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Rural Pragmatism

Lessons Learned From Colorado's North Fork Valley

By Jenny Rowland April 2018

Center for American Progress



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Introduction and summary

To enter Paonia, Colorado—a town with a population of 1,425—from the east, you have your choice of McClure Pass, elevation 8,755 feet, or Kebler Pass, elevation 10,007 feet, both of which weave through the aspen groves and conifer trees of the Gunnison National Forest.¹ About 10 miles from town, you pass the West Elk mine—the only remaining coal mine in the area. Tracking the North Fork of the Gunnison River, you make the final descent into the valley where, across the patchwork of public and private lands, you can spot vineyards, working farms, and ranches.

It's a fitting introduction to Colorado's North Fork Valley, where the people and the economy are closely intertwined with the region's natural resources. From the mountain streams that start in the 14,000-foot-high surrounding peaks,² to the oil, gas, and coal reserves that lie hundreds of feet below the surface, this corner of the Rocky Mountains is a living example of how the rural communities are shaped by the land and water and how, in turn, the land and water are shaped by the rural communities.

The North Fork is a valley in transition. For more than 100 years, its economy primarily centered around coal mining and, to a lesser extent, oil and gas development. Until as recently as 2013, the area had three active coal mines that collectively produced more than 15 million tons of coal and employed nearly 1,000 people.³ Today, mirroring national trends, two of the mines have closed, which has cost more than 700 mining jobs and lost tax income that supported schools and other public services.⁴

Instead of banking on the coal industry to bounce back or on oil and gas extraction to be a panacea, members of the community are coming together to set a path toward a more sustainable and diverse economy—one that also embraces tourism, agriculture, outdoor recreation, and clean energy.⁵ Notably, it's a path that remains driven by the North Fork's key resources—its people, land, and water—yet one that is not captive to the boom-and-bust cycle of fossil fuel extraction.

Transitioning to a more resilient economy is not without obstacles. Unstable energy markets and shifting policies for coal, oil, and gas; aging populations; and unpredictable demand for agricultural products all pose significant challenges to rural communities across the country. But the members of the self-reliant North Fork Valley continue to develop the tools they need to fulfill their vision for their community. In crafting solutions to the incredibly complex issues facing the region, the North Fork is defining its own brand of rural pragmatism.

Of course, the North Fork is not alone. It is just one of many rural communities across America that are taking control of their own future. These communities are not seeking handouts. They do not believe their better days are behind them. Rather, communities such as the North Fork have a vision for how small towns and rural counties can forge a prosperous and sustainable future that is rooted in their land, history, and way of life. By and large, the members of these communities are not—and do not want to be—reliant on Washington, D.C., or on multinational energy corporations for their livelihood or success.

As national and state leaders search for ways to strengthen rural economies, many of the answers lie within communities themselves. In August 2017, the Center for American Progress' Public Lands team visited the North Fork Valley to talk with farmers, business owners, former coal miners, activists, and residents.⁶ This report highlights some of the progressive and pragmatic solutions about which the team learned, with a focus on natural resources policy in three key areas: energy; land use planning; and agriculture.

The report then offers recommendations—some based on solutions being implemented in the North Fork—on how to encourage and spread these ideas to support rural communities across the nation. It also offers cautionary tales about how some of the Trump administration's policies are having immediate, negative impacts on the North Fork's connection to its surrounding public lands and its transition to a more diversified economy.

