colorado program, which has made grants for conservation easement acquisition every year since 1995, including funding for stewardship endowment, transactional costs, and administrative funding. Colorado's Wildlife Habitat Stamp has also been used to protect 253,000 acres since 2007, primarily via easements through the Colorado Wildlife Habitat Program (CWHP).

Montana has a robust form of easement funding through the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) Habitat Montana Program for public-private land conservation, which has protected nearly half a million acres through conservation easements over the past 35 years. In the past, Montana had additional dedicated funding for easements through the Agricultural Heritage Program, which protected 16,540 acres. However, the program's authority expired in 2003.

The Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resources Trust (WWNRT) invested over $27 million in conservation easements between 2005 and 2018. Conservation easements are especially popular within the state, partially as a result of effective collaboration and communication between willing landowners, state agencies, and land trusts.

Utah's LeRay McAllister Critical Lands Conservation Fund made grants of over $22 million to restore or conserve more than 90,000 acres between 1999 and 2016. However, funding for the program is allocated in a per-year appropriation, making it difficult for partners to rely on program funding from year to year. Deals for conservation easements often take years rather than months, and increased surety would enable more projects to move forward. Additionally, a quirk of the program is that acquired easements must be held by a state entity rather than a certified land trust. There is broad agreement within Utah that this element of the program should be changed, providing an opportunity to expand the program's potential without increasing funding.

Since 80% of Nevada's lands are federally managed and most of the remaining acres are privately owned, the Nevada Department of Wildlife sometimes uses its conservation bond allocations to leverage funding for conservation easements. Although original bond funding ran out before many easement projects were done, there is now an opportunity for additional work to resume after reauthorization of the program. The state should prioritize getting the program back up and running swiftly in order to support local land trusts and capitalize on leveraged federal funds.

Most states in the West have some easement funding through state land and wildlife management agency general funds or smaller reserves. However, most of these funds are spread thin across agency priorities, and are used for easements less often than funds in programs like those highlighted in Colorado, Montana, Wyoming, and Utah. An example of one of these programs is the Arizona Game and Fish Department's Heritage Fund, which was only recently changed to include conservation easements as an acceptable use of funding.
Arizona, Idaho, Nevada, and New Mexico all lack significant sources of state funding for conservation easements. In the past, New Mexico had the New Mexico Natural Heritage Conservation Program, while Arizona had a State Parks Heritage Fund; however, both programs are no longer active due to a lack of funding. In Idaho and Nevada, a first priority should be to establish the infrastructure for a state funding source (such as that in New Mexico and Arizona), meaning that funds could be allocated in the future when available. All four of these states would benefit dramatically from increasing their financial investment in long-term conservation efforts by private landowners, bringing extensive economic benefits into local communities.

State land and wildlife management agencies also regularly support voluntary private conservation efforts through significant funding and investment in restoration and habitat improvement projects. Although such work does not permanently protect land, it improves habitat for both landowner use and wildlife, making important strides toward protecting America’s biodiversity.

**CONSERVATION TAX INCENTIVES**

Another way that state governments can encourage voluntary long-term private conservation is through tax incentives such as conservation tax credits. Tax credit programs encourage the donation of land or easements to state agencies and land trusts in exchange for tax credits against a landowner’s state income tax liability, making conservation a more affordable and attractive option for landowners. States without incentive programs can promote private conservation by assessing whether creating conservation tax credit programs and additional easement incentives makes sense for their unique tax environment.

Of Western states, only Colorado and New Mexico have implemented conservation tax credit systems. These programs can dramatically increase the efficiency of private conservation, as tax credit deals often take significantly less time to complete than funded deals. Colorado’s program has been hugely successful since its inception in 2000 (despite some criticisms): over 2.2 million acres have been permanently protected in Colorado using state tax credits. Colorado tax credits are valued at 75% of the first $100,000 of the donated easement’s value and 50% of any remaining donated value up to a maximum of $5 million per individual donation. The overall tax credit program is currently capped at $45 million annually, although the program is rarely fully leveraged. As of early 2021, Colorado has the opportunity to improve its tax credit program by passing House Bill 1233, which would increase the credit value to up to 90% of the donated fair market value of the easement, improving equity and enabling more complete leverage of the program. In New Mexico, tax credits are only worth 50% of the easement donation value, with a maximum value of $250,000. By increasing tax credit value for donated easements, New Mexico could support agricultural families and communities. Both Colorado and New Mexico conservation tax credits can be carried forward by 20 years and are transferable, increasing flexibility for landowners by allowing the credits to be sold.

