

Western
Values
Project



A Voice for the Western Majority



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The Economics of Sagebrush:

What five priority sagebrush landscapes contribute to western economies



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Introduction

The western way of life depends on the health and productivity of sagebrush landscapes. From Lost River in central Idaho to Greater Dinosaur in northwest Colorado, sagebrush landscapes form the economic backbone of many western communities, supporting family farms and ranches while [generating over a billion dollars](#) in annual output from hunting, fishing and other forms of outdoor recreation. Federal agencies, along with their partners in state governments, now have an unprecedented opportunity to protect these landscapes – and the communities and businesses that depend on their well-being – by finalizing recently-proposed conservation plans for the Greater sage-grouse and its habitat.

Sagebrush country spans millions of acres across eleven western states and hosts over 350 unique species of wildlife. Among them is the Greater sage-grouse, whose populations have [declined steeply](#) in recent decades, and who is often regarded as an indicator of the health of sagebrush landscapes and dependent species. To protect the species, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has partnered with states and is preparing plans to conserve sagebrush landscapes, over 50 percent of which fall on federal public lands. The goal of this partnership is to avoid the need to list the Greater sage-grouse under the Endangered Species Act, a decision that must be made by the end of September 2015.

On May 28, 2015, the BLM [released proposed plans](#) that, when finalized later this year, will guide the management of more than 60 million acres of sagebrush habitat on federal public lands. These plans were prepared through extensive collaboration with on-the-ground stakeholders, state and local governments and officials, and other federal agencies. By focusing protections on [over 35 million acres of priority habitat](#), the fifteen plans represent a strong step forward in conserving sagebrush landscapes.

An average of one in five jobs is related to outdoor recreation and/or tourism.

An average of one in ten jobs is based on farming and/or ranching.

In the counties that overlap the Bear River Valley and Clarks Fork priority landscapes, one-third of all jobs are related to outdoor recreation, and one quarter of all business income is generated by sectors related to outdoor recreation.

In this report, the Western Values Project takes a closer look at five landscapes that are proposed for heightened protections in the proposed plans just released by the BLM. These landscapes include priority habitat for Greater sage-grouse, but also support a wide range of other activities, including outdoor recreation, farming, and ranching. As explained below, these activities provide many important economic and cultural benefits to local communities and businesses.

Overview of the Five Landscapes

Like so many places in the West, the five landscapes examined by Western Values Project – Greater Dinosaur, Hart-Sheldon, Lost River, Bear River Valley, and Clarks Fork – have long histories of mining, logging, and other forms of resource use. However, over time, residents and business owners have broadened their focus and are increasingly benefiting from and actively participating in efforts to conserve these landscapes.

For example, outfitters and rafting guides in Greater Dinosaur all depend on maintaining scenic values and robust wildlife herds to attract thousands of outdoorsmen and tourists to the area every year. And in Hart-Sheldon, ranchers are [finding that it makes economic sense](#) to invest in the conservation and restoration of wildlife habitat on their lands – because doing so reduces the risk of damaging wildfires and slows the spread of non-native plant species that are undesirable for forage.

These are just a few examples of why the conservation of these landscapes is so important to Westerners, and why it's so critical that the BLM adopt strong management plans to complement the work being done by states and private landowners. As shown by the economic data to the left and in the tables below on the five landscapes, these plans will not only help the Greater sage-grouse, but will also provide greater certainty and economic opportunity for so many of our communities and local businesses.

Economic Data

Table 1. Farming Jobs and Labor Earnings (in thousands of 2015 dollars) by Multi-County Region¹

| Landscape | Farming Jobs | Percent of Total Jobs in Region | Farming income | Percent of Total Income in Region |
|--------------|--------------|---------------------------------|----------------|-----------------------------------|
| Dinosaur | 593 | 5% | \$16,661 | 1% |
| Hart-Sheldon | 927 | 1% | \$103,447 | 1% |
| Bear River | 2,934 | 11% | \$33,087 | 3% |
| Clarks Fork | 2,848 | 11% | \$32,363 | 3% |
| Lost River | 6,303 | 11% | \$328,837 | 11% |
| Total | 13,605 | 4% | \$514,325 | 3% |

