

Conserving lands and prosperity: Seeking a proper balance between conservation and development in the Rocky Mountain West

Paul Lorah, Ph.D.
The University of St. Thomas,

Rob Southwick, Thomas Allen
Southwick Associates, Inc.

Abstract:

Public lands comprise a major portion of the western landscape and shape rural economies and cultures by providing raw materials, recreational opportunities, wildlife habitat and desirable scenic qualities. Management goals for public lands range from conservation to development of commodity resources such as oil, gas and minerals. This paper examines the relationship between economic security and varying land management and usage strategies in the rural Rocky Mountain West. A geographic information system is used to analyze the percentage of land in each county managed under three scenarios:

- (1) Recreation and conservation;*
- (2) Development of commodity resources; and*
- (3) A combination thereof.*

The analysis indicates that the jobs, income and growth from the commodity production sectors in the rural Rocky Mountain West, while still significant, have not experienced the growth seen by the rest of the regional economy. Rural counties with greater areas actively conserved for recreation, conservation plus lower impact commodity uses – including balanced levels of timber, mining and energy development - actually enjoy relatively higher income, population and employment growth. Counties dominated by conservation and recreation lands also have higher property values and high proportions of higher-income workers.

Communities need the energy and materials provided by the commodities sector. Individuals – residents and tourists alike – demand the quality of life provided by the region’s fish, wildlife and scenic resources. Nearly all rural Rocky Mountain communities need the jobs and income generated by both sectors. Public officials at the local, state and federal levels must carefully balance the needs and impacts from land use management decisions on all economic sectors to ensure the best, most rewarding economic future for the Rocky Mountain West.

Introduction

More than half of the land in the Western United states is managed by state and federal governments (Jackson, 1995). Public lands in the seven Rocky Mountain States¹ alone cover an area roughly 7.5 times larger than Florida ([see Figure 1](#)). These public lands shape rural economies and cultures by providing raw materials, recreational opportunities, wildlife habitat, natural beauty and ecosystem services. The wide range of benefits provided by public lands are partially the result of diverse and sometimes conflicting management goals, which range from encouraging extraction, to promoting tourism, to preserving wilderness.

Recent increases in energy prices have placed extra emphasis on developing the West’s energy resources. Calls for rapid expansion of oil and gas extraction may or may not have considered their impact on existing – and growing - economic sectors such as fish, wildlife and other outdoor recreation, plus the growth driven by people and businesses desiring the quality of life benefits possible from the region’s wild and scenic resources. Given the perceived conflicts between various types of economic activities occurring on rural public lands, it’s not surprising there is often widespread disagreement on how to best manage these lands.

¹ The Rocky Mountain States include Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming