

# RECREATION and RURAL COMMUNITY VITALITY



## KEY TAKEAWAYS

More and more people are [visiting Western public lands](#) to vacation and recreate. This growth has fostered a booming outdoor industry in the U.S. that supports [millions of jobs and billions of dollars in consumer spending](#). As a result, individual companies and larger trade groups have become increasingly active and influential in national policy debates around public lands management and natural resources conservation. Policymakers have also increasingly looked to this industry as a promising source of economic development for rural communities.

In the rural West, recreation trends have real, everyday implications for people, economies and natural resources. While some communities and outdoor landscapes are untouched by visitor growth, many find themselves overrun and overwhelmed. To move beyond this dichotomy, it is essential to have local voices in the policy and planning decision space. Too often however, rural communities — including residents, elected leaders, businesses and user groups — struggle to be heard among larger outdoor organizations and companies.

- 1 Recreation, rural economic development, and land management are intertwined.
- 2 Recreation planning and management must account for the costs and benefits they create for local communities.
- 3 Recreation management benefits from more collaborative processes.
- 4 Rural communities require tools and resources to establish their own strategies for recreation management.
- 5 Partnerships are crucial for developing and sustainably managing recreation.
- 6 Federal agencies need adequate tools and resources to manage recreation sustainably.
- 7 Recreation provides an avenue for engaging a broader audience in conservation and rural vitality.

The Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition (RVCC) has long advocated for planning and decision-making that address community needs and reflect local stakeholder input. We also recognize the connection between outdoor recreation and the ecological and economic sustainability of Western lands. With these central tenets in mind, RVCC has developed the following statement of values based on the shared experiences and perspectives of those in our coalition and our broader network. This paper outlines our priorities for approaching recreation planning and policy in a way that supports healthy landscapes and rural community vitality.



Photo by Brad Pearson on Unsplash

## OUR VALUES

- 1 Recreation, rural economic development and land management are intertwined.** Across the West, recreation use, impacts and infrastructure each affect and are affected by ecosystem health and land management. A riparian restoration project can improve local rafting opportunities, for example, while the development of trails and roads can increase erosion and impact vegetation. Fire risk rises with increased human visitation, while wildfires greatly affect recreational opportunities. Both recreation and land management also affect rural economies. A forest thinning project that includes trail improvements could improve biking opportunities—also helping nearby outdoor businesses—while federal commercial permitting processes could end up disadvantaging local outfitters or overwhelming a town’s visitor capacity. The interconnected nature of these elements must be considered during natural resources-focused planning and rural economic development discussions.

## OUR VALUES

- 2 Outdoor recreation planning and management must account for the costs and benefits they create for local communities.** Outdoor recreation can benefit rural communities in many ways. It [can help drive job creation](#), promote economic diversification, and build on an area’s existing assets. Recreational amenities can improve the quality of life for local residents as well, [helping communities attract and retain young people and skilled workers](#). However, recreation jobs also tend to be relatively low-paying and are often seasonal, which is less conducive to supporting families and long-term residents. Growth in recreation and associated tourism can [put pressure on local housing availability and pricing](#), as well as local public services and infrastructure such as police, search and rescue, roads, and healthcare. This has been highlighted most recently during the Covid-19 pandemic, when many recreation hubs have felt economic pressure to accommodate surging visitation and tourism despite concerns that “opening up” could strain the limited capacity of local health facilities.
- 3 Recreation management benefits from more collaboration.** Communities, including elected leaders, local collaborative groups, recreation user groups, and businesses, are calling for more input and transparency in agency decision-making. These entities directly experience the spillover effects of public lands recreation and should be given opportunities to engage with land managers as they go about planning and implementation. Conversely, many communities’ own tourism and economic development strategies produce higher traffic and visitor impacts for adjacent public lands. Just as collaborative processes have improved land management planning, bringing together local stakeholders and land managers in recreation-related decision-making at all levels is more likely to produce broadly beneficial actions that better account for all parties’ needs and interests.