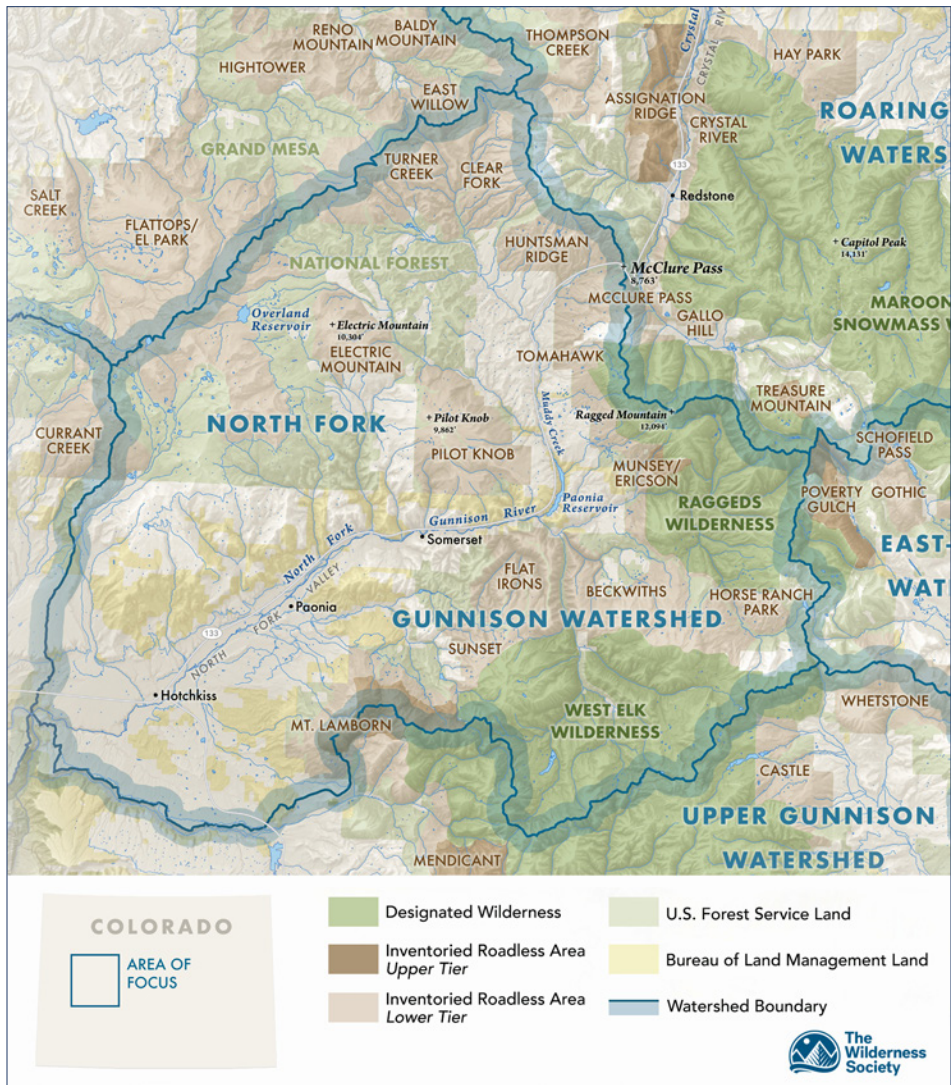
About the North Fork Valley

Located on the Western Slope of Colorado and encompassing the towns of Crawford, Hotchkiss, and Paonia, the North Fork Valley is in many ways representative of rural America: home to primarily white, older, and lower-income individuals and losing its population.⁷ Delta County, which houses all three towns, is 81 percent white, and the median household income is \$42,000—well below the national average. Residents over age 65 make up nearly a quarter of the county’s population, and the total population has decreased by 1.6 percent since 2010.⁸

Employment in rural areas, by and large, has recovered more slowly from the recession than it did in more urban areas.⁹ And like most rural counties in Colorado, the North Fork leans Republican. Delta County supported then-candidate Trump 7 to 3 in the 2016 presidential election, though after more than a year since the president took office, polls show that support declining.¹⁰

Like many rural communities in the West, the North Fork Valley is surrounded by and ingrained in public lands. Bordered by Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park to the south and by the Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area to the southwest, the region is a veritable layer cake of lands—with lower-elevation areas largely managed by the Bureau of Land Management, higher-elevation areas largely managed by the U.S. Forest Service, and national parks by the National Park Service. In fact, at least 55 percent of lands in the North Fork Valley are public lands.¹¹

In recognition of the challenges facing the North Fork, the tri-town community undertook an ambitious effort in 2014 to articulate its shared values and translate those into a path for economic development. With input from more than 1,300 residents—almost 20 percent of the area’s population—the North Fork’s “Vision 2020” group reveals a community that values its “rural and natural environment” above all else and that desires a future that preserves the valley’s open and accessible landscapes; water resources; abundant wildlife; small-town feel and sense of community; and historical farming and energy industries.¹²



