



Conserving public lands helps rural counties thrive, study finds

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CODY, Wyo. — Rural counties in the Rocky Mountain West that are managed more for conservation and recreation than resource development enjoy greater economic success, from higher home prices to more jobs, a new study suggests.

Compiled by Southwick Associates on behalf of Sportsmen for Responsible Energy Development, the report explores the relationship between land use and economic growth in 204 non-metropolitan counties across seven Western states, including Wyoming, Montana and Colorado.

The report, “Conserving Lands and Prosperity,” was released Tuesday.

“Counties that have a higher proportion of conservation land have had greater economic growth since 1969,” said Rob Southwick, author of the study. “Counties dominated by intense land development have experienced lower levels of economic growth, lower income and lower job growth.”

Southwick, who discussed the findings during a media call on Tuesday, said the study found that job, income and economic growth from commodity production in the rural West has not kept pace with the rest of the regional economy.

Employment rates

Using county-level data on employment kept by the Bureau of Economic Analysis, Southwick said that between 1969 and 2009, employment in commodity production across the Rocky Mountain West remained flat while total employment increased 136 percent.

At the same time, the study found, diversified rural counties have been able to capitalize on the shift in employment and conservation, enjoying growth in income, housing, population, tourism and other categories of economic activity.

“The top five conservation counties had 5.3 times faster job growth than the top five counties intensely managed for commodity production,” Southwick said. “The median housing prices were higher in the conservation and recreation counties, and population growth was faster, too.”

Teton County, Wyo., with 93 percent of its land dedicated to conservation and recreation,

topped the list. Valley County, Idaho; Mineral County, Mont.; Idaho County, Idaho; and Pitkin County, Colo., rounded out the top five.

While Park County, Wyo., didn't make the top five, Southwick used it in his regional report as a case study because of its diversified economy, its proximity to public lands and wilderness and its steady commitment to industry.

Overall employment in Park County has doubled since 1969, the report found, and the number of small businesses has increased by more than 250 percent.

Open spaces

Tim Wade, owner of North Fork Anglers in Cody and a former Park County commissioner, said he counts on open spaces and responsible land management to keep his business competitive.

"We do have great concerns about development impacting water quality, air quality, and some of the open spaces we have now," Wade said. "We like to sell Cody's wide open spaces and Park County's proximity to Yellowstone Park and all the wildlife and scenery and wild trout that go with that."

The report found that fishing, hunting and wildlife viewing in Park County support 785 jobs, or about 10 percent of total employment. Sportsmen and wildlife watchers contribute an estimated \$30.1 million to the local economy each year.

"We do like to think that my business, over the last 30 years now, has drawn a lot of people to the community," Wade said. "We put a lot of heads in beds. We feel that development in the future is going to have to be coordinated to maintain our wide-open spaces."

In fiscal year 2011, the study found, lodging in Park County generated more than \$23 million. The report suggests that 52 percent of that revenue stems from sportsmen and wildlife watchers, among others engaged in outdoor recreation.

"I think the study is right on target," said Mike Darby, president of the Cody Chamber of Commerce and owner of the Irma Hotel. "By the time you recirculate that, it's huge, whether it's employing waitresses, fishing guides, hunting guides, outfitters, gas station entrepreneurs or sporting goods stores."

Sportsmen for Responsible Energy Development is a pro-energy organization looking to balance growth with conservation in the West.

The coalition is composed of 500 businesses and organizations, including the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, the National Wildlife Federation and Trout Unlimited.

"We understand these lands must be developed for their commodity values for the nation's well-being and the jobs they create, where that makes sense," said Jim Lyon, vice president for conservation policy of the National Wildlife Federation.

"But a more careful balance on where this occurs and how we do it is necessary to ensure the natural areas are protected, not just for their intrinsic natural and wildlife values, but for their essential long-term economic contribution to the region."

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