An example of another form of a tax incentive is the Wildlife Habitat Exemption in Idaho. This tax exemption allows conservation easements of at least 15 years to be taxed at their previous agricultural value. In Idaho, taxed agricultural value tends to be decreased as a result of the Idaho Agricultural Exemption. On the other hand, in Montana,
state law says that conservation easements cannot reduce property taxes, decreasing opportunities for tax incentives to play a role in incentivizing private conservation efforts.

**TRANSPARENCY AND IMPACT**

Most states across the West have a need for enhanced easement data collection and centralization for the purposes of transparency, measuring conservation progress, and assessing the impact of state programs. Indeed, there is anecdotal evidence of states losing or not having access to easement data, making it difficult to determine the total number of acres under conservation easement. As a result, many states cannot adequately measure progress toward conservation goals or ensure that land already protected is properly stewarded. Even if data is not made publicly available, states have a responsibility to keep track of easements and assess the associated return on investment provided by state-sponsored programs.

**Montana** is the only state in the West where conservation easement reporting is mandatory. The requirement is the result of 2007 legislation following an audit that found a lack of transparency regarding easements held by both land trusts and the state. Data is centralized by the Department of Revenue.

Some states have made strides toward improved transparency and data centralization, while others still have a need to improve. In **Colorado**, the state supports the [Colorado Ownership, Management, and Protection (COMaP) service](#), a project of Colorado State University that works to map protected lands, including easements, across the state. In **Utah**, there is an opportunity to create a position within the Department of Natural Resources to administer, develop, and coordinate easement data. Similar positions or collected databases would be useful within all states that do not currently have a system for coordinating and centralizing easement data.

**EXPANDING THE TOOLBOX**

There is a significant opportunity for Western states to lead the way with creative options to further promote voluntary private conservation.

One opportunity lies in working to value easements in a new way. Currently, conservation easements in areas with little to no development pressure have minimal value: easements are valued at the difference between the value of the potentially developed land and the value of the land in its current condition. The current valuation method cuts out the financial appeal of an easement for otherwise willing landowners and reduces the ability to protect land that is ecologically valuable. Through incorporating biodiversity credits, carbon markets, or ecosystem service evaluation into easements or similar mechanisms, private conservation efforts could take into account the true value of protected land and increase opportunities for conservation.

**Colorado**'s tax credit incentive enables private conservation practitioners to explore solutions to this problem. One proposed option would be for the state to add an alternative method of easement tax credit valuation via legislative change, which would allow a conservation easement to be assessed for conservation values on the property rather than the loss of development rights that a landowner gives up. Such a change would dramatically increase opportunities for voluntary private conservation in less developed areas of Colorado and support rural communities. However, this solution would make landowners ineligible for the federal easement tax deduction, limiting...
opportunities to effectively implement similar changes in states without incentive programs.

Private land conservation efforts are often fragmented. Through cohesive strategies, principles, and planning methods, states can better coordinate and prioritize investments in private conservation across the landscape. **Colorado** state agencies and programs such as Great Outdoors Colorado, the Colorado Water Conservation Board, and Colorado Parks and Wildlife have supported the ongoing creation of a nonprofit-led Statewide Private Lands Conservation Plan, which seeks to fill this gap.

States also have an opportunity to mesh conservation science with private conservation by working to create additional incentives for voluntary conservation within key habitat areas. For example, the **Montana** state legislature created the Montana Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program in 2015, providing a grant opportunity for conservation projects, including conservation easements, in designated greater sage-grouse habitat. In **Wyoming**, the first state to implement wildlife movement corridor designations, there is an opportunity to explore options for targeted landowner incentives within migration corridors.

Flexible and dynamic opportunities for private conservation will be key to reaching the 30x30 goal in a rapidly changing world. Some practitioners have suggested solutions such as habitat leases to meet these needs. Habitat leases are long-term contracts on the scale of decades that compensate landowners for the ecological benefits provided by existing habitat on private land.

Another example of a flexible private conservation initiative is **Nevada's Conservation Credit System** (CCS). Through a system of buying and selling conservation credits and development debits, the state's CCS for the sagebrush ecosystem creates new incentives for private landowners to preserve and restore critical lands. Through a market-based system, the program has offset over 15,000 acres of direct disturbance to sagebrush habitat with over 114,000 acres of voluntary conservation agreements with private landowners.

**TAKEAWAYS**

Voluntary private conservation is incredibly popular in the West, where many landowners have a strong stewardship ethic. Some Western states successfully promote long-term private conservation through tax incentives and dedicated funding for easements, but such efforts could be dramatically expanded through increased funding and additional incentives. As a result, states would inject capital into rural communities, increase financial options for struggling landowners, support agricultural economies, empower land stewards already protecting vulnerable landscapes, and multiply returns on investment. Throughout the process, states should collect and centralize easement data wherever possible in order to assess the impacts of their investments.

Traditional voluntary private conservation mechanisms, such as easements, will be key to protecting 30% of America by 2030. But states also have options to get creative to promote more effective and ambitious conservation that will benefit landowners while expanding private conservation and stewardship. Flexible conservation mechanisms like habitat leases, coordinated planning to prioritize investments, increased incentives for conserving key habitats, and valuation of easements based on ecological metrics are all opportunities to improve the on-the-ground impact of state conservation efforts.
PROMOTING ECOLOGICAL CONNECTIVITY

As human development fragments the Western landscape, efforts to improve ecological connectivity have rapidly gained momentum, building on years of research and strong relationships between local communities and state land management agency staff. Efforts to promote ecological connectivity and incorporate connectivity into land protection are key to creating a conservation network that supports biodiversity and protecting an ecologically functional 30% of America by 2030.

WHAT IS ECOLOGICAL CONNECTIVITY?

Animals of all types need to move to complete their life cycles, migrate between seasons, and find resources and mates. Ecological connectivity is a measure of how well habitat is linked together to support wildlife movement and natural ecosystem processes. Biodiversity thrives when wildlife and plants are able to move: ecosystems have improved seed dispersal, plant communities rebound better following events like wildfires, and wildlife populations have better genetic diversity.

Habitat connectivity and wildlife movement occurs across many spatial and temporal scales, from a turtle or bear crossing a single road to salmon or herds of mule deer traversing hundreds of miles. In the West, big game migration often takes center stage in connectivity discussions. While measures to protect big game migration improve connectivity for other species and are key to supporting local communities and economies, there is also a need to expand connectivity discussions and efforts in the West to include a wider range of species.

Ecological connectivity can not only be promoted by protection of critical movement corridors and key habitat, but also by measures such as habitat restoration and improvement, the creation of infrastructure such as wildlife crossings and other solutions to allow wildlife to bypass roads and fences, and research to target future efforts and investments.

WHY ECOLOGICAL CONNECTIVITY?

Habitat loss and fragmentation are two of the greatest threats to biodiversity. Land protections are most effective when viewed through a landscape-scale connectivity lens, allowing for parcels to be efficiently and intentionally targeted for ecosystem functionality. With such an approach, land protections can address both threats to biodiversity in tandem.

Non-land-protection measures to promote wildlife movement, such as underlying research, wildlife crossings, and collaboration are also key to creating a functional network of protected areas. They help provide connective tissue between protected areas while integrating natural systems into our society.

In a connected landscape, biodiversity is also more resilient in the face of climate change. As animal and plant ranges shift in a changing climate, species and populations will need to be able to relocate.

Ecological connectivity supports healthy wildlife populations that are key to Western lifestyles, local communities, and recreation economies. Landowners and locally-based biologists are often the best informed about wildlife movements, making locally-led conservation efforts and collaboration...
essential to efforts to promote wildlife movement and migration.

WHAT ARE STATES DOING?

DESIGNATIONS

The most explicit way that Western states have established a commitment to promoting connectivity is via executive orders, legislation, resolutions, and high-level administrative changes and guidance. All of these pathways have led to on-the-ground conservation and help protect biodiversity, provide insight into future opportunities, and create a more connected Western landscape. However, only Wyoming Governor Mark Gordon’s executive order results in any form of land protection, while other actions instead help coordinate and direct state agency priorities—in many cases driving just as significant benefits for biodiversity.

Wyoming’s 2020 executive order to protect mule deer and antelope migration creates a science-based process to identify and conserve migratory wildlife corridors. Wyoming has so far designated the Sublette, Baggs, and Platte Valley migration corridors and has identified two others for potential designation. Once a corridor has been designated, the EO directs state agencies to protect wildlife movement, minimize surface disturbance, maintain habitat, and work to avoid wildlife-vehicle collisions within the corridor. Following designation, locally-engaged working groups are created to provide recommendations on the corridor and options to promote connectivity, such as incentives for voluntary private land conservation. Private landowners are explicitly exempt from the requirements of the executive order, allowing them to voluntarily pursue conservation opportunities. A significant gap in this order is that it strictly applies to mule deer and antelope wildlife populations, leaving out other species.

As one of the first states in the country to designate migration corridors, Wyoming has struggled with a number of implementation setbacks, including pushback from local landowners and uncertainty regarding connectivity science. However, the state has been able to move forward by highlighting landowners’ actions as explicitly voluntary, developing close relationships with private landowners, and working to clearly communicate the complex science of migration to both lawmakers and the public. Wyoming’s work to protect wildlife migration corridors can serve as a case study for other states, allowing practitioners to examine lessons learned and improve upon past solutions.

RESEARCH AND COMMUNICATION

Wildlife research is critical for identifying spatially explicit opportunities to protect wildlife movement and migration, such as high-use movement areas or key habitat areas like migration stopovers or bottlenecks.

All Western states have recently expanded efforts to map and define migration routes and other wildlife corridors through GPS collar studies. Agencies have taken key steps toward understanding and promoting ecological connectivity in their respective states by following up on this research through the creation of extensive state action plans, analyses, prioritizations, status reports, mapping projects, and management plans. This research and planning enables solutions to be implemented, and is at its most beneficial when used as an adaptive tool and integrated with other planning mechanisms.
Through making wildlife movement data publicly available and leveraging research to tell a compelling story, Western states can drive effective conservation of high-priority areas.

**Wyoming** has been a migration research and communications leader, energizing local communities and sportsmen and women while drawing national attention to migration corridors such as the Path of the Pronghorn and the Red Desert to Hoback mule deer migration. By highlighting the movements of mule deer, Wyoming revealed a particular land parcel that, if developed, would have nearly completely blocked a key migration bottleneck. As a result, the parcel was purchased and eventually donated to the Wyoming Game and Fish Commission to be turned into the Luke Lynch Wildlife Habitat Management Area.

**Utah** has also made impressive strides in connectivity communication, publishing an interactive map of ongoing research and monitoring projects and developing a tool called the Wildlife Tracker. The tool allows state agencies to visualize extensive datasets in a form that is readily understood, and as a result Utah has had great success in working with local city planners to protect movement corridors. In the City of Eagle, where rapid development may soon prevent wildlife migration, use of the Wildlife Tracker to communicate with local officials has driven changes in land use plans that may result in increased connectivity and identified the potential need for conservation easement funding.

## EASEMENTS AND ACQUISITIONS

Protecting and sustaining wildlife movement and migration is impossible without targeted land protections to maintain open space in core usage zones. All connectivity legislation and executive orders in the West explicitly do not apply to private landowners. Instead, Western states have pursued connectivity-targeted land protections through voluntary private conservation easements and land acquisition. Conservation easements provide win-wins for landowners and wildlife, providing financing options to rural landowners while preventing large properties from being subdivided and broken up by accompanying roads and fences.

Montana, Colorado, and Idaho have all extensively integrated conservation easement opportunities into state action plans for big game migration. In Idaho, implemented examples include easements to allow movement of bighorn sheep in the south-central part of the state as well as others to support implemented wildlife crossings.

**Montana** and **Colorado** have both taken an approach of integrating connectivity into prioritizations and assessments in pre-existing state conservation programs and funding sources. This approach successfully directs funding toward connectivity-oriented land protections, with both states investing heavily in conservation easements to protect habitat in key wildlife movement areas. Montana’s connectivity strategy directs Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks to explicitly incorporate wildlife movement and migration into habitat programs and funding, while Colorado’s Habitat Stamp and GOCO funds are allocated via processes that take into account wildlife movement corridors and connectivity. For example, the Colorado Wildlife Habitat Program (CWHP) is targeted at Colorado Parks and Wildlife Commission 2020 funding priorities, which include both “big game winter range and migration corridors” and “landscape scale parcels and parcels that provide connectivity.”
In Nevada and Wyoming, easements and acquisitions have been pursued on a more project-by-project basis. In Nevada, for example, a collaborative effort has secured a conservation easement for over 2,000 acres of crucial winter habitat that serves as a major migration stop-over, while over 1,000 acres have been acquired by the state to protect either side of an implemented wildlife crossing. An example in Wyoming is the Munger Mountain Corridor partnership, which resulted in a 236-acre conservation easement that allows cow elk to migrate to calving grounds.

Utah, New Mexico, and Arizona all recognize conservation easements as tools in their state action plans for big game migration, but have not worked to integrate them as fully into connectivity work.

Despite the incredible work already underway, no state in the West has developed a robust public–private voluntary incentive structure or easement program specifically for the purposes of promoting connectivity and wildlife movement, although both Colorado and Wyoming executive orders suggest incentivizing voluntary landowner cooperation. As a benefit of creating explicit wildlife corridor designations, Wyoming has a unique opportunity to lead and explore targeted incentives for voluntary landowner connectivity projects or conservation easements, potentially with a sliding scale based on property locations within designated corridors.