The communities in the North Fork Valley have responded to the economic vacuum left by the national decline of the coal industry by making a concerted effort to diversify their economy and plan for a future that they want—one that does not rely on the boom-and-bust cycle of the extractive industry. While many of the complications associated with a dominant extractive industry—such as strong historical ties to the industry and threats to clean air and water—are still present in North Fork communities, the area is also an organic farming hotspot; wine and art hub; outdoor recreation destination; and home to one of the most recognized solar energy installation training companies in the world.

How policymakers can learn from the North Fork

The triumphs and setbacks of the North Fork's transition from a coal-dependent economy provide insight into what policies and conditions rural economies need to become more diverse and sustainable. Below are snapshots of the North Fork's transition as well as natural resource-related policy recommendations that forward-looking federal and state policymakers can support to export these lessons learned to other rural communities.

Ease reliance on the extractive energy industry

Since 2012, nearly 40,000 jobs in the coal industry have been cut nationally—and, according to most economists, are not coming back.¹³ Despite the Trump administration's recent approval of an expansion of the West Elk Mine (see text box), the North Fork community is proactively working toward a clean and affordable energy future. It is also looking beyond energy to expand existing sectors of its economy that are tied to public lands, including the outdoor recreation economy.

Clean energy

Nationally, the clean energy economy is a growing source of jobs for more than 4 million workers, with wind and solar energy jobs far outpacing those in the coal industry.¹⁴ The North Fork has successfully expanded its energy economy in two growing sectors: solar energy and coal mine methane.

Solar Energy International (SEI) is a big player in the North Fork's expansion into solar energy. SEI is a nonprofit educational organization with a mission to provide technical training and expertise in renewable energy to people, communities, and businesses worldwide, and is one of the most recognized solar training institutes in the country.¹⁵ Headquartered in Paonia, SEI's technical training school is one of the town's largest employers.

People from across the globe move to Paonia temporarily in order to take classes and get credentialed at SEI. The company uses the North Fork and its public lands, clean air, and water as selling points for employees as well as students, who can spend weeks to months at a time living in the North Fork Valley.¹⁶

SEI recently completed a three-year Solarize program aimed at training Delta County residents and farmers in solar installation; boosting solar energy in the local area; and creating more local jobs. As a result, nearly 60 new solar systems have been installed—and over \$1.5 million invested in solar power—in the area since 2015.¹⁷

With two closed or idled coal mines in the North Fork, methane capture has emerged as another opportunity to expand locally produced power. Coal mining releases methane gas trapped below the earth's surface—61 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent in 2015 alone.¹⁸ Traditional coal mining allows the powerful greenhouse gas and air pollutant to vent into the atmosphere, which it continues doing for years even after a mine closes. Emerging technologies, however, have the power to harvest the methane for use as a natural gas that otherwise would have been wasted.

A North Fork company called Vessels Coal Gas, Inc. runs a coal mine methane capture project at the now-closed Elk Creek mine. One of several pilot projects of its kind across the nation, the facility translates the methane gas into 3 megawatts of energy—enough to power 2,000 homes each year—which is then sold to Holy Cross Energy.¹⁹ In addition, Vessels flares, or burns off, whatever methane the facility does not use to generate electricity, which allows the company to claim renewable energy or carbon credits that can then be sold to companies aiming to lower their greenhouse gas emissions.²⁰

The Trump administration's threats to the North Fork's transition

Coal mining

In 2015, Arch Coal applied to expand the underground West Elk Mine into the Sunset Roadless Area—a rugged and pristine terrain near the North Fork that is cherished by hunters and hikers alike.²¹ The lease would cover more than 1,700 acres of the roadless area, build more than 6 miles of temporary roads, and drill nearly 50 exploratory and methane venting wells.²² While the lease expansion has the potential to maintain some local jobs in the coal industry, there is reason to be concerned about the project's potential impacts on other valley resources.

