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PUBLIC LANDS

Federal acres bring prosperity to rural areas — study

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Rural counties with a higher share of federal lands in the West enjoy greater economic benefits than areas with less federal lands, according to a new study that challenges arguments that public lands kill economic opportunity and job creation.

The [study](#), conducted by the nonpartisan research firm Headwaters Economics based in Bozeman, Mont., evaluated data from 276 rural counties in 11 Western states — Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wyoming.

The study evaluated population, employment, personal income and per-capita income data in these counties over a decades long period from the early 1970s until the early 2010s, according to Headwaters Economics.

It found that population, employment and personal income, on average, "grew significantly faster" in Western rural counties "with the highest share of federal lands compared to counties with the lowest share of federal lands."

Per-capita income growth was slightly higher in counties with more federal land, the study says.

Federal lands in the study include national parks, wilderness, national conservation areas, national monuments and national wildlife refuges.

"Counties that performed the best are benefiting from nearby public lands in multiple ways," said Megan Lawson, an economist at Headwaters and the study's author.

The benefits are not just limited to increased tourism or recreation spending, she said, but also come from natural gas production and timber harvesting on these lands.

"These findings do not represent a short-term business cycle or the influence of a single industry," Lawson said. "They show that as the regional Western economy grows during the longer term, federal lands and protected federal lands in rural counties are associated on average with better economic performance."

The study, among other things, counters some congressional and Western state leaders who argue federal lands — and moves to conserve them — hamper local economies.

It's also a rebuke to those lobbying for the transfer of federal lands to willing states.

House lawmakers last month approved a new rules package that would permit the chamber to consider federal land transfers cost- free and budget-neutral — a move that critics contend would clear the path to disposal of public lands.

Under pressure from sportsmen's groups and others, House Oversight and Government Reform Chairman Jason Chaffetz (R-Utah) withdrew legislation he sponsored that had called for the sale of millions of acres of public lands across 10 states ([Greenwire](#), Feb. 2).