REGULATIONS

Western states have been cautious in drafting connectivity-related regulations that impact private landowners. However, Colorado has led the way on integrating connectivity into regulations on extractive industries, effectively protecting a significant amount of habitat from surface disturbance.

Colorado’s Oil and Gas Conservation Commission recently developed the most comprehensive oil and gas regulations to protect wildlife habitat and ecological connectivity in the West, which went into effect in early 2021. The new rules minimize impact on wildlife migration corridors and critical habitats and can serve as a model for regulations in other states. The regulations put an additional 5.5 million acres of key wildlife habitat areas off-limits for drilling and required developers to consult with Colorado Parks and Wildlife experts before receiving drilling permits on an additional 12.7 million acres of high-priority habitat.

NON-LAND-PROTECTION MEASURES

The benefits of land protections are greatly enhanced by measures that create connective tissue and opportunities for wildlife movement across the wider landscape. The vast majority of work that Western states are doing to promote movement and migration is through non-land-protection measures such as planning and prioritizations to direct future efforts; interjurisdictional and interdisciplinary collaboration to coordinate solutions; habitat management; and implementation of infrastructure-related solutions such as wildlife crossings and wildlife-friendly fencing. Such efforts are often how states are most effectively promoting connectivity, and should be supported and reinforced by additional resources and funding moving forward.

Here is a very brief summary of incredible and extensive work being done by states across the West:

- Legislative, executive, and high-level administrative actions: Many Western states have made commitments to
connectivity via legislative, executive, and administrative actions that do not explicitly protect land. Colorado's 2019 executive order on conserving big game corridors and winter range set the stage for state action on connectivity, while Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks formalized an agency-wide commitment to ecological connectivity via a comprehensive strategy to centralize connectivity work within the agency in 2020. New Mexico's legislature passed the New Mexico Wildlife Corridors Act in 2019, which mandates the creation of a Wildlife Corridors Action Plan to identify existing human-caused barriers to movement and migration for all species. Utah legislators signaled support for the protection and restoration of wildlife corridors via a concurrent resolution in 2020. The Utah Division of Wildlife Resources has also created the Utah Wildlife Migration Initiative, accompanied by dedicated staff and annual funding of $750,000. Moving forward, such mandates and actions should be accompanied by dedicated funding, and would maximize ecological benefits by addressing connectivity for all wildlife species.

- **Coordination:** Promoting ecological connectivity requires interjurisdictional and interdisciplinary solutions and collaboration between states, agencies, and tribes. Over the past decade, collaboration in many states has evolved from checking boxes required by agency policies to proactive discussions to benefit wildlife and local communities. A particular strength of many Western states is found in strong collaborations between state transportation departments and wildlife management agencies, manifesting in MOUs, collaborative summits, ongoing working groups, and on-the-ground projects. It is important for states to formalize collaboration, ensuring continued commitment to partnerships and projects.

- **Habitat management:** All Western states perform extensive habitat management in order to provide resources for migrating wildlife and increase populations. Management techniques can include herbicide application to mitigate habitat degradation by noxious weeds, invasive species removal to prevent conversion of native habitat, or post-fire treatment to re-seed and rehabilitate important habitat like stopovers and winter range.

- **Infrastructure:** Roads, fences, and human development are the most common barriers to wildlife movement, resulting in roadway collisions between motorists and large wildlife and an annual societal cost of more than $8 billion. However, research has found that wildlife crossing structures can reduce collisions by up to 97 percent. As a result, all Western states have begun extensive efforts to implement solutions like under and overpasses, wildlife culverts, and wildlife detection systems. States are most successful when they engage local communities early and often when exploring such solutions. While well-designed fences can improve road crossings, other fences are dangerous. Research in Utah and Colorado has shown every year one ungulate is tangled for every
2.5 miles of fence. States have been successful in working to remove or modify fencing on state lands or collaborating with landowners to facilitate improvements of private fences.

**TAKEAWAYS**

States can ensure that the 30x30 goal accomplishes the goal of protecting biodiversity by incorporating habitat connectivity into land protection efforts and using additional measures to connect a functional network of protected areas.

Creating land designations to promote connectivity can be a complicated task, especially in terms of clear communication with local stakeholders. Corridor designations in the West should be explicit about exempting private landowners from regulation while instead incentivizing voluntary conservation efforts. On the other hand, there is a very real opportunity to protect land from development and surface disturbance through regulations on extractive industries.

A key way to protect land for the purposes of ecological connectivity is via voluntary private conservation easements. Such efforts have been extremely successful, and have the potential to ensure that an ecologically functional 30% of America is protected. By incorporating connectivity into project assessments and prioritizations, states can better fund intentional and efficient conservation.