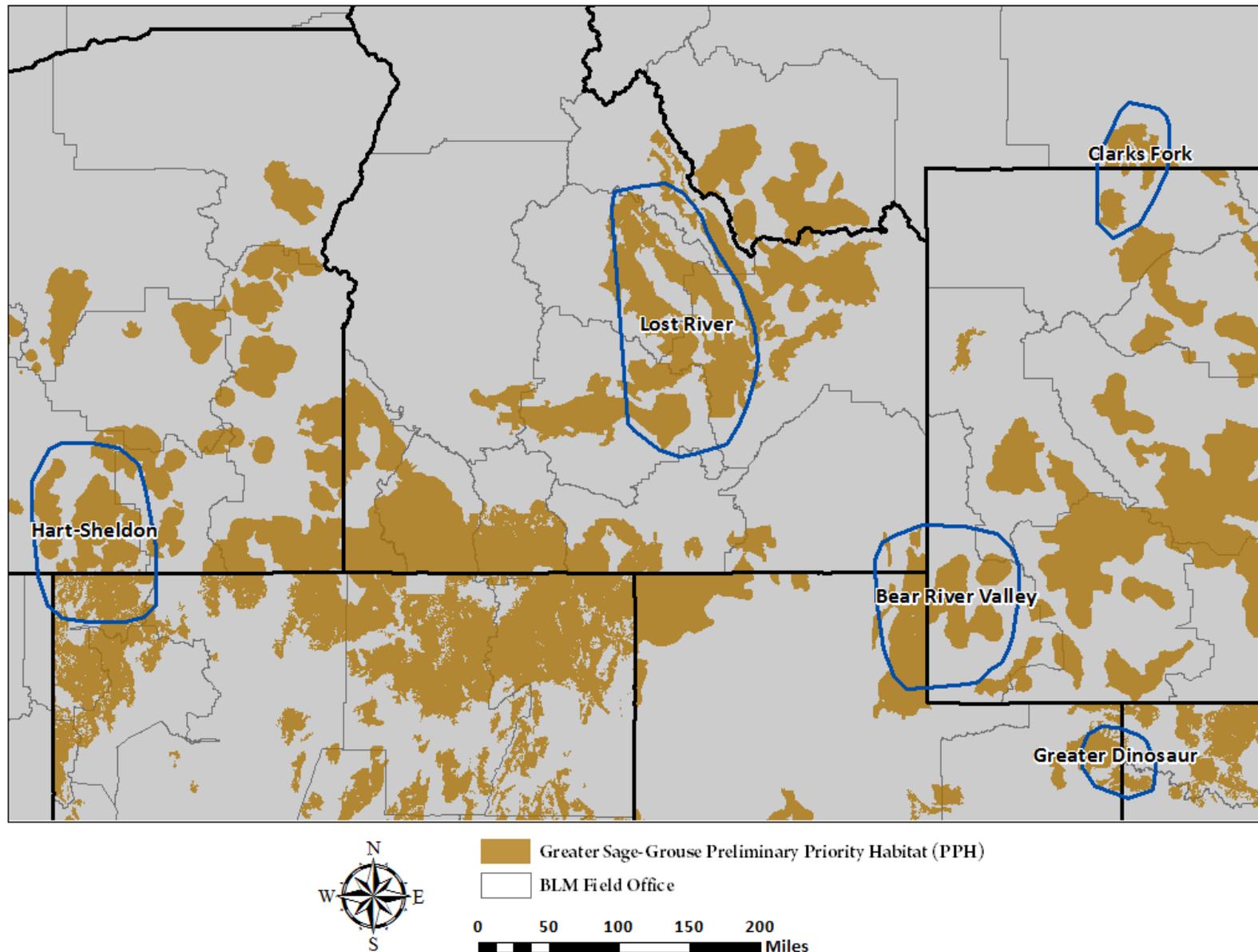
Table 2. Jobs and Business Income in Sectors Related to Outdoor Recreation²

| Landscape | Outdoor Recreation Jobs | Percent of Total Jobs | Recreation-based Establishments | % of Total Establishments | Recreation-related Business income | Percent of Total Business |
|--------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Dinosaur | 1,777 | 24% | 144 | 15% | \$215,893 | 16% |
| Hart-Sheldon | 15,714 | 18% | 1,279 | 14% | \$1,147,004 | 5% |
| Bear River | 1,857 | 33% | 194 | 30% | \$341,743 | 25% |
| Clarks Fork | 2,035 | 34% | 212 | 23% | \$269,413 | 25% |
| Lost River | 1,977 | 19% | 322 | 26% | \$196,501 | 8% |
| Total | 23,360 | 20% | 2,151 | 17% | \$2,170,554 | 7% |

