Nebraska will benefit from 30x30 plan

Each year over $130 million dollars flows into Nebraska's rural communities to help thousands of farmers and ranchers implement conservation practices on working lands. These voluntary, incentive-based programs conserve our precious soil and water resources and make Nebraska one of the most productive crop and livestock producing states. At the same time, these agricultural landscapes provide habitat to hundreds of species of fish and wildlife, supporting recreational opportunities that annually provide nearly $2 billion in economic activity.

Agriculture is the backbone of Nebraska's economy and stewardship of the state's natural resources largely falls on the shoulders of landowners. That's why the Nebraska Chapter of The Wildlife Society applauds the release of the America the Beautiful report, also known as 30x30, to conserve 30% of land across the United States by 2030. The report calls for "locally led" voluntary, incentive-based conservation "that reflect the priorities, needs, and perspectives of the families and communities that know, live, work, and care for the lands and waters." In fact, this is how conservation is done in Nebraska right now, from the ground-up through the cooperation of landowners, state and federal agencies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Misinformation has created fear that the 30x30 plan is a federal land grab, which cannot be further from the truth. In fact, one of the eight guiding principles outlined in the report is to "honor private property rights and support voluntary stewardship efforts of private landowners." Farmers and ranchers depend on conservation programs to benefit their operations. The Nebraska Farm Bureau has joined forces with conservation groups as part of the Food and Agriculture Climate Alliance, because carbon markets mentioned in the report can be a tremendous opportunity for their members. Further, Senator Deb Fischer and Congressman Don Bacon are original cosponsors of the Growing Climate Solutions Act, which would make it easier for Nebraska's farmers and ranchers to tap into emerging carbon markets.

Conservation in Nebraska is supported by an innovative partnership of state, local, federal, and NGO budgets. If we remove federal dollars from the equation, Nebraska loses. The citizens of Nebraska need voluntary federal conservation programs administered by United States Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency and Natural Resources Conservation Service. The demand by farmers and ranchers for programs like the Conservation Reserve Program, Environmental Quality Incentives Program, and Conservation Stewardship Program has outpaced funding each year for decades. The 30x30 report will honor private land ownership and individual rights in the same manner as these programs, because the local landowners are the ones who know their land best.

Need an example? Recent research at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln shows that eastern redcedar encroachment on Board of Educational Lands reduces rangeland profitability. In fact, the reduction of rangeland cost Nebraska Public Schools $2,440,000 between 2006-2016 that could have been put towards supporting our K-12 public schools. According to their research, "the steadily declining profitability will slowly consume school budgets at the rate of a few million dollars a year in the near term." The report and its goals promote the development of funding and education to address these kinds of conservation issues that affect both private and public lands.

Nebraskans have a long list of reasons to support conservation, including the recommendations identified in the report. We cannot allow our state to be divided on such an important issue at a time when we need to be focusing our efforts on how we can help farmers and ranchers put more, not less, conservation on the ground. Nebraskans need partners such as those identified in the America the Beautiful report who will provide technical and financial assistance to work neighbors to build sustainable working lands.

Larkin Powell and Carl Wolfe

Larkin Powell lives in Lincoln and Carl Wolfe lives in Republican City. They are members of the Nebraska Chapter of The Wildlife Society.