

Accountable? Not Us!

Joe Biden's 30 by 30 plan is just a first bite toward choking down the rest later.

By Dave Skinner

"We must identify our enemies and drive them into oblivion."

Can you remember which homicidal tyrant declared that? You should, because those chilling words haunt rural America today, especially in the public-lands West. Think a minute...

Okay, time's up. Those infamous words were not blurted carelessly into a hot mic. Rather, they were deliberately put in print after approval by the leadership of the League of Conservation Voters for inclusion in its 1991 member scorecard, over the signature of LCV executive director Bruce Babbitt.

Yep, that Bruce. Scion of a wealthy ranching family, governor of Arizona, thankfully failed presidential candidate, then LCV leader, Mr. Babbitt left LCV shortly after to become Interior secretary for all eight years of Bill Clinton's presidency. Secretary Babbitt's tenure, in many ways, left a "monumental" legacy.

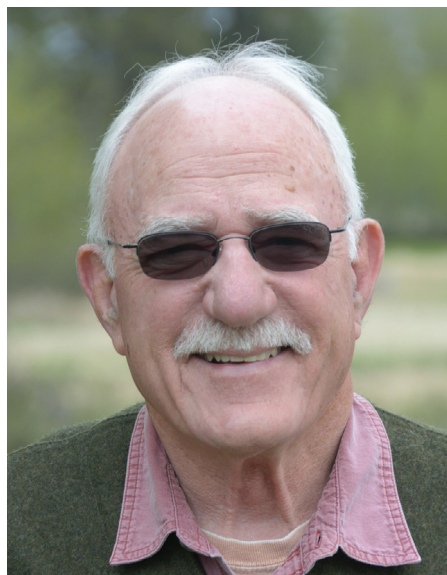
Thing is, somebody still holds Babbitt's words close to heart. He is striving, with stunning personal success, to build upon his monumentality, quite successfully. That would be Eric Kessler.

A child of means thanks to his shares in family-owned automotive gasket maker Fel-Pro, as a UC Boulder campus radical Kessler tried and failed to ban "right-wing" Coors from campus. By 1991, he'd landed on the staff of LCV. Secretary Babbitt brought Kessler with him to Interior. Federal Elections Commission records show a \$500 contribution to the League's Political Action Committee confirming Interior as Kessler's employer, with agency political appointee Kessler listing his occupation simply as "environmentalist."

Fast-forward a few years. Loyal RANGE readers might recall a story about an entity with a brilliantly deceptive name: Western Values Project (WVP). Legally domiciled as a nonprofit watchdog out of a budget-size UPS Store box in Whitefish, Mont., a handful of remote-working staff (former Democratic and union political operatives) ran a multi-million-dollar negative political PR campaign, aimed first at savaging the reputations of western "enemies"—all Republicans.



PHOTOS VIA INTERNET



COURTESY JOHN FULLER

When Donald Trump was elected, Western Values Project shifted its emphasis to broad-scale reputational attacks on any and all Trump administration officials. There were billboards, select TV advertisements, endless histrionic press releases, multiple reports, and hundreds more Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, leading to multiple formal complaints, again, with each complaint supported by a blizzard of press releases.

In the end, WVP's political hit squad managed to collect one important scalp, that of Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke. Yet Zinke isn't in oblivion; he's leading in the polls to return to Congress representing Montana's new western congressional district.

Montana state representative John Fuller (R-West Kalispell) is a longtime Zinke associate, including a stint on his field staff during Zinke's time in Congress. As an insider, he saw copies of all complaints levied against the secretary, including one "scandal" based on Zinke's socks.

Fuller tells RANGE the complaints were "never about corruption. There wasn't any. They were filed because Western Values and the other groups wanted dearly to discredit Ryan Zinke, simply because the Trump policies Zinke was carrying out would disrupt the green-decoy environmentalist agenda. As [s]ecretary, Ryan Zinke was trouble for them and he needed to be canceled by whatever means possible."

Zinke resigned at the end of 2018. Fortunately, his successor at Interior, David Bernhardt, was able to shrug off "his" smears and manage effectively, if briefly. Among other

TOP: Eric Kessler has come a long way from his days as a Colorado campus radical. On behalf of an unknown number of left-wing oligarchs, Kessler now oversees (for a nice commission) the laundering and expenditure of billions (\$1.7 confirmed in 2020 alone) in tax-deductible political "dark money" through a cluster of "charities" his company controls.