Methodology

The data in this report represents straight jobs and income statistics, which are provided by the Bureau of Economic Analysis, the County Business Patterns and the 2012 Economic Census from the U.S. Census Bureau. They represent aggregates of the jobs and incomes numbers for each county that contains the parts of the landscapes described in the report. Those counties are listed in the endnotes below. The recreation data was collected from a broad range of sectors that are related to or include recreation. These data were collected by the firm ECONorthwest, as commissioned by the Western Values Project.

Map of the Five Priority Landscapes



Greater Dinosaur, CO/UT

Located in northwest Colorado and northeast Utah, Greater Dinosaur is a 520,000-acre landscape made up of sandstone spires and canyons separated by vast plains of sagebrush and desert shrub. The area forms the southern and western boundary of Dinosaur National Monument, and is divided by the Green River. Year-round, Greater Dinosaur supports a rich variety of recreational opportunities, including rafting and float trips during the spring and summer, and world-class hunting and cross-country skiing during the fall and winter.



Hikers enjoy the lands surrounding Dinosaur National Monument. Photo courtesy of National Park Service

Economic Activity

As in the other landscapes, farming, ranching, tourism, and recreation in Greater Dinosaur³ provides essential revenue and economic support to local and surrounding communities. In the counties that overlap Greater Dinosaur, nearly one in every four jobs is related to outdoor recreation, and farming and ranching jobs account for another 5% of local employment. Moreover, in 2013, Dinosaur National Monument received more than 200,000 visitors and generated more than 40,000 overnight stays. Together, then, farming, ranching, tourism and recreational activities within Greater Dinosaur support the livelihoods of local residents and provide indispensable economic benefits to nearby communities.

“As a former National Park Ranger I spent the greater part of my career working in the sage brush communities of our western landscapes, including Dinosaur National Monument. An intact sage brush community supports diverse plant and animal populations, supports critical jobs in ranching, farming as well as recreation and tourism, and maybe most importantly preserves a landscape that in so many ways defines the American west, and an iconic American way of life.”

Ellis Richard, former
Park Ranger

Area Attractions



Ely Creek Falls near Dinosaur National Monument. Photo: National Park Service

Nearly one in every four jobs is related to outdoor recreation, and farming and ranching jobs account for another 5% of local employment.

The rich variety of recreational opportunities in Greater Dinosaur explains why almost a quarter of jobs in the area are supplied by sectors related to the outdoor recreation industry. Perhaps the most prominent natural feature in Greater Dinosaur is the Green River, which runs through Dinosaur National Monument and out into northeastern Utah. Along its corridor, thousands of dinosaur and marine fossils line the riverbed and canyon walls, which also display petroglyphs and pictographs carved and painted by past inhabitants. In warmer months, the river offers calm sections for floating, as well as white water rapids for rafting, and nearby hiking and mountain biking trails provide spectacular views of the river and surrounding landscape.

In addition to hiking, biking, and rafting, Greater Dinosaur also provides opportunities for fishing, camping, birding, and rock climbing. West of the Green River, the three Diamond Mountain Lakes offer fishing spots for brook and rainbow trout, along with several camp sites. In addition, there are several popular rock climbing routes at the Battleship Formation northeast of Vernal, including a number of traditional desert crack climbs. For birders, Greater Dinosaur provides habitat for a variety of eagles, flycatchers, and warblers, and, during their spring and summer migration, thousands of sandhill cranes occupy the area south of Dinosaur National Monument.

