

POLITICS

Republicans Probe Secret Biden-Era Settlement With Green Groups To Shut Down Family Ranches

'These are long-time community members that are being evicted and displaced,' California rancher tells the Free Beacon

(Win McNamee/Getty Images)

Thomas Catenacci
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A top House panel that oversees public land policies is investigating five green groups that brokered a settlement with federal officials in the waning days of the Biden administration, forcing family-owned ranches to vacate their leases on federal property over environmental concerns, the *Washington Free Beacon* has learned.

Under the January 2025 settlement between the green groups, owners of 11 multi-generational ranches, and the National Park Service, 12 of the 14 existing organic dairies and cattle ranches located across Point Reyes National Seashore in northern California will be abandoned by early 2026. The agreement was made possible by the Nature Conservancy, a Virginia-based group which financed the agreement and will pay the ranchers an undisclosed sum of money.

The settlement is the culmination of a lawsuit the green groups in question filed against the National Park Service in 2022. The lawsuit argued that the agency had illegally leased Point Reyes National Seashore property for commercial beef and dairy ranching "despite the significant harm that it causes to environmental, scenic, and recreational values."

Environmental activists have long attacked ranching, arguing it destroys surrounding habitats and produces carbon emissions.

But critics of the settlement say it ends one of the most successful public-private partnerships in recent memory and threatens to devastate the local economy while having impacts on consumers nationwide. They also argue the ranchers ultimately relented and signed the settlement only after years of environmental lawsuits—activists repeatedly accused the ranchers of destroying the environment, wildlife, and native plants—and a covert pressure campaign spearheaded by federal government officials.

The congressional investigation—launched Thursday by House Natural Resources Committee chairman Bruce Westerman (R., Ark.) and six fellow Republicans—seeks to gather more information about how the settlement came together. And it seeks to home in on the Nature Conservancy's activities leading up to the settlement.

The probe could ultimately pull back the curtain on how powerful environmental groups coordinated with the Biden administration to shut down family-run businesses that supply dairy, agriculture, and meat to consumers nationwide. It also represents Congress's latest action to [investigate far-left climate actions](#) Biden officials pursued shortly before the Trump administration took office.

"The committee is concerned not only with the lack of transparency surrounding the settlement but also with the environmental and legal consequences the settlement may impose," the committee Republicans wrote in an [oversight letter](#) to the Nature Conservancy on Thursday morning.

Ranchers were allegedly paid as much as \$40 million under the settlement but expressed hesitation with the deal and were forced to sign non-disclosure agreements, the letter states. The letter also says ranchers were pressured by the National Park Service to "keep quiet."

Nature Conservancy representatives allegedly visited some ranchers' homes to ensure compliance with the deal.

The Nature Conservancy solicited donations to fund the settlement, the *Press Democrat* reported in January, and is in large part bankrolled by foreign billionaire Hansjörg Wyss. Through his grantmaking nonprofit, the Swiss-born Wyss promised to give the Nature Conservancy \$1 billion for conservation projects in 2020 and pushed nearly \$70 million to the group and its affiliates between 2018 and 2023.

The Natural Resources Committee sent separate oversight letters to the Center for Biological Diversity, Resource Renewal Institute, Western Watersheds Project, and Advocates for the West, which were involved in the settlement as well.

In accordance with the settlement, in January, the National Park Service revised its management plan for the Point Reyes National Seashore and nearby Golden Gate National Recreation Area, converting land leased by ranchers to scenic landscape zones, a classification that prioritizes conservation over other uses.

"Culturally, it's devastating for our communities," Albert Straus, the founder of Straus Family Creamery located near Point Reyes, told the *Washington Free Beacon*. "These are long-time community members that are being evicted and displaced, as well as the ag worker families."

"By losing these farms, we are now in a shortage of organic milk in the United States," he continued. "Nationally, we've gone from 4.6 million dairy farms in 1940 down to less than 26,000 today, and they only expect about 12,000 survivors in the next decade. So, we're losing farms, we're losing community, and we're losing the ability to produce our food. It's a misguided effort. We've become too reliant on imports—it's not sustainable."

In addition to Westerman, Reps. Paul Gosar (R., Ariz.), Tom Tiffany (R., Wis.), Mike Ezell (R., Miss.), Doug LaMalfa (R., Calif.), Mike Collins (R., Ga.), and Lauren Boebert (R., Colo.) signed onto the oversight letters Thursday.

The Nature Conservancy, Center for Biological Diversity, Resource Renewal Institute, Western Watersheds Project, and Advocates for the West did not respond to requests for comment.

The settlement, meanwhile, faces additional hurdles.

In early February, a group of 150 local agriculture workers sued the National Park Service and the Nature Conservancy over the settlement, saying it would harm their livelihoods and that the agreement's "lack of transparency, secret negotiating, and imposition of a gag order" is contrary to the public interest.

Weeks later, a family that raises cattle and breeds chickens on a ranch in Point Reyes filed their own lawsuit against the National Park Service, arguing that blocking further leasing on the land is illegal and would do substantial harm to their business.

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