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Valuing Our Western Public Lands: Safeguarding Our Economy and Way of Life

This new report compiles and highlights key information from recent surveys and studies on the importance of conserving our public lands – economically, environmentally and culturally. The report comes as state and federal officials intensify their calls to sell millions of acres of public land, turn it over to the states, and escalate drilling and mining on these lands while limiting or blocking protections. These demands grow louder despite overwhelming public endorsement of conserving the land and documentation of the economic benefits of sustaining the wide open spaces, backcountry and fish and wildlife habitat. This report summarizes several proposals that would undermine our invaluable public-lands legacy and outlines ways people can get involved to ensure the legacy is passed on to future generations.

Summary

Our public lands, the bulk of which are in the West, have helped shape the character and economy of this country. These days, the open spaces, wildlife, forests, mountains and remote canyons are valued for more than the commodities – timber, oil, gas, coal, gold – they can produce. As the West changes from a largely natural-resource based economy to a knowledge- and service-based economy, conserving public lands becomes more important. The lands are critical to the expanding tourism and recreation industries, people seeking a high quality of life and businesses competing for highly trained professionals.

Several recent studies and surveys found that:

- Many communities near public lands managed for conservation and recreation report higher levels of economic, population and income growth and higher property values.
- The outdoor recreation industry, including fishing and hunting, contributes nearly \$650 billion to the U.S. economy and supports more than 6 million jobs. Western public lands provide recreation for people from across the country and world.
- Americans invest nearly \$39 billion annually in natural resource conservation, resulting in more than \$93 billion in direct economic benefits.

- Extractive, commodity-based industries generate needed materials and energy and provide jobs and revenue, but have been cyclical and have become a smaller part of the overall economy.

Despite the growing body of information showing that conserving public lands makes economic sense and is widely supported by the public, battles over how the land is managed rage on. Surveys show that efforts to sell the lands to private parties or turn them over to the states are out of touch with the public opinion. **This report highlights bipartisan support among voters in the Rockies for:**

- Conserving public lands as an important part of the economy
- Protecting air and water quality, wildlife habitat, unique species
- Strong environmental laws
- Ensuring access for hunters and anglers to public lands

Surveys show that:

- Two-thirds of Western voters believe the laws protecting land, air and water should be strengthened or at least better enforced
- A majority of voters believe environmental laws have a positive effect on such economic factors as business opportunities and job growth

A section of the report details state and federal proposals that conflict with people's desire to keep public lands in public hands. In just the past year, legislatures in seven Western states have passed, introduced or considered measures demanding that the federal government turn over millions of acres of land to the states. Many federal lawmakers are working to weaken or eliminate laws intended to keep great landscapes open to everyone, preserve clean air and water and maintain the fish and wildlife for future generations.

These attempts continue despite a recent bipartisan survey confirming that most Westerners take a positive view of candidates who support protecting public lands and conservation. Why the disconnect? Perhaps it's a result of the fact that **54 percent of the voters in the Rocky Mountain West don't know their representatives' stance on public lands**

The report encourages citizens to ensure that the economic, environmental and cultural benefits of public lands are maintained for future generations by:

- Taking advantage of opportunities for citizen involvement in decisions affecting our public lands
- Contacting elected representatives

Voices in support of public lands (from the report's testimonials)

“It is my hope that our grandchildren will also have public lands so common to them that they take them for granted, and their parents have an ‘epiphany’ moment when they become aware of the critical need to work and preserve the legacy of our national public lands.”

Steve Gale, Idaho, farmer- turned- cheesemaker

“Much of the public land that surrounds me is big country. A large portion of it is little changed from when the fur trappers first explored the area. Unlike many other parts of the U.S., it is still home to all the big animals that roamed the country when it was first settled.”

Armond Acri, Wyoming Wildlife Federation

“Some are happy about the jobs (extraction industries provide), but others recognize it’s a boom-and-bust economy. They’re going to have to brace themselves for what happens after the minerals are extracted. You can’t destroy your environment and come out ahead. We really have to be smart and make the choices upfront.”

Ty Markham, Utah, businesswoman, town councilwoman

“Here in northern New Mexico we’re kind of blessed because we have so much public land. That’s what really supports my fly shop because the majority of things that I sell are sold to people who go fishing on their own. Stores like mine rely on people being able to go out national forest land and other public land.”

Nick Streit, New Mexico, business owner, fishing guide