CENTER: Union and Democratic operative Chris Saeger ran one tiny star in Kessler's dark galaxy, the now-dormant Western Values Project.

LEFT: Montana state representative John Fuller (R) worked closely with Ryan Zinke while Western Values was active. He heard a lot from Mr. Saeger then, but not much since.

things, Bernhardt helped bring about producer-friendly(er) management policies in Montana's grizzly bear management zones, at least until the end of the Trump administration.

Then what? Pretty much nothing. Fuller notes, "I haven't heard anything about either Chris Saeger [WVP's main front man] or found his name since Secretary Zinke left office, nor anything from Western Values Project."

Thankfully, Mr. Saeger's LinkedIn page provides some insight. His employment history shows five years with WVP ending in November 2019. How he characterizes his employment is revealing. "Grew small conservation advocacy organization to a nationally recognized player in the national conversation about public lands and government ethics in the Trump administration."

Actually, Mr. Saeger didn't grow WVP, nor was it small. In fact, WVP has never legally existed on its own. Rather, it was a completely in-house "project" of the New Venture Fund, which is managed under contract by Arabella Advisors, a private firm run and 35 percent owned by Eric Kessler. How much of a budget did New Venture have at the time WVP was flogging Zinke the hardest? It was \$371 million, with Arabella charging a two percent commission. Do that math.

Also revealing is Mr. Saeger's next job and how he describes it—"director of strategic initiatives" for Accountable.US, where he "created new partnerships with reporters, thought leaders and elected officials to start up government accountability organizations. Led discrete [not discreet, but 'individually separate and distinct'] projects of particular interest to the executive team and key external stakeholders."

But since January 2021, when of course Joe Biden took his oath of office, Mr. Saeger has been a consultant. Job well done! Don't worry, his wife is a doctor.

What about Accountable.US? Well, that's our story. Greens are now in charge of federal environmental policy, including Tracy Stone-Manning, new Bureau of Land Management director and former EarthFirst! spokesperson from its most violent days. The administration has an agenda and it's aggressive, including a "conservation" program called "30 by 30," or as Greens insist, "America the Beautiful." (See "Winchester" sidebar, page 14.)

A decent percentage of western and rural politicians and citizens "get" 30 by 30 and, being rational, they're opposed and organizing slowly but surely. If a critical mass of opposition comes together...well, that's it for

In fact, Western Values Project has never legally existed on its own.

the Wildlands Project. So, Accountable.US's task today is, as Bruce Babbitt put it—to identify and drive into oblivion "enemies" of 30 by 30—oops, America the Beautiful.

Ground-level efforts to alert rural producers of the long-term hazards posed by 30 by

30 (oops, America the Beautiful), as well as defensive political and/or legal actions that can be taken in the short run by targeted individuals and communities, are gathering decent steam. One such effort is that of American Stewards of Liberty (ASL), a small Texas



This snapshot from a Montana event aimed at permanent "full funding" for the Land and Water Conservation Fund hints at how anonymous "charity" plus "project" plus "nonprofit" equals well-coordinated politics. From left: Event host Aaron Weiss of project Center for Western Priorities; Aaron Murphy, former chief of staff for U.S. Sen. Jon Tester (D-MT), now executive director of nonprofit Montana Conservation Voters; Tracy Stone-Manning, former nonprofit EarthFirst! spokesperson, federal/state/staffer, charity National Wildlife Federation executive and now Bureau of Land Management director; and Land Tawney of charity Backcountry Hunters and Anglers.

Brigadiers of Disinformation

The Center for Western Priorities report is hosted at "stop30x30disinformation.org," created April 4 of this year, with Registrant, Administration, Technical and Billing all "Redacted for Privacy" in the "Individual" category, mailing address given as "CO, US." CWP is based in Colorado, and the Web page itself links back to CWP's home site and states the "stop" Web page is a "project of Center for Western Priorities."

Credit for preparing the Brigade dossier is due Aaron Weiss, deputy director of Center for Western Priorities. Somehow not surprisingly, he was once a television journalist. Nor will you be surprised that years after ditching journalism in favor of advocating for "western priorities," on at least one occasion CNN featured him in its studios as an expert and journalist on guns. He had elsewhere taken a public, anti-gun-rights position.