Greater Dinosaur also provides a variety of outstanding winter recreation opportunities, including snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, hunting, and wildlife viewing. Some of the largest elk herds in the country populate Greater Dinosaur during fall and winter months, which, along with mule deer and pronghorn antelope, create world-class big game hunting opportunities. In addition to hunting, the area south of Dinosaur National Monument is open to snowmobiling, and several cross-country skiing and yurt trails crisscross the northern section of Greater Dinosaur within Ashley National Forest. Year-round, then, Greater Dinosaur provides a rich variety of recreational opportunities and accommodates thousands of outdoor enthusiasts.

Hart-Sheldon, OR/NV

At over 2 million acres, Hart-Sheldon is one of the largest examples of the sagebrush steppe ecosystem in the country, a high desert composed of natural lakes, sagebrush flats and rugged ridgelines. Straddling the border of northwest Nevada and southeast Oregon, the greater Hart-Sheldon landscape fills the region between [Hart Mountain National Wildlife Refuge](#) in Oregon to the north, and the [Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge](#) in Nevada to the



Pronghorn migrate between Hart and Sheldon National Wildlife Refuges. Photo: Fish and Wildlife Service

Economic Activity

In the counties that include the Hart-Sheldon landscape,⁴ jobs in sectors related to outdoor recreation represent nearly one-fifth of the region's 85,069 total jobs, or 18%. Recreation-related sectors are responsible for 5% of the region's total business income, or \$1.1 million of the region's \$23.9 million annual total. Data from the two BLM offices in the Hart-Sheldon region underscore the significant visitation to this area, with a combined total of over a quarter-million visits logged in 2013. The region has also historically hosted a number of ranches, which are today fewer and further between; as a result, farming-related activity represents 1% of the labor earnings for the region.



County Natural Beef Cooperative's website shows billboards they have placed throughout the West, advertising beef ranches alongside healthy wildlife habitat.

For the ranches that still exist, many long-time ranching families in the region have joined the [Country Natural Beef](#) Cooperative, a ranching co-op owned by ranchers that has thrived by providing sustainable beef to markets throughout the country. Their website boasts strong sustainable ties to the land in the Hart-Sheldon region, [stating in the Q&A](#) that “we are comprised of ranchers who are committed to environmental sustainability and possess an extraordinary land ethic. Perhaps better than anyone else, we understand our future depends on healthy rangelands, streams, rivers, and open space.” The recently proposed BLM plan for this area should help ensure that these important livelihoods have an intact landscape where they can continue to thrive.



Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge in the spring. Photo: Fish and Wildlife Service

Area Attractions

The greater Hart-Sheldon region serves as both a permanent habitat and a migration corridor for a number of iconic sagebrush species, including, but not limited to, pronghorn antelope, mule deer, sage-grouse, and bighorn sheep. In fact, the region boasts one of the highest densities of Greater sage-grouse populations in the entire U.S., and tourists come here every spring to spectate the bird’s famous mating ritual.

The Hart-Sheldon region is also known for its excellent outdoor recreation—remote and challenging hiking, camping, [backpacking](#), horsepacking, [bikepacking](#), and hot springs tourism. The region is largely undeveloped, meaning that many of these recreational opportunities are self-guided and off-trail, but those who venture out are hugely rewarded with epic canyons, mountains that rise straight out of the valley floor, and solitude in small sporadic hot springs.

Visitors also come for rockhounding, both at [commercial locations](#) and on [specially-designated BLM land](#); the region is known for its quantities of rare stones unique to the area, including blackfire opals (Nevada) and Oregon sunstones. The influx of people for wildlife-viewing, outdoor recreation and rockhounding keep a booming business happening in the two main small towns in this vast region, [Adel](#) and [Plush](#) (both located in Oregon).

Lost River, ID

Located in central-eastern Idaho, Lost River contains a wide variety of terrain with a rich collection of ecosystems and landscapes. Alpine peaks, wildflower meadows, spring-fed wetlands and sagebrush plains all compose this more than 2 million acre landscape. The diversity of terrain within Lost River supports a variety of wildlife habitats and provides countless opportunities for outdoor recreation all year long.



The Lost River Range in Idaho boasts some spectacular viewsheds. Photo: Bureau of Land Management

Economic Activity

Like the other landscapes, local communities in Lost River⁵ also depend on farming and outdoor recreation to support their businesses and provide jobs to their residents. In Lost River, one in every four businesses is related to outdoor recreation, and these businesses support one in every five local jobs. In addition, farming and ranching supply another 10% of local jobs and labor earnings. Collectively, farming, ranching, and outdoor recreation support hundreds of businesses and provide thousands of jobs to the region.