Land and habitat protections to promote connectivity are only one part of the puzzle: the vast majority of work to promote connectivity is done through research, coordination, infrastructure improvements, habitat management, and legislative or administrative actions to prioritize the needs of biodiversity. The benefits of such research and solutions can be multiplied through compelling storytelling, which helps engage and energize local communities to preserve habitat and wildlife movement.

**PROTECTIONS FOR WATERS**

The ambitious goal of conserving 30% of America requires not only protecting our lands, but waters as well. While there are many mechanisms for protecting oceans, rivers, and streams at the federal level—such as national marine sanctuaries and Wild and Scenic Rivers—fewer options exist for state governments.

**WHY INLAND WATER CONSERVATION?**

Streams, rivers, lakes, and the water they provide are the lifeblood of the West. Major river systems have long supplied communities with water for agriculture and drinking, and provided critical habitat for wildlife. Over the course of centuries, a complex system of laws has been developed to govern ownership of water rights, protection of rivers and streams, and how waters can be conserved for communities and future generations.

Increasingly, hotter temperatures and drought caused by climate change have increased stress on rivers and streams across the region, driving the need for increased conservation efforts.

**WHAT ARE STATES DOING?**

Across the West, policy governing water use, conservation, and the protection of aquatic habitat is a hotly debated topic. Now, as Western states face prolonged drought exacerbated by climate change, along with increased pressure from development, state
governments are looking for innovative ways to protect and conserve water supplies and habitat.

In 2009, Colorado's legislature enacted a Wild and Scenic Rivers Fund, which aims to develop protections for rivers as an alternative to the federal Wild and Scenic River designation. Under the program, the Colorado Water Conservation Board has provided funding for stakeholder groups to determine “waterways with outstanding remarkable values” worthy of protection across the Upper Colorado, Lower Dolores, and San Juan river basins. These groups have engaged in a wide range of activities, from monitoring stream flows and water quality to providing recommendations on how to increase and maintain recreational access and protect critical habitat. Similarly, Utah has developed a partnership to monitor and conserve the Weber River basin.

Multiple Western states, including New Mexico, Arizona, and Colorado have established programs to fund watershed restoration and cleanup that can improve river health. These programs generally distribute federal funding to reduce pollution from development activities and improve habitat and water quality.

Virtually all Western states conserve some lakes and rivers through state parks, wildlife areas, and other protected spaces. Additionally, state governments seek to provide fishing and boating access to a range of waterways, with an additional goal of protecting aquatic habitat.

One critical tool states have is allowing the owners of water rights to allow water flows to be left instream without forfeiting their legal rights. Such instream flows are critical in protecting habitat for fish and other aquatic species. For example, in 1973 Colorado's state legislature voted to allow instream flow water rights, which have since been utilized in more than 9,700 miles of streams. Several additional Western states also allow instream flow water rights, including Wyoming, Nevada, Idaho, and New Mexico. While Arizona does not currently allow water rights to be used for environmental purposes, operating instead under a “use it or lose it” policy, bills have been introduced to allow instream flows. Additionally, Colorado has enacted a program for recreational instream flows, maintaining water levels in certain places to ensure a suitable recreational experience.

**TAKEAWAYS**

Western watersheds are increasingly feeling the impacts of climate change and development. While state governments are bound by an arcane web of laws governing water rights, several states have taken innovative measures to protect lakes, rivers, and streams, such as creating protective designations for waterways, establishing watershed restoration funds, and allowing instream flow water rights. Going forward, state action to protect aquatic habitat and conserve waterways will be critical in reaching the goal of protecting 30% of America's lands and waters by 2030.

**CONCLUSION**

The moment has arrived to confront the climate and nature crises by working to protect 30% of America by 2030. The natural landscapes of the Western United States provide a unique opportunity to preserve our natural heritage while supporting local communities. Western states have starkly different cultures and challenges, but all have a strong conservation legacy.

The West is positioned well to lead the way in a new era of conservation.
continuing and expanding innovative work already happening on the ground, states can contribute to the bold 30x30 goal while promoting locally-led efforts and driving a wide range of benefits for taxpayers and communities. Moving forward, conservation efforts should prioritize equitable access to the outdoors, tribal sovereignty, and functional ecosystems.

States can drive conservation benefits through a number of different approaches, including designating state conservation areas, allocating resources to invest in conservation, exploring options to conserve state trust lands for future generations, supporting voluntary private land conservation efforts, promoting and prioritizing ecological connectivity, and protecting aquatic habitat and waterways. These approaches are inherently interwoven; by pursuing multiple approaches in tandem, states can magnify their impact.