RANGE recommends that you, dear reader, download Mr. Weiss' "report." His background as a journalist means he knows how to prepare materials—from press releases all the way up to reports intended to be source materials for "news" stories. The report links many "original sources," but the selection of those sources is, um, very careful, and very educational. For some, the Brigade report identifies "enemies" and for others, "friends."

Speaking of projects, Center for Western Priorities is, yep, itself a "project" of the Resources Legacy Fund out of Sacramento, Calif. The gross for RLF in 2020 was \$112 million. And there's a Resources Legacy Fund *foundation* at the same address with 2017 income of \$677. Sigh.

Finally, CWP was first created and funded as, yep, a project of the New Venture Fund prior to RLF becoming the hosting "charity." ■

PHOTOS VIA INTERNET

property-rights nonprofit run by husband-and-wife team Dan and Margaret Byfield.

Margaret's father, of course, is the late Wayne Hage, a Nevada rancher who world famously fought an endless court battle with the federal government over his water and range rights. That experience of many years left the Byfields with a singular and specialized base of expertise no one else can offer.

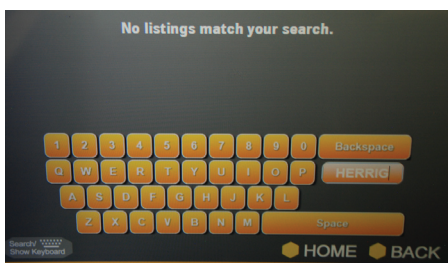
In 2019, ASL—a 501(c)(3)—got about a third of its \$320,000 income (pretty small) from donors, with the other two-thirds “program service revenues” coming from paying clients. Importantly, these clients include various rural county/local/state government officials desiring to effectively engage with federal land managers at the policy level, and needing guidance for doing so.

Earlier this spring, ASL hosted a 30 by 30 conference in Lincoln, Neb. It was attended by a solid list of producer-friendly western politicians, experts and speakers. However, a perfectly timed day or two before the conference



PHOTO VIA INTERNET

Search as RANGE might, this lousy image of Accountable.US front man Kyle Herrig is the best. So because the Wandering Scout just happened to be in D.C. with a camera, why not? The building actually has a fourth floor AND a nice computer directory. But searching for Accountable, its known subsidiaries, and named employees, came up bupkes (bottom). The nice security guard lady does know Mr. Herrig, however, and reported he was “out.”



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was to begin on Earth Day, the *Lincoln Journal Star* published a guest column by Kyle Herrig, “a native of Omaha and the president of government watchdog Accountable.US.”

Mr. Herrig's 700-word missive was a textbook “hit piece.” You might be interested to know that political scientists actually hold clinics on the tactics of political debate. And, yep, long ago your humble wandering scout wandered into such a clinic, hosted by then-top-ranked Democratic pollster Celinda Lake. Ms. Lake told her students that debates win votes, but absolutely not by discussing “the merits” or even arguing. Forget the issues, she

Winchester

After some consideration, especially of those “advocating” for 30 by 30, the entire thing looks more and more like a Model 94 in 30/30 aimed at America's heart—and there's nothing beautiful about that.

Even worse, 30 by 30 is envisioned by elites as a mere increment toward 1980's EarthFirst! fantasies about kicking out people and bringing back the Pleistocene—before humans hit North America during the most recent ice age. The theoretical minimum for the “conservation biology” bunch is fully half of all lands, waters and oceans worldwide conserved to be biologically complete landscapes independent of human management or exploitation. That's *all*. All types, not merely what Dave Foreman complained was wrong with congressional wilderness areas, being mostly “rocks and ice.”

Some 30 years of refinement later, what once was promoted as the Wildlands Project is today publicly discussed as 50 by 50—meaning 50 percent of the United States set aside by 2050—in short, “rewilding” not just lands, waters and oceans, but also American society, to fit this “minimum.”

Ambitious? Crazy? Sure, which is why today's talk is about 30 by 30, a not-so-nuts bite, with an eye toward choking down the

rest later. Putting fully 30 percent of America's total land base (and territorial waters, by the way) into “protected” status by 2030—with protections possible for hundreds of millions of acres ranging from congressional designations of federal lands as wilderness, unilateral presidential monument declarations, all the way down the line to implementing individual conservation easements on private lands, at a cost in the trillions—is still a gigantic bite for the American public to swallow.