“I’ve been in sage grouse country for 55 years in Southeast Idaho--both in the Bear River Basin and the Blackfoot River drainages. My family has and does run [cattle] on federal Forest Service and to a lesser degree BLM grounds for summer range, as well as on expansive private holdings. In addition to ranching, a passion of mine was hunting ‘the big bombers’ over a German shorthair and Brittanies a good share of my life. It is with firm belief that I say sage-grouse are a heritage species--the canary in the mine for much of western wildlife. Conserving their habitat means we’re conserving the western way of life for sportsmen and ranchers.”

Mark Steele, Publisher, Soda Springs, Idaho

Area Attractions

State and Private Conservation Efforts

State and local governments, along with private landowners, have also prepared plans and adopted safeguards to protect the Greater sage-grouse and its habitat. State conservation plans and executive orders provide directives for research, monitoring, and habitat management that supplement federal efforts and create incentives for protection measures on private lands. In turn, farmers, ranchers, and private landowners with property that overlaps sage-grouse habitat have invested millions of dollars making landscape improvements and forming conservation easements to protect their sagebrush lands.

State and private conservation efforts are critical to the survival of the Greater sage-grouse. However, the long-term survival of the species cannot rest on those efforts alone. Strong, complementary management plans from federal agencies are also needed to ensure that sage-grouse are protected across all jurisdictions and landscapes.

Its diverse terrain and rich collection of resources allow Lost River to support a wide range of recreational activities all year long. Hundreds of hiking trails wind through the area, many of which lead to some of the highest peaks in Idaho.

Recreational vehicle users can ride miles of old mining and logging roads that run along rivers and streams, including the route along Big Lake Creek leading to Jimmy Smith Lake, a popular fishing spot. Jimmy Smith, along with dozens of other lakes, streams, creeks, and reservoirs, provide anglers with excellent fishing spots for rainbow, brook, and steelhead trout.

Lost River also provides outstanding recreation opportunities in the winter months. Downhill skiers can ride the rope tow and ski downhill runs at Bald Mountain Ski Area, or drive up Trail Creek Pass to access some of the best back-country skiing terrain in the country. For hunters, winter habitat in Lost River supports a variety of big game, including bighorn sheep, mule deer, and pronghorn antelope.

Finally, year-round, birders and wildlife enthusiasts can enjoy several specially-protected areas especially rich in wildlife. The Chilly Slough Wetland Conservation Area, for example, is a rare high desert, spring-fed wetland that contains more than one hundred bird species. Together, its variety of landscapes, natural resources, and wildlife make Lost River a playground for outdoor recreation enthusiasts during all seasons.

Bear River Valley, ID/UT/WY

The Bear River is the largest tributary of Utah's Great Salt Lake, flowing through southeastern Wyoming, southeastern Idaho, and into northern Utah, while draining a mountainous area that turns into farming valleys and plains. Bear River Valley encompasses some 2.2 million acres of land at the confluence of these three states to the northeast of the Great Salt Lake, and includes the slightly-smaller Bear Lake right at its center. The valley is home to two different wildlife refuges, Cokeville National Wildlife Refuge in western Wyoming and Bear Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Idaho.



Sunset at Bear Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Utah. Photo: FWS

Economic Activity

Bear River Valley, which is host to Bear Lake, has quickly grown as a significant tourism and recreation destination in recent years. In the counties that contain this landscape,⁶ one-third of all jobs are in sectors related to outdoor recreation. These sectors also bring in one-quarter (\$340,000/year) of all business income for these counties. Data from the three BLM offices in the Bear River region underscore the significant visitation to this area, with a combined total of over 1.1 million visits in 2013. In addition, more than one in every ten jobs (11%) in the counties that include Bear River Valley are farming-based. Together, recreation and farming in the Bear River Valley provides valuable economic support that sustains the livelihoods of its residents.