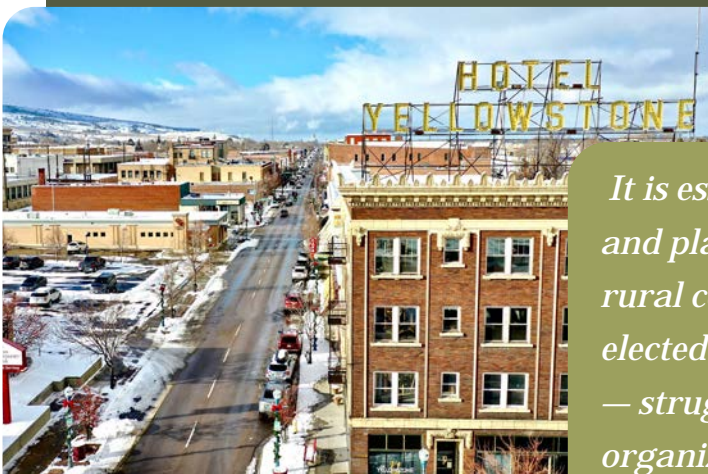


Photo by Mitchell Kmetz on Unsplash

*It is essential to have local voices in the policy and planning decision space. Too often however, rural communities — including residents, elected leaders, businesses and user groups — struggle to be heard among larger outdoor organizations and companies.*

## OUR VALUES

### 4 Rural communities require tools and resources to establish their own strategies for recreation and tourism management.

While recreation holds promise for the economic diversification of rural economies, it is not a silver bullet. Each community must decide how to manage recreation and its related tourism in a way that supports and sustains its own socio economic wellbeing. To achieve this, local governments and stakeholders need more than the marketing and promotion provided through tourism commissions -- they also need [resources and technical assistance](#) to develop comprehensive recreation plans that help manage and mitigate the impacts of visitors. Furthermore, communities need improved public resources and increased local capture of recreation spending to support on-the-ground work like tourism and outreach strategies, local business development, public infrastructure improvements, and expansions to public services used by locals and visitors alike. Investments in community planning, capacity, and infrastructure are crucial so that development of the recreation sector happens with communities, not to them.



Photo by Chris Henry

*Partnerships provide much-needed capacity and resources to help mitigate impacts and ensure recreation is sustainable for local residents and the environment.*

### 5 Partnerships are crucial for developing and sustainably managing recreation.

Public land management agencies and rural communities largely lack sufficient resources to effectively manage growing recreational demand and its many associated impacts. Partnerships provide much-needed capacity and resources to help mitigate impacts and ensure recreation is sustainable for local residents and the environment. While land management agencies have already developed strong partnership programs in many places, the magnitude of the need requires expanding those efforts. Partnerships, such as those between [private landowners, local governments, and federal land managers](#), are a promising means of implementing shared goals despite difficult funding environments.

**OUR VALUES**

- 6 Federal agencies need adequate tools and resources to manage recreation sustainably.** Although recreational demand continues to surge, federal investments in recreation staff, trails, campgrounds, interpretive education, parking lots, and other services have not. As both staffing and operational budgets decline, it is often local groups that step up to fill the void. Partners across the West [maintain campgrounds](#), [repair expansive trail systems](#), and [operate trailhead ambassador](#) programs through their own fundraising and innovation. But to continue this critical partnership work, local groups need fuller engagement from their federal counterparts, which requires more federal capacity in the form of staffing, conservation corps programs, and funds. Local stakeholders are in a position to be important advocates for their agency partners to be adequately resourced.
- 7 Recreation engages a broader audience in conservation and rural vitality.** Recreation is an important entry point for all people to engage in the management of their public lands. Outdoor experiences can build a powerful connection to place, cultivating new advocates for the policies and programs that support public lands stewardship and conservation. They can also foster understanding and appreciation for the rural communities whose amenities and services are so critical to visiting recreators. Additionally, interest in recreation issues can spur new stakeholders to join land management-focused collaborative efforts, helping diversify the range of perspectives and values represented within the group. Moving forward, communities, agencies and organizations working on land stewardship should consider how recreators can help support this work.

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Photo by Kerry Greene for Forest Service, Pacific Southwest region

## CONCLUSION

RVCC's network has voiced a need and an opportunity to improve recreation planning and management. As a coalition focused on promoting place-based solutions and community-based natural resource management, RVCC looks forward to contributing to and informing outdoor recreation planning, management, and policymaking conversations in a way that ensures the experiences of smaller rural communities are heard and represented.