President Biden is giving 30 by 30 a heck of a try. He signed a huge environmental/climate Executive Order supporting 30 by 30 within days of taking office. Officially government is making an “all agencies” effort to implement “America the Beautiful.”

Yep, that's what it's called, and it isn't accidental. As wicked-slick messaging, the phrase “America the Beautiful” is utter genius, immediately conjuring stirring music, pleasant mental images and good feelings about our “mountains...prairies... oceans white with foam,” with no contextual explanation of 30 by 30's actual goals or enormous scope, costs, and social fallout.

But false narratives created through slick, simplistic messaging

isn't translating into competent governance in the real world. With Congress a wreck, President Biden much the same, the entire world on its way to becoming a wreck, Biden has an overwhelming list of other targets. He's running through his political ammunition fast, meaning by the time he gets around to 30 by 30, he'll already be “Winchester,” headed home to Delaware. ■



HAND MODEL HEATH HALDEN © DAVE SKINNER

When combat aviators run out of ammo, they report their status as “Winchester.”

declared, explaining how the winning participant does so by deliberately maximizing the association of loaded negative words with the “bad” side, while equally associating loaded positive phrasing with the “good” side. Sorry, but Ms. Lake’s chat happened before smartphones...

Positive examples? Mr. Herrig notes, “My happiest memories as a child were spent outdoors with my family on the Niobrara,” and the 30 by 30—oops, America the Beautiful—initiative “encourages voluntary efforts to protect American landscapes.”

The negative samples are truly classic. In rough order: Hitler’s Germany; conspiracy theory; black helicopters circling; embracing extremism; grifters; fringe fearmongering. For special impact, Mr. Herrig singled out Congresswoman Lauren Boebert (R-Colorado) for having “lovingly quoted Wayne Hage, an anti-government extremist whose daughter and son-in-law now run American Stewards.”

Mr. Herrig’s contribution also featured a link to a 30-plus page, multicolor, custom-produced “exposé” of every named conference presenter, a link also included in a sample press release sent to Nebraska and other media outlets, apparently including the *Huffington Post*. This dossier, “The 30x30 Disinformation Brigade,” came not from Mr. Herrig’s group, but from the allied, equally wonderfully-misnamed Center for Western Priorities, which has never, ever legally existed. (See “Brigadiers” sidebar, page 13.)

The thing is, the Western Priorities dossier is an expensive item. Who funded it? Mr. Herrig piously declared to *Journal Star* readers, “As is too often the case, following the money provides important insight.”

Shall we? Sure, but before we hit that tawdry trail, keep in mind that Mr. Herrig’s rhetorical Lincoln bomb was a dud. Margaret Byfield reports to *RANGE* there were no known cancellations and the conference itself was a success. Furthermore, the Brigade continues to do business, some of it pretty impressive.

To whom is Accountable.US actually accountable? Western Values Project maven Chris Saeger was on Accountable’s payroll doing mostly the same job. And, according to Margaret Byfield, Accountable apparently uses the same Freedom of Information Act gambit in its attacks against American Stewards as were used by WVP against Utah-based American Lands Council. Founded and first run by Utah state representative Ken Ivory (R), the nonprofit ALC advocated for the transfer of western federal lands, or at least



Western Values Project (and other “allied” groups funded through Kessler entities) celebrated when its target Ryan Zinke resigned in late 2018. But Zinke (above left) is trying a political comeback, running for Montana’s new “western” congressional district. He won the Republican primary, but by a narrow plurality, evidence of lingering reputational damage inflicted by the Arabella/New Venture machine. In fact, his Republican opponents (there were three) used machine materials in their campaigns. BELOW: A “Stop 30x30 Summit” session in Lincoln, Neb.



the multiple-use parts, to states willing and able to accept them.

Byfield tells *RANGE* that Ivory’s group gathered a lot of interest quickly, but because he and ALC were being hired by local governments to give advice, FOIA laws came into play thanks to ALC vendor/contractor status.

Big guns in progressive Washington have their enemies identified and targeted.

Similarly, because American Stewards of Liberty has consulted with state, local and county governments on 30 by 30 issues, Byfield notes: “Accountable has been after us for over a year now. They FOIA every county we visit or work with. They FOIA everyone they can they think is connected to us.”