The proposal received immediate pushback from community members who opposed the expansion's potential impacts on the previously undisturbed roadless forest, the climate, and the area's wildlife and water supply. In December 2017, however, the Trump administration granted the expansion to Arch Coal. Within days, a local advocacy organization joined with four conservation groups to sue the Trump administration over the decision.²³

In addition to marring the national forest with noise, lights, roads, and well pads, the expansion would increase the methane footprint of the West Elk Mine, despite it already being the single largest source of industrial methane pollution in Colorado from 2013-2015.²⁴ Arch Coal also requested and was granted a royalty rate reduction from 8 percent to 5 percent, meaning less revenue for the state of Colorado that could help retrain miners and transition economies.²⁵ The request for the royalty rate reduction also indicates that the coal project itself is not economically viable without taxpayer subsidies.

Methane capture

In January 2017, then-President Barack Obama finalized a policy to encourage coal companies to capture methane released during mining.²⁶ The voluntary rule was implemented as part of former President Obama's climate action plan and directed the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to include a provision in new and existing coal leases allowing—but not requiring—companies to capture or destroy waste mine methane.²⁷ The Trump administration rescinded the rule in December 2017 as a “burden” to energy development, pointing

out in the rescission that the policy “will not create significant burden on operators because it provides for voluntary compliance based on mutual agreement between the operator and the BLM.”²⁸ Without this voluntary standard in place, forward-looking companies such as Vessels could have a harder time securing financing, developing pilot projects, and establishing a market for this emerging technology.

In response to local concerns regarding methane venting from the West Elk Mine expansion, Gunnison and Delta counties initiated the North Fork Coal Mine Methane Working Group that includes diverse stakeholders from the local, county, state, and federal levels. The working group's goal is to find additional ways of economically utilizing the wasted methane resource that simultaneously mitigates climate impacts and creates more local jobs.²⁹

Oil and gas development

The environmental impacts of oil and gas development on public lands pose a threat to the diversifying economy of the North Fork. Nearby drill rigs and oil wells could damage the growing agritourism—tourism surrounding visits to agricultural facilities including wineries, farms, ranches, gardens, or other agricultural businesses—and outdoor recreation economies, which rely on clean air and water, unobstructed viewsheds, and accessible public lands.

In 2017, Gunnison Energy proposed drilling 35 oil and gas wells just north of the town of Paonia. The project would affect approximately 35,000 acres, including 24,000 on national forests, and build up to 4.6 miles of new roads.³⁰ A report conducted by the Delta County-based Citizens for a Healthy Community finds that the proposal would result in a net economic loss for the county, likely damaging revenues for agritourism, outdoor recreation, and residential and agricultural property taxes due to a decline in property values.³¹

The project is currently under National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) review from the BLM and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; an environmental impact assessment is expected to be completed in the coming months.³²

Recommendations

Below are policy recommendations that encourage renewable energy generation and related job creation in rural areas. They include: fully funding the Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy (EERE); maintaining solar and wind energy financing and tax credits; expanding the capture and flaring of coal mine methane; expanding partnerships with rural electric cooperatives on solar and other renewables; and removing caps for rural electric cooperative energy generation.

Fully fund the Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy

EERE houses the SunShot Initiative, which has successfully provided funding and technical assistance for solar installations in the North Fork. As part of EERE's Solar In Your Community Challenge, Paonia was awarded seed money to install five 10-kilowatt solar systems on regional high schools that will be incorporated into classroom learning about solar energy and installation.³³ The SunShot Initiative also sponsors SolSmart designations, which recognize communities that have removed obstacles to solar development and provide them no-cost technical assistance. Delta County was awarded this designation in October 2017, along with cities such as New York and Chicago.³⁴ The North Fork is leveraging the designation to court solar developers and show that it is an attractive place to enter the market with fewer procedural obstacles and shorter permitting times.

President Donald Trump's fiscal year 2019 budget recommended cutting funding for EERE by more than two-thirds and significantly cutting staff.³⁵ His Department of Energy also recently removed the SunShot Initiative label from the EERE website.³⁶ Congress should maintain full funding for the office to continue providing opportunities for rural communities to expand their renewable energy capacity affordably.

