

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, DC 20515

May 12, 2022

The Honorable Brenda Mallory
Chair
Council on Environmental Quality
730 Jackson Place, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20503

Dear Chair Mallory:

On April 11, 2022, the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) announced the “\$1 billion America the Beautiful Challenge”¹ (Challenge) purportedly aimed at leveraging federal dollars with unspecified non-federal contributions to advance the America the Beautiful Initiative (Initiative).² The Biden administration, however, is simply rebranding their original 30x30 Initiative, aimed at preserving 30 percent of lands and waters by 2030.³ Despite CEQ’s efforts to reinvent this initiative, the agency repeatedly failed to clearly define the metrics used to satisfy the 30 percent goal. Therefore, we seek to understand the parameters CEQ will use to monitor the Challenge’s implementation.

As Americans face sky-rocketing prices at the gas pump and rampant price inflation for essentials, like groceries, it is alarming that the Biden administration would propose \$1 billion in new spending that will only exacerbate President Biden’s inflation and energy crises and sink our nation further into debt. Ironically, this new billion-dollar government spending program was announced the day before the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that inflation hit a 40-year high of 8.5 percent in March 2022.⁴ Specifically, the price of gas rose 48 percent in the past year, due in large part to the Biden administration’s energy-killing policies and harmful overregulation.⁵ Moreover, the Biden administration’s repeated failings to maximize domestic energy production not only hurts our national security and economy, but also jeopardizes funding for numerous conservation programs reliant on fossil fuel revenues. It is troubling that instead of

¹ While the Challenge was announced as a \$1 billion spending program, to date, over 55 percent of the funding is non-existent and questions related to where this funding would come from went unanswered.

² U.S. DEP’T OF THE INTERIOR, *America the Beautiful*, <https://www.doi.gov/priorities/america-the-beautiful> (last visited Apr. 19, 2022).

³ Press Release, The White House, *Biden-Harris Administration Launches \$1 Billion America the Beautiful Challenge to Support and Accelerate Locally Led Conservation and Restoration Projects*, (Apr. 11, 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/ceq/news-updates/2022/04/11/biden-harris-administration-launches-1-billion-america-the-beautiful-challenge-to-support-and-accelerate-locally-led-conservation-and-restoration-projects/>; Press Release, The White House, *Executive Order on Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad*, (Jan. 27, 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/27/executive-order-on-tackling-the-climate-crisis-at-home-and-abroad/>.

⁴ German Lopez, *Inflation’s 40-Year High*, THE N.Y. TIMES, April 13, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/13/briefing/inflation-forty-year-high-gas-prices.html>.

⁵ *Id.*

ensuring the longevity of these existing conservation programs, this administration is now creating new, vaguely defined spending programs.

CEQ's April 11, 2022, briefing to congressional staff failed to provide transparency regarding how this new Challenge will operate. CEQ staff simply indicated that agencies within the Departments of the Interior, Agriculture and Defense would provide an initial commitment of more than \$440 million in federal resources over the next five years to a new public-private grant program to be administered by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF).⁶ Further, CEQ vaguely cited authority under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law⁷ as justification for agencies supplying the funding.⁸ CEQ presented a goal of dispersing at least \$1 billion in grants,⁹ despite the fact that there is no mention of "conserving 30 percent of the nation's lands and waters" or the Initiative within the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. Concerningly, CEQ indicated that they anticipated the Department of Commerce and the Environmental Protection Agency would provide additional, unquantified funding at a later date.

Unfortunately, numerous questions remain unanswered after the time-limited, April 11, 2022, briefing. For example, CEQ failed to provide which statutory authorizations CEQ relied upon to facilitate the initial \$440 million expenditure, the sources of federal funds that will support the new initiative, or how it will be expended. Additionally, CEQ failed to provide the criteria upon which NFWF would rely to disburse grant money. Despite Minority staff requests for copies of the operating procedures that the federal agencies and NFWF would employ in this process,¹⁰ CEQ failed to provide any additional information.

Therefore, in order to assist with our oversight activities, please produce the following as soon as possible, but no later than 5:00 p.m. on May 26, 2022:

1. All documents and communications, including but not limited to, agreements, memoranda of understanding, emails, and internal communications of which CEQ is aware, between any agencies and NFWF referring or relating to the establishment and operation of the Challenge from January 20, 2021, to present.
2. All documents and communications, including but not limited to, reprogramming requests made to the House or Senate Committees on Appropriations, referring or relating to reallocation of discretionary money to the Challenge or a document sufficient to confirm and describe why no reprogramming requests were submitted to either or both of the Committees.
3. A document sufficient to describe the source of funding for the Challenge, including but not limited to:

⁶ Briefing from CEQ Leg. Affairs to H. Comm. on Nat. Res. Staff (Apr. 11, 2022, 15:00 EDT)

⁷ Public Law 117-58.

⁸ *Supra* note 8.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ Email from H. Comm. on Nat. Res. Minority Staff to CEQ Cong. Affairs Staff (Apr. 11, 2022, 16:31 EDT) (on file with Comm.).