Western governors and legislatures now have the opportunity to set the stage for the next decade of conservation in the United States. By using all of the tools and approaches at their disposal to protect nature, public health, and outdoor recreation economies, Western states can propel us along the road to protecting 30% of America by 2030.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Center for Western Priorities would like to thank the many individuals and organizations who generously shared their time and expertise with us to aid in the development of this research.
APPENDICES

A. RESTORATION PROGRAM EXAMPLES

While the 30x30 goal is about protecting acres, restoring ecosystems and enhancing wildlife habitat can help to address climate impacts and the biodiversity crisis. In the U.S., nearly 60% of land is still in a mostly natural condition or could be restored, giving restoration programs an important role to play in conservation. Here are a few examples of successful restoration programs in Western states:

NEVADA TAHOE PROGRAM

Nevada's Tahoe Program is a comprehensive restoration program that improves water quality, controls erosion, restores natural watercourses, improves forest health and wildlife habitat, and provides recreational opportunities in the Lake Tahoe Basin. The lake, which straddles the border between California and Nevada, is surrounded by a patchwork of land ownership, as well as significant habitat and recreation resources.

The restoration program is a collaborative effort between four state agencies that then works with a network of other stakeholders, including the state of California, the federal government, local governments, and private landowners.

Nevada's Division of State Lands capitalized on Nevada's unique conservation bond funding program, which was reauthorized in 2019. Projects range from forest thinning and prescribed burns to acquiring and managing urban lots for erosion control, water quality, wildlife habitat, open space, and forest restoration.

RESTORE COLORADO

Restoration and Stewardship of Outdoor Resources and Environment (RESTORE) Colorado is a partnership between Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO), Colorado land management agencies, and nonprofit organizations aiming to fund large-scale habitat restoration and stewardship projects across several habitat priorities. The collaboration allows the agencies and organizations to support larger, more impactful projects and streamline the application process for grantees.

In 2020, Restore Colorado awarded $2.7 million in grants, which was matched by another $3 million from other sources. Projects included active management to improve big game habitat, removing invasive species in sagebrush ecosystems, and removing fish barriers and restoring the floodplain along the Conejos River.

IDAHO HABITAT IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM

Idaho Fish and Game partners with private landowners and Tribes to provide technical and financial assistance for upland game bird and waterfowl habitat enhancement projects. Landowners apply to the program, and receive assistance from state biologists to create a cooperative agreement and project plan. Enhancements range from wetland buffer zones to establishing grassy areas for nesting and winter cover.
B. FEDERAL EASEMENT FUNDING

There is high demand for popular federal easement programs, most of which desperately need additional funding and resources. Here are some of the federal programs and incentives:

- The federal conservation easement tax incentive allows landowners to deduct a portion of their conservation easement's value from their yearly income (up to a certain percentage of their income) for up to 15 years.

- The popular Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), which recently received full and permanent funding from Congress, can provide funding for both direct land purchase and conservation easement acquisition from willing landowners.

- The USDA's Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) provides funding to help landowners and land trusts protect and restore wetlands, farms, and ranches through conservation easements.

- The USDA's Healthy Forests Reserve Program funds easements and restoration on private forestland.

- The Forest Service's Forest Legacy Program works in partnership with states to encourage protection of environmentally important forestlands through easements or land purchases.

- The USDA's Regional Conservation Partnership Program is unique in that it matches the Natural Resources Conservation Service with partners in order to target specific natural resource management goals.

- The Department of Defense's Readiness and Environmental Protection Initiative (REPI) helps fund easements to protect lands around military installations.

- The Department of Defense's Sentinel Landscapes Partnership is meant to align DOD and private landowner conservation priorities near military lands.

- The Grassland Easement Program allows the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to acquire easements on grasslands for bird conservation; similarly, the Wetland Easement Program enables it to acquire wetlands to conserve waterfowl habitat.

- The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund provides grants to states to protect Endangered Species Act-listed species. These grants can be used to acquire conservation easements in relevant habitat.
C. COMPILED TAKEAWAYS

STATE CONSERVATION AREAS

Rising visitation is expected to continue on public lands, including state parks and wildlife areas. To keep up with demand and provide outdoor opportunities for residents and visitors alike, state agencies should look for ways to expand state park systems, prioritizing accessibility and proximity to communities that stand to benefit the most from nearby nature. Establishing goals and planning processes is a great starting point, but supporting this with dedicated funding is vital to ensure the state’s conservation priorities are executed.