Area Attractions

The valley is home to two different wildlife refuges, and wildlife-viewing, and birdwatching in particular, is a significant attraction for the area. In southwestern Wyoming (the eastern limit of Bear River Valley) is the [Cokeville National Wildlife Refuge \(NWR\)](#), a wetland haven for migratory and nesting birds and waterfowl. Cokeville NWR also hosts other iconic sagebrush species, including mule deer, sage-grouse, elk, and pronghorn antelope. And located in the north of the basin, in Idaho, is the [Bear Lake National Wildlife Refuge](#), home to sandhill cranes during their migration. Bear Lake NWR offers hunting, fishing, and great photography opportunities to those wishing to see abundant wildlife, often while visiting Bear Lake to the south. In the corridors in between these refuges, visitors can enjoy trail-riding, hiking, and [hunting](#) for high mountain mule deer, moose, or elk.

Bear River Valley basin boasts a relatively lush river valley in the midst of an otherwise high-desert landscape, and as a result it has predominantly been an agricultural region for most of its history. The Utah portion of Bear Lake Valley is renowned for its famous canby [raspberries](#), and even hosts a festival each year during the height of raspberry season in August called [Raspberry Days](#). This has helped Bear Lake become a [significant tourist attraction](#) over the last couple of decades, and there has been a recent shift from more traditional ranching and agriculture to seasonal tourism and recreational development in the area.

Bear Lake is often called “the Caribbean of the Rockies” because of the lake’s turquoise-blue color. The region’s office of tourism suggests that the lake attracts between 300,000 and 500,000 visitors each summer, and many vacation homes have been built in recent years as a result. Visitors can enjoy fishing, boating, camping, and general beach activities on Bear Lake—it’s a self-proclaimed “[recreational paradise](#)” that has become a vacation hotspot in recent years. Because of rapid growth in the region, in 2010, many regional stakeholders of all stripes engaged in planning the Bear Lake Valley [Blueprint](#) in order to allow all uses of the valley—recreation, tourism, development, ranching/agriculture and wildlife habitat—to continue into the future.



Waterfowl in Wyoming’s Cokeville National Wildlife Refuge. Photo: FWS



Utah raspberries. Photo: Rich County, UT



Boating on the Idaho side of Bear Lake. Photo: Idaho Parks & Recreation

Clarks Fork, MT/WY

The Clarks Fork of the Yellowstone River originates in the Gallatin and Beartooth mountains in southern Montana and snakes into northern Wyoming through the Shoshone National Forest and eventually joins the Yellowstone River just southeast of Laurel, Montana. Clarks Fork is named for Captain William Clark of the Lewis and Clark expedition, and is famous for its breath-taking views and recreational opportunities at the doorstep of Yellowstone National Park.



The Clarks Fork Watershed. Photo; U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Economic Activity

The Clarks Fork region is a high-recreation area, and 34% of all jobs in the counties that overlap the region are in sectors related to outdoor recreation.⁷ Similarly, one-quarter (25%) of the business income for the region, or nearly \$270,000/year, is generated through sectors related to outdoor recreation. Data from the two BLM offices in the Clarks Fork region underscore the significant visitation to this area, with a combined total of over 600,000 visits in 2013. Farming is also a significant economic driver in the Clarks Fork region, with 11% of region's jobs are farming-based. These sectors rely on the Clarks Forks' pristine waters and low-conflict landscape to thrive.

“Preserving sagebrush habitat and specifically sage-grouse is extremely important to protect our agriculture future and our future environment. Sage-grouse is an indicator species for a healthy environment that we all rely on here in Montana to maintain our livelihood and quality of life.”

Bonnie Martinell, Boja Farm, Montana

“Eliminating native species and prime habitat for the sake of ‘progress’ results in the exact opposite. We lose more than just a native species, we also lose our way. Intact sagebrush habitat like we see in the Clarks Fork region is critical not only to maintaining species, but also to supporting our local economies. In my own line of business as a fly-fishing guide, it’s a huge part of what maintains our pristine rivers and streams—which in turn bring in most of our business.”

