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Opinion: Four keys to reaching California conservation goals

30X30 initiative could profoundly transform the Bay Area, making region more resilient to climate change



Only significant investments in agencies like the State Coastal Conservancy will move forward multi-benefit projects, such as Coyote Valley in Santa Clara County. (Photo Ron Horii, Santa Clara Valley Open Space Authority)

By **ANNIE BURKE** |

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One year ago, Gov. Gavin Newsom set a bold goal of conserving 30% of land and coastal water in California by 2030. President Biden and other leaders around the world have also established goals to conserve at least 30%. This goal, known as 30x30, could profoundly transform the Bay Area by creating additional parks and open space with more equitable access for all communities, protecting biodiversity and advancing projects that will make the region more resilient to climate change.



The Bay Area's land conservation groups have been working for years toward a similar ambitious goal. Our goal is to conserve 50% of the region's lands by 2050. Fifty percent is what we need to allow nature and the Bay Area's extraordinary flora and fauna to thrive amongst our 105 cities. It's what we need for clean air, clean water, wildfire prevention, drought adaptation, flood protection and natural spaces for our physical and mental health. And we need to achieve this goal by 2050 when the effects of climate change will be felt by us and nature even stronger than they are today.

TOGETHER Bay Area members are actively working to implement this bold and achievable goal. Our members are Indigenous Tribes and groups, nonprofits and public agencies — almost 70 of them — all working for healthy lands, people and communities. And they partner with state agencies such as the State Coastal Conservancy to implement programs and projects that conserve land for wildlife, recreation and agriculture and support the 50×50 and 30×30 goals.

We want the state's 30×30 initiative to be successful. For that to happen, we need collective action — including the governor and his administration, the Legislature and organizations working for climate resilience across the state — to incorporate four factors into the design of the initiative and implementation through legislation and on the ground in communities across the state.

First, Indigenous People tended and stewarded this place for thousands of years. It's critical to develop partnerships with tribes and groups to advance the goals of 30×30 and to reconnect the original stewards with their lands. The state and conservation organizations can help heal injustices by supporting the return of land in a variety of ways, including ownership, cooperative management and stewardship agreements. This has many benefits, including decreasing catastrophic wildfire risk through traditional land stewardship practices.

Second, consistent funding from the state is critical. Projects that advance 30×30 will stall or never happen without reliable sources of funding. Significant investments in agencies such as the State Coastal Conservancy will move forward multi-benefit projects, such as the India Basin Shoreline Park in San Francisco, Coyote Valley in Santa Clara County and the Restore Hayward Marsh Project in the East Bay.

Third, effective conservation is a long game. Lands and waters should not be considered conserved without securing support and funding for stewardship that builds resilience. Healthy lands require active and ongoing management, just as Indigenous People did for thousands of years. And that can't happen without funding for stewardship.

Finally, we need to make it easier to do environmental restoration. The hurdles and time delays from permitting and regulations for habitat restoration and climate resilience projects must be decreased significantly. Let's cut the green regulatory tape to get more restoration work done sooner.

Momentum is building for the state's 30×30 initiative led by the California Natural Resources Agency (CNRA). Thousands of people across the state participated in 14 public workshops convened by CNRA over the past year. Dozens of experts were convened to produce thoughtful recommendations. And there's political will for 30×30 as demonstrated by its inclusion in this year's historic budget surplus spending. But we need more.

One year down and nine more to go. The clock is ticking, and we must move fast to conserve our state's unique biodiversity and create a resilient Bay Area that is in the best condition to buffer us from catastrophic impacts of climate change such as sea-level rise, flooding, extreme heat, droughts and severe wildfire. We can achieve the goals of 30×30 statewide and 50×50 in the Bay Area with robust funding and bold policy changes. Together, we can do this.

Annie Burke is the executive director of TOGETHER Bay Area.

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