Where land acquisition opportunities are unavailable due to funding constraints or current ownership, establishing voluntary partnerships with other agencies and private landowners can be an important intermediate conservation measure. Agencies can lend important resources and expertise to protect significant habitat and natural resources.

As the country makes progress toward reaching 30x30, states can lead the way by protecting conservation areas while benefiting communities and increasing access to recreation. State conservation efforts can bring to life the priorities of local communities and build grassroots momentum for the bold 30x30 conservation goal.

CONSERVATION FUNDING

In every state, the demand for conservation funding outweighs what’s available. Many states are facing tough choices for how to allocate limited resources, but even so, relying on variable general fund allocations from year-to-year for conservation is unsustainable and risks missing out on federal investment and revenue from the growing outdoor recreation economy.

Dedicated funding sources, passed through legislation or constitutional amendments, have proven to be the most effective way to maintain conservation funding despite impacts to general state budgets. Programs like Colorado’s GOCO and Nevada’s conservation bond have the highest impact, but smaller revenue streams, like dedicated taxes or specialty license plates or stamps, can direct hundreds of thousands of dollars towards conservation every year, as long as the legislation is clear in specifying its priorities and ensuring funds are explicitly directed to conservation.

With the harsh reality of dwindling budgets, states should look to leverage federal funding by setting aside funds to match grants, as well as direct funds to capitalize on the economic opportunities of the outdoor recreation economy. State parks, new trails, and improved access points can bring important benefits to local communities, generate tax revenue for local communities, and help the country reach the 30x30 goal.

STATE TRUST LANDS

Western states manage significant swaths of trust lands, primarily for the economic benefit of state schools and institutions. While these agencies are constrained by certain mandates, the opportunity exists for innovative programs to conserve state trust lands for future generations. In particular, state agencies can identify ways to establish conservation leases, permits, and programs to conserve key habitat and cultural resources, while still generating revenues. Additionally, states should continue to identify opportunities for land exchanges to
consolidate land ownership and provide for the conservation of broader landscapes.

**VOLUNTARY PRIVATE LAND CONSERVATION**

Voluntary private conservation is incredibly popular in the West, where many landowners have a strong stewardship ethic. Some Western states successfully promote long-term private conservation through tax incentives and dedicated funding for easements, but such efforts could be dramatically expanded through increased funding and additional incentives. As a result, states would inject capital into rural communities, increase financial options for struggling landowners, support agricultural economies, empower land stewards already protecting vulnerable landscapes, and multiply returns on investment. Throughout the process, states should collect and centralize easement data wherever possible in order to assess the impacts of their investments.

Traditional voluntary private conservation mechanisms, such as easements, will be key to protecting 30% of America by 2030. But states also have options to get creative to promote more effective and ambitious conservation that will benefit landowners while expanding private conservation and stewardship. Flexible conservation mechanisms like habitat leases, coordinated planning to prioritize investments, increased incentives for conserving key habitats, and valuation of easements based on ecological metrics are all opportunities to improve the on-the-ground impact of state conservation efforts.

**PROMOTING ECOLOGICAL CONNECTIVITY**

States can ensure that the 30x30 goal accomplishes the goal of protecting biodiversity by incorporating habitat connectivity into land protection efforts and using additional measures to connect a functional network of protected areas.

Creating land designations to promote connectivity can be a complicated task, especially in terms of clear communication with local stakeholders. Corridor designations in the West should be explicit about exempting private landowners from regulation while instead incentivizing voluntary conservation efforts. On the other hand, there is a very real opportunity to protect land from development and surface disturbance through regulations on extractive industries.

A key way to protect land for the purposes of ecological connectivity is via voluntary private conservation easements. Such efforts have been extremely successful, and have the potential to ensure that an ecologically functional 30% of America is protected. By incorporating connectivity into project assessments and prioritizations, states can better fund intentional and efficient conservation.

Land and habitat protections to promote connectivity are only one part of the puzzle: the vast majority of work to promote connectivity is done through research, coordination, infrastructure improvements, habitat management, and legislative or administrative actions to prioritize the needs of biodiversity. The benefits of such research and solutions can be multiplied through compelling storytelling, which helps engage and energize local communities to preserve habitat and wildlife movement.
WATER

Western watersheds are increasingly feeling the impacts of climate change and development. While state governments are bound by an arcane web of laws governing water rights, several states have taken innovative measures to protect lakes, rivers, and streams, such as creating protective designations for waterways, establishing watershed restoration funds, and allowing instream flow water rights. Going forward, state action to protect aquatic habitat and conserve waterways will be critical in reaching the goal of protecting 30% of America’s lands and waters by 2030.