Maintain solar and wind energy financing and tax credits

Both state and federal renewable financing and tax credit programs have helped fuel the growth of solar power in the North Fork. Delta County has adopted the Commercial Property Assessed Clean Energy (C-PACE) program, a Colorado state initiative that allows small businesses and farms to spread their financing for energy-efficient projects over 20 years and thus realize immediate savings.³⁷ The program recently financed its first agricultural project: an organic orchard in Hotchkiss, Colorado.³⁸

Furthermore, the federal Investment Tax Credit provides a 30 percent tax credit for residential and commercial solar systems and small wind projects; it has been a huge incentive for many of the North Fork's new solar projects. The credit is scheduled to begin phasing down in 2019 and is slated to end in 2022.³⁹ Congress should maintain and extend this tax incentive. For rural areas, it is especially important that these programs work well for small-scale systems as well as for large projects.

Expand the capture and flaring of coal mine methane

Sen. Michael Bennet's (D-CO) 2017 Thompson Divide Withdrawal and Protection Act includes a provision to address the waste of coal mine methane in the North Fork Valley by requiring the BLM to inventory the methane vented from coal mines; establish a leasing program; and allow for the development of on-site facilities to capture, convert, or utilize the resource.⁴⁰ Legislation such as this could be expanded upon for other communities to help encourage this promising technology. Federal and state rulemakings could also provide needed regulatory clarity related to methane utilization.

Expand partnerships with rural electric cooperatives on solar and other renewables

The Delta-Montrose Electric Association (DMEA), the cooperative that serves the North Fork Valley, is already experimenting with a community solar program and has partnered with SEI on the Solar in Schools program.⁴¹ Partnerships with rural electric co-ops help diversify the co-op's portfolio while also incentivizing rural communities to expand renewable generation.

Remove caps for rural electric cooperative energy generation

Many rural electric cooperatives can be subject to stringent agreements that limit local energy generation. In places such as the North Fork Valley, with large quantities of renewable local energy resources, generation caps can stunt the growth of cheaper, more reliable local energy generation. Over the past few years, DMEA has filed and won multiple petitions to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, but it has not yet been granted the right to supply locally more than 5 percent of its energy needs.⁴²

Outdoor recreation

The world-class outdoor recreation opportunities on the North Fork's vast system of nearby public lands offer another promising avenue for the valley to move away from its dependence on extractive industries. The national forests and other public lands offer hundreds of miles of hiking and biking trails; the Gunnison River is becoming well-known for river rafting and fishing; and Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park received more than 307,000 visitors last year, generating more than \$14.6 million for the local economy.⁴³

Nationally, the outdoor recreation economy generates \$887 billion every year—and it is growing.⁴⁴ While the North Fork is not aiming to replicate nearby Telluride, Colorado's resurgence from a bankrupt mining town to a tourist mecca, the community recognizes the critical role that healthy and intact public lands play in growing

and sustaining tourism and outdoor recreation economies as well as in making the North Fork Valley an attractive place to live and build businesses.⁴⁵ A recent study by Colorado Mesa University found that abundant public lands and access to recreational opportunities were key reasons why people live in and enjoy rural Colorado.⁴⁶

Recommendations

There are several opportunities for both federal and state polices to encourage and expand the outdoor recreation economy. They include fully funding the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) and expanding similar state-level programs and creating a state office of outdoor recreation.

Fully fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund and expand similar state-level programs

The LWCF is a highly successful bipartisan fund that uses a portion of revenue from offshore drilling to support conservation efforts around the country. Since the fund was established in 1964, Delta County has received more than \$300,000 for nine projects.⁴⁷ Most recently, the fund was used to add 2,494 acres to Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park for additional access to recreation opportunities.⁴⁸ The fund is set to expire on September 30, 2018, and while it is meant to acquire \$900 million in funds each year, Congress diverts much of this funding elsewhere.⁴⁹ Congress should reauthorize and fully fund the LWCF, which can help rural communities protect and preserve important open spaces—on both federal and state lands.