Flathead National Forest in Montana. Photo by USDA Forest Service.

## ABOUT RVCC

RVCC envisions healthy landscapes and vibrant rural communities throughout the American West. We are committed to finding and promoting solutions through collaborative, place-based work that recognizes the inextricable link between the long-term health of the land and the well-being of rural communities.

## CONTACTS

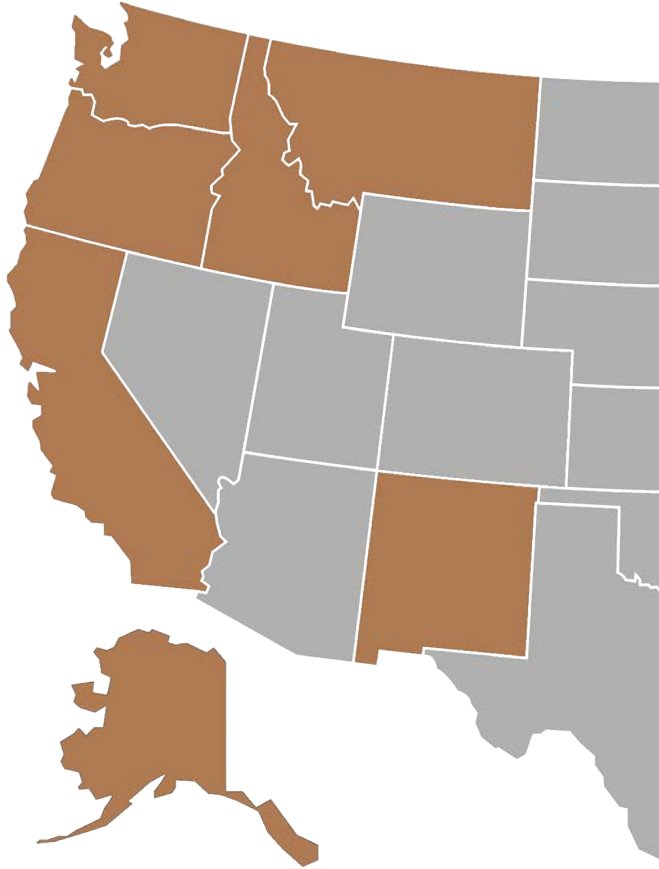
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**COALITION SIGN-ONS**



**ALASKA**

Sitka Conservation Society  
Living Systems Design LLC

**CALIFORNIA**

Watershed Research and Training Center\*  
ForEverGreen Forestry  
Mattole Restoration Council  
Calaveras Healthy Impacts Product Solutions (CHIPS)  
California Center For Rural Policy  
Sierra Institute for Community and Environment  
Sierra Business Council

**IDAHO**

Policy Analysis Group\*  
Salmon Valley Stewardship\*  
Framing Our Community, Inc.  
Idaho Adventures  
Middle Fork Lodge Rafting Company  
Idaho Depart. of Parks and Recreation  
Idaho Conservation League  
Lemhi Regional Land Trust

**MONTANA**

Heart of the Rockies\*  
Montana Watershed Coordination Council

**NEW MEXICO**

Forest Stewards Guild\*  
Cibola Trail Alliance  
Cottonwood Gulch Expeditions

**OREGON**

Blue Mountains Forest Partners\*  
Ecosystem Workforce Program\*  
Siuslaw Institute, Inc\*  
Sustainable Northwest\*  
Wallowa Resources\*  
McKenzie Watershed Stewardship Group  
Southern Willamette Forest Collaborative  
Salmonberry Trail Foundation  
Kathy Holston, Mayor, City of Oakridge

**WASHINGTON**

Mt. Adams Resource Stewards\*  
Glacier Peak Institute  
Town of Darrington

**REGIONAL/NATIONAL**

Southern Rockies Fire Science Network  
Western Environmental Law Center  
The Rural Assembly  
Fiber Artist Market LLC  
Coalitions and Collaboratives, Inc

\* Denotes RVCC Leadership Team member