Furthermore, in late May Accountable.US

filed a second complaint with the Internal Revenue Service, accusing Stewards of illegal lobbying and other political activities that 501(c)(3) charities are not allowed to do.

Why? Byfield responds, “We’re really a small outfit, but we are the group most connected to the people who are doing the most to frustrate implementation of 30 by 30.”

Might all this be just coincidence, just two unrelated groups doing what everyone else does? Pshaw.

First, where is Accountable.US actually housed? In another hinterlands UPS box? Amazingly enough, no. There’s a real office at 1919 M Street NW (Suite 450) in Washington, D.C. But since Beltway real estate is wickedly expensive, that address is shared. Other tenants include Accountable Pharma, which probably targets pill manufacturers, another left-wing bête noire. We’ll just take note of a Zoominfo item naming some Accountable Pharma staffers and their job titles: Avery Whitehead, war room associate; Jenna Kruse, director, Rapid Response Research; and Kristina Pinault, manager, Research. Accountable staffers work in jobs



Nebraska Public Media reporter William Padmore attended and reported on the Stop 30x30 Summit event in Lincoln, Neb. At the hotel's breakfast nook (an area open to registered guests outside the conference), Mr. Padmore met and photographed Aaron Weiss (above) of Center for Western Priorities. Serendipitous? Sure, as is that copy of Mr. Weiss' expensively printed-and-produced "disinformation" dossier, ready to be smilingly handed off. To his credit, Mr. Padmore wrote fairly about the summit—but his photograph gives up Accountable's entire playbook. RIGHT: Former Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt at 30 by 30's kickoff event in February 2021, hosted by Wyss Campaign for Nature and National Geographic.

one expects to find in campaign war rooms of politicians and political parties, not "charities."

Restore Public Trust filed a November 2019 complaint against a Trump nominee for Homeland Security for providing false testimony. That letter was signed by RPT "senior advisor" Kyle Herrig.

So that's at least three impoverished charities sharing expensive space, a boss, and perhaps a mission. Perhaps they have the same funder? Oh, but there's one more entity domiciled in Suite 450, and you won't be surprised: Western Values Project!

Finally, there's something else interesting. Accountable.US is not just another fiscally invisible New Venture "project." It's actually a stand-alone charity with its very own books and IRS filing requirements. According to the

same Freedom of Information Act request letter revealing that Western Values is domiciled with Accountable.US, RANGE has learned that charity status was applied for on March 26, 2019.

Once charity status is applied for (but not yet granted), new charities can accept gifts (tax deductible, mind you) under their very own Employer Identification Number (EIN). That's neat. But even neater, Accountable.US can run projects of its own—and does: Allied Progress, which "stands up for consumers." No, Allied isn't at 1919 M Street; it's a few blocks away. But everything is cozy. Before Allied Progress was Accountable's project, it

was a New Venture project!

The Guidestar nonprofit website listing for Accountable.US confirms 2020 as the "ruling year" of charitable 501(c)(3) IRS status, under the R-40 "voter education/registration" classification. However, "This organization has not yet reported any program information." Just weeks ago, Charity Navigator was still unable to score Accountable.US because "Charity Navigator does not currently have the data required from e-filed IRS Form 990s for Accountable.US under the EIN: 83-4158350. This indicates that Accountable.US may still be filing paper Form 990s."

As of May 12, when RANGE's loyal scout wandered by, the Form 990 still wasn't posted after 16 months. However, that same day RANGE found an IRS business master file

Accountable staffers work in jobs one expects to find in the campaign war rooms of politicians and political parties, not "charities."



listing showing Accountable ended 2020 with \$3.937 million. Using Accountable's EIN to search helped clear things up a little. Not surprisingly, one line item for that EIN showed up on page 65 of New Venture Fund's 2019 Form 990 report: \$4.649 million granted to Accountable.US for "civil rights, social action, advocacy."

On something called the "501c3 Lookup" page, which apparently

accesses IRS master files, Accountable shows \$12,109,596 in assets at the end of 2021 while 501c3 Lookup also gave the name for records "in care of" Katherine LaBeau. She pops right up in LinkedIn. She's currently a partner at Elias Law Group. Prior to September 2021 she was full-time counsel at Perkins Coie LLP, beginning in December 2020, promoted from its "political law group."

