



The Next Front in the Culture Wars: Conservation of Rural Land and Water

by Marshall Mayer

Nebraska Public Media reported earlier this month on another emerging culture war: rural Republican governors in the Intermountain West and Great Plains states—led by Nebraska’s Pete Ricketts and including Montana’s Greg Gianforte—equating President Biden’s conservation agenda with a federal government land grab.

It seems that Biden had the audacity in his first month in office to direct the Secretary of the Interior (Deb Haaland), in consultation with the Secretary of Agriculture (Tom Vilsack), to develop a program to “conserve” at least 30 percent of all lands and waters in the United States by 2030. The “America the Beautiful” plan, or “30 by 30” as it is now known, is a national call to action to conserve the country’s natural resources.

Currently, only 12% of America’s land and water are “conserved,” according to the Department of the Interior, most of which is federal land (wilderness, national parks and monuments, wildlife refuges, etc.). Much of the other conserved lands are under permanent conservation easements voluntarily entered into by private land owners, primarily farmers and ranchers, keeping agricultural land from being developed. Other farm and ranch lands have been conserved by private landowners’ voluntary participation in federal programs designed to protect natural resources, dating back to the New Deal of the 1930s. These federal programs have been successful at significantly reducing soil erosion and protecting water and wildlife.

But according to Gov. Ricketts and his co-conspirators, “We are deeply concerned about any effort to enlarge the federal estate...[and] we oppose any increase in land use restrictions on lands under our state jurisdiction... [or] infringing on the private property rights of our citizens” (from a letter by the Governors to the President, April 21, 2022).

The only problem is, of course, that none of these fever dreams are real. It’s just another effort to convince rural communities that the federal government is out to steal their land or trick them into doing something that is contrary to their property rights.

These Republican governors are lying to farmers and ranchers. It’s not working, yet. In deep-red Nebraska, at least, 95% of Democrats and Republicans, according to polling done by New Bridge Strategies, a Republican research and polling firm, agree that they support private landowners’ ability to conserve land through voluntary programs.

According to Dean Fedde, a farmer in southeast Nebraska quoted in the Nebraska Public Media report, “There is no land grab. The government is not going to take your farm. They’re here to help protect that ground. They want to see working farms continue to be working farms. It’s just the opposite of what’s being told.”

But that won’t stop the grifters from grifting. These governors will escalate their campaign to confuse farmers and ranchers when President Biden signs the Inflation Reduction Act this week. The Act, among other provisions to address the climate crisis, contains \$20 billion to boost *voluntary* land conservation in farm and ranch country.

In Nebraska, Governor Ricketts will step up his campaign to get county commissioners to adopt resolutions to oppose the creation of conservation easements on farmland. Already half the counties in the state have complied with this government overreach, and conservation easement applications in the Sand Hills have already been denied.

In Montana, expect the campaign to be led by the United Property Owners of Montana (UPOM), an astroturf public relations campaign waged by The Montana Group, a Helena-based political consulting firm of former Republican Party electeds and professional grifters who are known for hawking their “Save the Cowboy” yard signs (“only \$35!”). UPOM is opposed to the American Prairie’s “land grab” to establish a 3-million acre reserve for bison on public and private land in central Montana (and for several hundred years the home of the Blackfeet, among other indigenous peoples).

These grifters will undoubtedly be joined by Governor Gianforte and Attorney General Austin Knudsen, both of whom have opposed the Reserve. American Prairie and other conservation organizations in Montana are simply using all of the tools developed by conservationists in and out of government for the last century to protect both the land and property rights. What they are doing is working for the benefit of all Montanans.

Like Nebraskans, let’s tell the grifters that their culture war is not welcome in Montana.

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