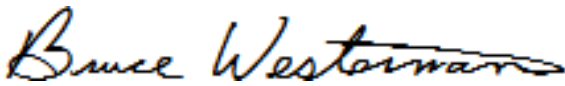
- a. The amount contributed by each agency;
 - b. Future obligations committed by each agency to the Challenge;
 - c. The accounts from which each funding is sourced; and
 - d. The legal authorities provided in statute to utilize the funds in support of the Initiative.
4. A document sufficient to describe how the administration plans to finance the remaining \$559 million announced for the Challenge and whether additional taxpayer resources will be committed to the Challenge.
5. A document sufficient to describe the operating principles of the Challenge.
6. A document sufficient to describe under what legal justifications agencies may transfer funds to NFWF to establish the Challenge.
7. A document sufficient to describe any limitations on how the funds may be expended, including but not limited to:
 - a. Whether funds can be used to fund projects that acquire new land;
 - b. Whether funds can be provided to cover costs of litigants suing the federal government;
 - c. Whether non-governmental organizations under active investigation by Congress are eligible for funding;
 - d. Whether non-governmental organizations with a history of human rights abuses are eligible for funding;
 - e. Whether non-governmental organizations that accept funds from hostile foreign nations are eligible for funding; and
 - f. Whether any funds can be used to shut off or reduce public access to federal lands, particularly for recreational, hunting, fishing, and shooting opportunities.
8. A document sufficient to describe how the administration plans to provide public transparency to the Challenge, including, but not limited to, disclosure of:
 - a. Recipients of funds;
 - b. The purpose for which funds were provided; and
 - c. Amount of funds distributed.
9. A document sufficient to explain the administration's protocols to monitor waste, fraud, and abuse of funding provided under the Challenge.
10. A document sufficient to describe the criteria by which applications will be reviewed by NFWF.

11. A document sufficient to describe what percentage and estimated distribution of funding will be available to state, local, and Tribal governments, and non-governmental organizations.
12. A document sufficient to describe whether the administration plans to make funds available prior to the completion of the American Conservation and Stewardship Atlas.
13. A document sufficient to describe how the administration is defining the following terms and baseline metrics in order to determine whether proposed projects are “consistent with the America the Beautiful Initiative”:
 - a. Conservation;
 - b. Restoration;
 - c. 30 percent of lands and waters;
 - d. Equitable access; and
 - e. Underserved communities.
14. A document sufficient to describe whether any funding provided through the Challenge may be used to establish a Civilian Climate Corps and the statutory authorities the administration would use to establish such a Corps.

Please contact the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee Minority staff at HNRR.Oversight@mail.house.gov with any questions about this request and to coordinate the delivery of your response to room 1329 Longworth House Office Building.

An attachment contains additional instructions for responding to this request. Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Bruce Westerman
Ranking Member
Committee on Natural Resources



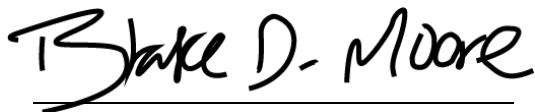
Russ Fulcher
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on National Parks,
Forests, and Public Lands



Cliff Bentz
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and
Wildlife



Pete Stauber
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Energy and
Mineral Resources



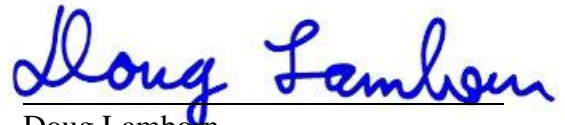
Blake Moore
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Oversight and
Investigations



Jay Obernolte
Ranking Member
Subcommittee for Indigenous
Peoples of the United States



Louie Gohmert
Member of Congress



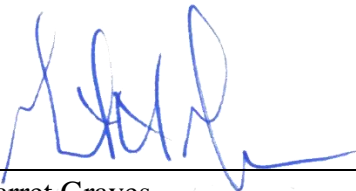
Doug Lamborn
Member of Congress



Robert J. Wittman
Member of Congress



Tom McClintock
Member of Congress



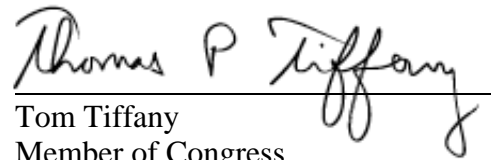
Garret Graves
Member of Congress



Jody Hice
Member of Congress



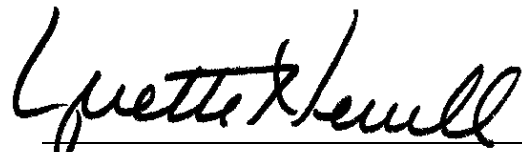
Aumua Amata Coleman Radewagen
Member of Congress



Tom Tiffany
Member of Congress



Matthew Rosendale, Sr.
Member of Congress



Yvette Herrell
Member of Congress

Chair Mallory
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A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Lauren Bt". The signature is written in a cursive style with large, flowing letters. The "L" is particularly large and loops around the "a". The "B" is also large and loops around the "t". The signature is positioned above a horizontal line.

Lauren Boebert
Member of Congress