Does that ring any bells for you? Like five

million bells worth of Russian dossier later revealed to have been secretly paid for by Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign with the money moved through Perkins Coie counsel (and Democratic super lawyer) Mark Elias. Now that's either pretty darn high or darn low on the national political food chain, depending on your point of view.

One thread ties all this together, its far end closely held by one man, Eric Kessler, protégé of Bruce Babbitt, a man whose environmental and government career was, beyond all doubt, search and destroy. Babbitt's public life is waning now, but his legacy continues in Mr. Kessler's operations. At every point of this narrative—even something as isolated as a tiny group holding a meeting in fly-over Nebraska—the big guns in progressive Washington have their enemies identified and targeted.

Does it matter? The latest reports, including in actual news media, have Mr. Kessler on top of a political “dark money” machine that controls five nonprofits, either charities or advocacy entities. In order of creation, they are: New Venture, Sixteen Thirty, Hopewell Fund, and Windward Fund. According to IRS Form 990s posted publicly, total 2020 revenues for these four alone was \$1.67 billion. The fifth entity, brand-new North Fund, is known from other sources to have received and reallocated at least \$50 million for state-level campaigning, mostly on ballot issues targeted by willing wealthy activists whose identities are as closely held as is legal.

On top of all that cash flow, Arabella Advisors, itself a private firm, with 35 percent owned by Eric Kessler, charges a roughly two percent administrative services fee. Care to do the math? Two percent of \$1.67 billion is \$33.4 million in revenue. While that might not seem like much, especially after paying wages and fixed expenses, keep in mind “administration” often includes making expenditure and grant-making decisions on behalf of the donor under the rubric of “effective philanthropy and impact investing.” Imagine how much fun it is to get paid to tell rich people how to spend their money—to accomplish the dearest wish of your mentor, to identify enemies and drive them into oblivion—with only the barest hints after 15 years that anyone will ever identify you and, um, hold you accountable. ■

Dave Skinner is increasingly splitting his time between his northwest Montana research bunker and doctors' offices.



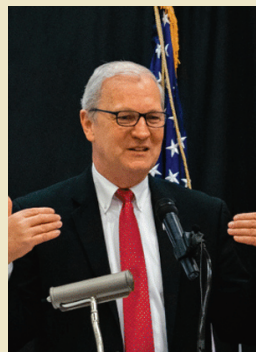
PHOTOS COURTESY / AMERICAN STEWARDS OF LIBERTY

Sticking Up

Sen. Kevin Cramer (R-North Dakota) and Rep. Lauren Boebert (R-Colorado) remain committed to their lead sponsorship of the 30 x 30 Termination Act, which reads, “Section 216 of Executive Order 14008 (86 Fed. Reg. 7619, relating to Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad) shall have no force or effect,” and would stop federal funds from being spent on 30 by 30 or anything “substantially similar.” There are other interest-

cial list. Of its 93 counties, about 25 have not yet passed a resolution, including the three most urban. Still, no counties are officially in support. There's also a 30 by 30 landgrab press release. Does anyone doubt where the governor stands on this issue?

Just before press time, a gaggle of 21 ag-state/western Republican U.S. Senate members sent a letter to the White House Council on Environmental Quality



A few of the speakers at the Stop 30x30 Summit in Lincoln, Neb., on April 22, 2022. From left: U.S. Sen. Kevin Cramer, Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts, and U.S. Rep. Lauren Boebert. AT TOP: Margaret Byfield, American Stewards of Liberty.

ing provisions. If you want to look them up, search for H.R. 3014.

Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts (R) is so concerned about 30 by 30's impact in Nebraska that he is personally hosting town hall meetings across the state. His official website has a “Taking Action to Stop 30 x 30” page. One brag, from summer 2021: “To date, over 50 counties in Nebraska have passed formal resolutions opposing the 30 [by] 30 plan.” The Nebraska Department of Ag keeps an offi-

demanding that CEQ and the executive branch do a full-scale Environmental Impact Statement before implementing any part of 30 by 30 (oooops, America the Beautiful).

Under the National Environmental Policy Act, any “major federal action” triggers NEPA oversight—and 30 percent of America seems major enough. Sure enough, making formal demands for an EIS was a major conference topic in Lincoln. ■