A dedicated state funding source for public lands that is immune to political whims is also considered a best practice for states hoping to court more jobs and dollars from the outdoor recreation economy.⁵⁰ The Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) program began under a constitutional amendment in 1992 and uses proceeds from the Colorado Lottery to preserve and expand public lands and outdoor recreation opportunities. The innovative program has already protected more than 1 million acres of Colorado land.⁵¹ Delta County was recently awarded GOCO funds to create a recreation master trails plan.⁵²

Create a state office of outdoor recreation

In 2013, Utah created the first Office of Outdoor Recreation. Colorado, Washington, and Oregon have since followed suit. By giving special policy attention to this growing industry, these states are recognizing outdoor recreation's importance to the economy and to the well-being of state residents.⁵³ Other states should build on the success of these offices by taking a similar step.

Setting a proactive vision and creating a seat at the table

With public lands playing an outsized role in the North Fork's identity and evolving economy, residents are working hard to integrate their vision into how public lands are managed. Identifying a plan and a seat at the table has forced the federal government—to varying degrees of success—to engage this western community in the decision-making processes.

The North Fork's proactive approach is exemplified by its work on the Uncompahgre Field Office Resource Management Plan (RMP). RMPs are a tool the BLM uses to create a blueprint for the future management and development of public lands. These plans, which can be in place for 20 years or more, have historically favored the extractive industry and defaulted to opening lands to leasing, placing little value on recreation and conservation.⁵⁴

Typically, the BLM will outline a plan with several alternatives and then tweak the proposals based on public comment before identifying a final plan. Rather than accept the status quo, constituents in the North Fork took the initiative to define what a balanced approach to BLM's multiple-use mandate meant to them. Over 18 months, a diverse group of North Fork stakeholders—including agricultural, tourism, realty, business, and conservation organizations—worked together to create the North Fork Alternative Plan (NFAP), a detailed set of recommendations for the BLM's consideration.⁵⁵

The NFAP lays out a local vision that rejects the false choice between conservation and economic growth. The balanced proposal would allow for consideration of regulated energy development on up to 25 percent of the area's federal lands and recommends additional protections for lands important to hunting, fishing, and other outdoor recreation.⁵⁶ In 2014, the BLM agreed to incorporate the NFAP in its planning considerations.

The BLM is expected to release the final RMP in spring 2019. However, the latest public draft of the BLM's preferred alternative would make 94.5 percent of oil and gas mineral acreage available to leasing, including virtually every acre in the North Fork.⁵⁷ With the Trump administration's singular focus on expanding extractive development, it seems unlikely that the voices of the North Fork Valley will be heard.

The North Fork Valley is also in the process of proactively creating a Recreation Master Trails Plan with funding from the state. The plan will inventory, assess, and map the region's recreation and public lands resources, including trails and river access points. It will also identify opportunities for creating new trails and connections.⁵⁸ This thoughtful, local-scale planning will help the North Fork make the most of its public lands and boost its growing recreation economy.

Recommendations

Because federal lands are central to many facets of rural economies and ways of life—including grazing, energy development, hunting and fishing, and outdoor recreation—a more inclusive and transparent planning process is a must. Federal and state governments should find ways to encourage and facilitate community participation in the planning process—moves that have the potential to reduce costly litigation and better align local, state, and federal goals. These moves could include: removing barriers to participating in land management planning processes; conducting oil and gas leasing in accordance with good planning practices; investing in county- and congressional-level economic data; and coordinating agency planning processes.

Remove barriers to participating in land management planning processes

Public meetings to solicit input on proposed plans must be well-advertised and set at convenient times and locations for residents.

