



THE AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL FRESHWATER CHALLENGE

A PARTNERSHIP TO CONSERVE AND RESTORE AMERICA'S
RIVERS, LAKES, STREAMS, AND WETLANDS

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The America the Beautiful Freshwater Challenge: A Partnership to Conserve and Restore America's Rivers, Lakes, Streams, and Wetlands

Our nation's lakes, rivers, streams, estuaries, and wetlands are fundamental to the health, prosperity, and resiliency of our communities and held sacred by many Tribal Nations. They are the sources of clean, fresh drinking water that flows into the taps of our homes. Marshes and wetlands soak up excess water when it storms and floods. Lakes, wetlands, and underground aquifers help store clean water for times of drought. Coastal estuaries and mangrove forests protect communities against storm surges, and provide habitat for animals, plants, and fish that sustain economies and help feed communities. By absorbing and storing carbon, our nation's waterways and wetlands – and the forests, grasslands, and farmlands they nourish – also play a critical role in the fight against climate change. And importantly, our lakes, rivers, streams, and wetlands are places families play, fish, hunt, and enjoy the wonders of the outdoors.

Despite their importance to both people and nature, freshwater resources here in the U.S. and around the world are at risk. Globally, wetlands are disappearing at three times the rate of our forests, and freshwater animal populations are declining at twice the rate of terrestrial animals. In the U.S., over 50 percent of the nation's wetlands in the Lower 48 states have been lost since colonization; most Western states are experiencing long-term drought conditions; nearly half of threatened and endangered species in the U.S. are dependent on wetlands; and more than 600,000 miles, or about 17% of our rivers, have been modified by large dams. And in 2023, a Supreme Court ruling known as the *Sackett* decision limited the ability of Federal agencies under the Clean Water Act to protect some of our country's most important and most imperiled streams, wetlands, and freshwater resources from pollution and destruction.

There is still time to protect the critical freshwater resources for ourselves and for our children. Federal agencies, states, Tribal, and local communities all have a major role to play in conserving these vital resources. Water, and everything in it, moves—without regard to geopolitical boundaries—so we must work together across governments to conserve and restore the freshwater bodies that protect and support us.

The Biden-Harris Administration has worked to build upon and improve our country's long-standing policy of no net loss of wetlands. Even still, freshwater resources are at risk. That is why in addition to reaffirming the importance of halting the loss of wetlands, the Biden-Harris Administration is setting bold, new national goals that help rebuild our nation's wetlands and freshwater resources:

- 1) Reconnect, restore, and protect 8 million acres of wetlands by 2030, with an emphasis on forested, vegetated, peat soil, brackish, and tidal wetlands; and
- 2) Reconnect, restore, and protect 100,000 miles of our nations' rivers and streams by 2030, using approaches like removal of impediments and stream bank restoration.



Each of these goals is consistent with the Biden-Harris Administration's commitment – alongside 45 other nations – to the global Freshwater Challenge, which aims to restore 186,000 miles of degraded rivers and 850 million acres of wetlands globally by 2030.

To achieve the new national freshwater protection goal and to ensure that our freshwater resources are protected for current and future generations, the Biden-Harris Administration is launching the **America the Beautiful Freshwater Challenge** to invest in the conservation and restoration of our nation's freshwater resources and support Tribal, state, and local efforts to protect and restore America's lakes, rivers, streams, estuaries, and wetlands.

Many states and tribal governments are already using their own authorities and resources to better protect America's freshwater systems. For example, North Carolina set forth a goal of protecting 1 million acres of natural lands with a special focus on wetlands and restoring one million acres of forests and wetlands within the state. Washington recently protected almost 1,000 miles of rivers as Outstanding National Waters. New York state recently enacted statutory changes to its Freshwater Wetlands Act that will safeguard an additional million acres of valuable wetlands. The America the Beautiful (AtB) Freshwater Challenge calls on all states and other governments and entities, including Tribes, interstate organizations, cities, and local communities to advance their own policies and strategies for conserving and restoring America's freshwater systems.

Additional Goals

In addition to the national numeric goals for wetland and river protection, the America the Beautiful Freshwater Challenge asks participants to pursue these additional goals:

- Protect our sources of clean drinking water, including groundwater aquifers to ensure that we are safeguarding these from contamination and helping to recharge these important resources;
- Support achieving and maintaining fishable and swimmable waterways;
- Enhance the natural climate resilience provided by healthy and functional freshwater and estuary resources, including protection from floods, wildfires, aquifer depletion, intense heat, soil health degradation, nutrient loading and drought;
- Support aquatic ecosystem biodiversity, including addressing threats from invasive species;
- Honor Tribal trust and treaty obligations and ways of life, and incorporate Indigenous Knowledge into restoration approaches;
- Ensure that freshwater resources and estuaries continue to support regional and rural economies, including clean manufacturing, global supply chain, outdoor recreational industries, farmers, ranchers, and forest owners;
- Harness and protect the national security, supply chain, and drinking water benefits of freshwater and estuary resources; and
- Protect clean, safe access to our freshwater and estuary resources, especially for communities with environmental justice concerns.

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Available Tools and Approaches

Participants in the America the Beautiful Freshwater Challenge agree to lead by example and use all of the tools at their disposal to protect freshwater resources. Examples of the types of approaches and tools available to protect these resources include:

- Considering wetlands, waterways, and aquatic habitats scientifically as features with physical and biological characteristics that merit protection, conservation, and restoration of function, service, and integrity regardless of their location, legal status, or political jurisdiction;
- Developing, revising, or supporting state, tribal, and community-level goals for the protection of vulnerable wetlands, rivers, and other aquatic habitats, and developing policies that avoid and mitigate adverse impacts to those resources, where possible;
- Expanding partnerships between Tribal Nations, states, and local communities with environmental justice concerns to improve climate resilience and achieve watershed scale restoration of wetlands, rivers, and other aquatic habitats;
- Supporting efforts to establish or expand state and community-level incentives for states, Tribes, local governments, and private landowners to conserve and restore these resources, including by utilizing federal funding opportunities where applicable (e.g., working lands incentive programs, land and easement acquisition programs, the National Fish Habitat Partnership, or State Revolving Funds);
- Utilizing regulatory programs when necessary to protect and restore wetlands, rivers, and other aquatic habitats (e.g., Outstanding National Resource Water protections);
- Developing policies that support and encourage private investment in the enhancement, protection, and restoration of aquatic habitats and the biodiversity that depends upon them;
- Establishing and supporting partnerships across agriculture, infrastructure, finance, energy, and urban-planning sectors to ensure the protection, restoration, and conservation of freshwater and estuarine resources;
- Establishing large-scale, (e.g., multi-state, multi-city, regional) partnerships and projects that consider and apply solutions to freshwater resource integrity and capacity at corridor, watershed, and basin wide scale;
- Sharing information about the economic, environmental, social, and climate resilience value of wetlands, rivers, and aquatic habitats;
- Supporting efforts to restore aquifers and mitigate for intense heat and drought; and
- Providing data to update and improve a nationwide map of our freshwater and estuarine resources.