

Study: Colorado's federally protected areas drive economic growth

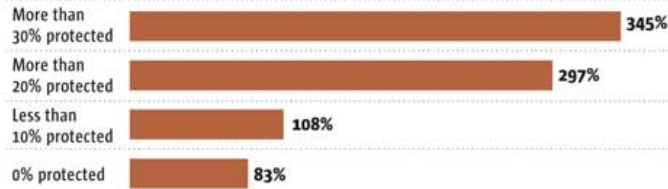
By Jason Blevins
[The Denver Post](#)

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Protected lands good for economic growth

A new study by a Montana research firm points to the West's federally protected lands as a primary economic driver.

Percent change in employment for nonmetro counties in the West, 1970-2010



Source: Headwaters Economics

The Denver Post



Visitors navigate their way through Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve as evening approaches. A new study shows that Colorado's federally protected national parks, wilderness areas and monuments are driving economic growth. Great Sand Dunes Park is in the south-central region of the state. (Tim Rasmussen, The Denver Post)

Protected federal lands are fueling Colorado's economic vitality by luring both employers and employees eager to pursue a quality of life elevated by wild, open spaces.

[A new study released Wednesday by Montana's Headwaters Economics](#) — an independent research group that compiles federal and regional statistics into research aimed at improving community development and land management decisions — shows that Colorado's federally protected national parks, wilderness areas and monuments are driving economic growth. The study of Colorado and the West reports that Western non-metro counties with more than 30 percent of lands federally protected enjoyed a 345 percent increase in jobs since 1970 while non-metro counties with no protected lands saw only 83 percent job growth in the same period.

It's not just the host communities that are thriving.

"The lands immediately surrounding these federally protected areas are the fastest growing," said Ray Rasker, the executive director of Headwaters Economics who describes himself as an "economic geographer."

Dispelling the notion that land protection hinders economic development, Rasker's research points to Colorado's vast collection of federal land — 36 percent of the state — as a primary driver in growing the state's economy.

In 2010, Colorado was a top-ranked state for entrepreneurs, with 450 new businesses every month for every 100,000 residents compared to a national rate of 340 new businesses a month.

David White, head of marketing for the Colorado Springs Regional Economic Development Corp. regularly trolls California for chieftains of fast-growing companies eager to escape a rough business climate. Focusing on six key industries, White has found a gold mine of California CEOs ready to move to Colorado for personal lifestyle reasons. His group's new ad campaign emphasizes Colorado Springs' outdoor fun. A list of Orange County businesses that recently relocated to the city is growing.

"Our quality of life and our open spaces and our trails are very appealing in trying to attract the companies we want to attract," White said.

High wage services industries have led Colorado's job growth, with Rasker's research showing new health care, finance, real estate and professional services jobs driving and diversifying the state's job landscape. Many of those workers were lured by the state's outdoor offerings, he said.

Colorado's wildlands not only attract new businesses but contribute to existing business growth. Ryan Martens, founder of Boulder's Rally Software, said Colorado is "the best combination of place, knowledgeable workers and lifestyle."

"I can't think of a better place to anchor a business," said Martens, who employs 200 highly skilled workers in Colorado. "It allows us a place to regenerate also. It's a place for us to actually clear our heads."

John Land Le Coq [recently relocated his Fishpond and Lilypond fly-fishing gear and apparel companies from Kansas to Denver](#) and is infusing his brands with not just Colorado's sustainable, open spaces but the workers drawn to those places.

"We could have gone to several different places, but Colorado was vital to us because of the employee base," Le Coq said. "The kind of people we want in our business are here for the same reason we are. It's the employee base we need."

Jason Blevins: 303-954-1374 or jblevins@denverpost.com

Bringing in jobs and visitors

A breakdown of what federally protected areas in Colorado generated in 2010:

Park property	Jobs	Visitors	Visitor spending
▲ Great Sand Dunes National Park	184	283,284	\$10.55 million
Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site	36	29,120	\$1.05 million
Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park	145	179,344	\$8.6 million
Colorado National Monument	338	433,561	\$22.45 million
Dinosaur National Monument	137	197,812	\$6.93 million
Curecanti National Recreation Area	546	969,549	\$41.64 million
Hovenweep National Monument	29	27,386	\$1.43 million
Mesa Verde National Park	714	559,712	\$42.65 million
Rocky Mountain National Park	3,033	2,955,821	\$176.2 million