Land management plans, meanwhile, should be required to include one local alternative for broader consideration should the community put one forward. This initiative should be paired with resources and technical assistance—such as the planning grant from the state of Colorado to develop the trails plan or funding for capacity building—to support communities that wish to develop an alternative.⁵⁹

Finally, Congress and land management agencies should restore the policies that allow western communities to have a voice in the planning process. Over the past year, Congress and the Trump administration have weakened or rescinded important avenues for participation, including the BLM's Planning 2.0 rule, Master Leasing Plans, and Regional Advisory Councils.⁶⁰

Conduct oil and gas leasing in accordance with good planning practices

In January 2018, the BLM released an oil and gas leasing reform memo that was intended to clear the way for expanded drilling. The memo eases requirements for environmental review, discourages lease deferrals, and makes public comment on oil and gas lease sales optional, among other new mandates.⁶¹ Any oil and gas leasing should continue to be deferred in regions currently undergoing planning processes—including the North Fork Valley—as leasing would undermine the integrity and public trust in the land management plans once completed.

Invest in county- and congressional-level economic data

Local and county-specific data is difficult to come by, but it can be invaluable in helping communities demonstrate the strength of nonextractive industries to their local economies. Federal and state governments should direct resources toward the creation of county, district, and other local data to better measure and reflect emerging rural economies such as agritourism, arts, and outdoor recreation.

In 2015, Washington state dedicated funding for an in-depth economic analysis of outdoor recreation that provided both county and congressional district-level data.⁶² These local data give Washington communities an important tool with which to weigh in on public lands planning decisions about the value of protected natural areas to the economy. Other states should explore similar analyses.

Coordinate agency planning processes

Like the North Fork, the West overall is often a patchwork of state and federal lands, with various agencies charged with their management. For the average citizen, it can be difficult to navigate the myriad and opaque planning processes. Federal agencies such as the BLM and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) should better align planning efforts to accommodate rural communities. A planning process that looks at the landscape as a whole and across jurisdictional boundaries can simplify the public input process. Co-location of BLM and USFS offices, watershed-level plans, or better coordination to reflect overlapping landscape objectives are all potential solutions.

Agriculture and small-business development

Agriculture and traditional farming have been staples in the North Fork since its settlement.⁶³ In recent decades, however, the community has leveraged this strength to attract tourism and develop small businesses that thrive off the valley's rich soil and clean air and water.

Today the North Fork Valley is home to Colorado's largest concentration of organic farms and produces everything from peaches to garlic, flowers, vegetables, eggs, honey, meat, hemp, hops, and more.⁶⁴ The North Fork has also embraced agritourism, with several successful wineries and cideries sprouting up across the valley. The area now hosts several festivals throughout the year—including the annual Colorado Hard Cider Festival for six years running, which draws a number of small businesses and tourists to the valley for the weekend.⁶⁵ Agricultural Census data from 2012 show that Delta County's 1,250 farms generated \$55.6 million in agriculture-related sales. In total, land and buildings used for agriculture in Delta County have an estimated market value of \$832.9 million.⁶⁶

Recommendations

Progressive state and federal policies concerning agriculture and agritourism can make it easier for community members to participate in one of rural America's most crucial industries. Recommendations include: measuring the economic impact of the agritourism economy; adopting state cottage food laws; creating a rural loan forgiveness program; and providing farm bill grants for smaller-scale, organic farms and agricultural conservation.

Measure the economic impact of the agritourism economy

Currently, there is no official record of the economic impact of agritourism through employment or spending nationally, statewide, or locally. Knowing the jobs that are created from this kind of tourism could help attract more businesses of this kind; influence decisions on investing in this economy; and show how it should fit in planning processes. An assessment could look similar to the Outdoor Recreation Jobs and Economic Impact (REC) Act, which was signed into law in 2016 and directed the U.S. Department of Commerce to count the outdoor recreation economy as part of the national gross domestic product.⁶⁷

Adopt state cottage food laws

Cottage food laws allow home chefs and bakers to run businesses out of their homes without licenses or permits and without needing to prove compliance with food safety regulations. To be protective of food safety, cottage food laws generally only apply to foods which tend not to be at risk of carrying foodborne illnesses.⁶⁸ In 2012, Colorado passed the Cottage Food Act, which allows many in the North Fork and beyond to participate in the value-added agricultural economy without needing the capital to open a full-fledged store. These laws vary from state to state and may have restrictions on the type of foods allowed for sale, specific labeling requirements, or an annual revenue cap.⁶⁹ States without cottage food laws should consider passing them, and those with laws on the books should evaluate them to ensure that they include provisions needed to foster local business.