Tim Wade, owner, North Fork Anglers

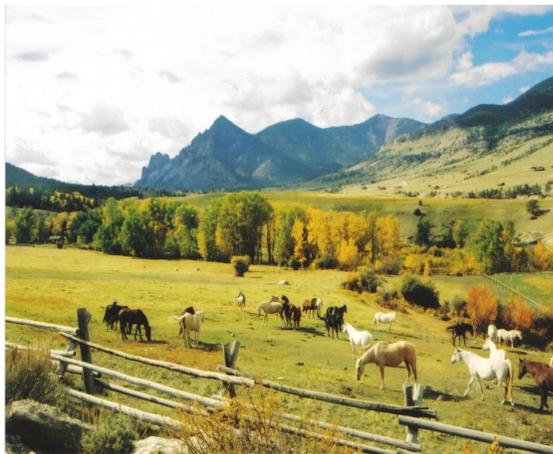
Area Attractions

Clarks Fork has a blue-ribbon trout fishery composed of brook, rainbow, and cutthroat trout in abundance. As a result, a number of [guiding services](#) are sustained by the influx of fishermen and women that are drawn to the region. The Clarks Fork River is also a boater's dream, particularly a 20-mile stretch of the river where it carves a canyon between the Beartooth Mountains to the north and the Absaroka Mountains to the south. This portion of the river was granted Wild and Scenic [status in 1991](#), and [kayakers](#) from around the world are attracted to this box canyon region given that it has the third-hardest set of rapids in the U.S.



Fishermen enjoy a lazy afternoon on Clarks Fork. Photo: Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks

On top of fishing and boating, the region also provides excellent wildlife-viewing opportunities typical of the sagebrush habitat: elk, mule deer, and many rare birds, including some of the highest densities of Greater sage-grouse in the country. The [Spring into Yellowstone Birdwatching and Wildlife Festival](#) is well-attended and is hosted annually out of Cody, WY, permitting visitors to tour leks, watch raptors, go on trail rides, and engage in other recreational activities.



Sunlight Basin, Wyoming. Photo: City Data

Also in Clarks Fork is the [Sunlight Basin](#), which boasts one of the most spectacular views in America. Visitors can traverse the Chief Joseph Scenic Highway, enjoying views of Sunlight Gorge and Dead Indian Pass. History buffs are often drawn to [Heart Mountain](#), which was an internment camp during World War II. The region also supports a wide variety of dude ranches, both working ranches and tourist ranches. Among those ranches are two wilderness-intervention ranches for teens, the [Mt. Carmel Youth Ranch](#) and the [Trinity Teen Solutions](#) Ranch, both of which provide opportunities for teens to learn while working in these remote locations.

Conclusion

The five priority landscapes described in this report are critical to the long-term survival of Greater sage-grouse. But they also support hundreds of local farms, ranches, businesses and countless recreation activities. This, in turn, supplies thousands of jobs to community residents—in the counties that overlap these five landscapes, more than ten thousand jobs depend on farms and ranches, and one in five jobs is supported by outdoor recreation. Because these ranching, farming and outdoor recreation activities all depend on maintaining healthy landscapes, it is critical that the BLM finalize the strong conservation measures proposed in its sage-grouse management plans.



Greater sage-grouse strut alongside cattle on a ranch in sagebrush habitat. Photo: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture.

Endnotes

1. Source: ECONorthwest, based on data from the Bureau of Economic Analysis. (US Bureau of Economic Analysis. “Tables CA25, CA25N: Total Full-Time and Part-Time Employment by Industry” and “Tables CA5, CA5N: Personal Income and Employment by Major Component and Earnings by Industry.” Local Area Personal Income and Employment Data Series. <http://www.bea.gov>. Accessed in May 2015.)
2. Source: ECONorthwest, based on data from the 2012 Economic Census (U.S. Census Bureau. “Geographic Area Series: Summary Statistics for the US, States, Metro Areas, Counties, and Places: 2012. <http://factfinder.census.gov>. Accessed in May 2015.)
3. The Greater Dinosaur landscape is contained within Moffat County, CO and Uintah County, UT.
4. The Hart-Sheldon landscape is contained within Lake and Harney Counties in Oregon, and Humboldt and Washoe counties in Nevada.
5. Lost River is contained by Lemhi, Custer, Blaine, Butte, Lincoln, and Bingham Counties in Idaho.
6. Bear River Valley is contained by Bear Lake County, ID; Rich County, UT; and Uinta and Lincoln Counties, WY.
7. The Clarks Fork landscape is contained within Carbon County, Montana and Park County, Wyoming.