Create a rural loan forgiveness program

With many young people choosing to live in cities in favor of more job opportunities and higher wages, shrinking rural areas are often faced with an older workforce and smaller tax bases.⁷⁰ A rural loan forgiveness program could encourage young people to stay and work in rural areas. This program could include loan forgiveness or no-interest loans for people working, opening a business, or farming in small towns and rural communities across the country. This could be modeled after programs that provide loan forgiveness and repayment for rural health and medical professionals that work in underserved areas for a designated number of years.⁷¹

Provide farm bill grants for smaller-scale, organic farms and agricultural conservation

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) provides massive support for large-scale agriculture, but resources for small farms are limited. Converting to organic agriculture can be costly and time-intensive, and current USDA efforts—namely the Organic Initiative within the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP)—do not have sufficient funding to meet demand. An expanded cost-share program or a revolving loan fund for organic and sustainable agriculture would allow landowners and businesses to share financial risk as they invest in environmentally friendly pursuits and would make organic agriculture more accessible for rural communities.⁷²

To foster local leadership in sustainable and organic farming and agricultural conservation, the conservation title of the next farm bill should be fully funded by Congress. Programs such as the Regional Conservation Partnership Program and Conservation Innovation Grants help landowners work with their communities on innovative protection of natural resources, while other programs, such as the EQIP and Conservation Stewardship Program, provide vital support for landowners to invest in and care for their land.⁷³

Furthermore, the nutrition title in the farm bill has a significant impact on rural communities. Programs should encourage the use and availability of fresh and local food through farm-to-school initiatives and ensure that the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and similar benefits can be used at local markets and farms. One model for this is Double Up Food Bucks, a program that began in Michigan and has spread to at least 22 other states, which doubles SNAP benefits at participating farmers' markets. The program helps to provide wider access to local fruits and vegetables for SNAP recipients and brings more customers to local farmers.⁷⁴

Rural solutions do not end at natural resource policy

No discussion of the North Fork, or rural America writ large, would be complete without a nod to the need for accessible, equitable, and affordable technology, education, and housing. While those issues are outside the scope of this particular report, they deserve brief mention as critical factors to help rural communities transition to a diverse, sustainable economic future.

Broadband

About 30 percent of Colorado—most of it in rural areas—does not have access to high-speed internet.⁷⁵ Many rural counties see broadband as the number one way to help diversify their economies and attract new people, businesses, and teleworkers. Delta County is currently finishing a \$125 million broadband project to bring high-speed internet to the region.⁷⁶

Education

Quality high school and adult education can be difficult to find in many rural areas. There is also the problem of schools losing students as young people and families leave rural areas for more urban areas. The North Fork is exploring creative solutions to this issue, including through adult educational resources with vocational relevance.⁷⁷

Affordable housing

A lack of affordable and workforce housing is another abundant problem in the North Fork and in many rural towns across the West. The emergence of short-term rentals such as Airbnb is eating into the supply of annual and long-term rental properties. And the abundance of public lands, which leave less room to build new housing developments, can actually exacerbate the housing crunch.⁷⁸ The town of Paonia was recently selected as part of the Space to Create Colorado program⁷⁹ to assist in developing affordable housing centered around creative arts. The town's plan is to expand the program beyond traditional artists to include culinary arts, distilleries, and other sectors that could complement the region's growing agritourism and farming economies.

Conclusion

Polls are beginning to show that President Trump's support is softening in rural communities across the nation.⁸⁰ This trend suggests that rural voters are realizing that President Trump's populist rhetoric is not matched by his policies and actions.⁸¹ Instead, as evidenced by the North Fork Valley's experience, President Trump is plowing a path that leaves many western communities without a voice and that benefits the coal, oil, and gas industries at the expense of other emerging economic sectors.

In light of—and in spite of—the national political picture, rural communities are continuing to forge their own paths to strengthen their economies and protect their ways of life. This rural pragmatism, encapsulated by the creative and bipartisan solutions emerging from the North Fork Valley, holds a key to how rural communities across the nation can begin to transition to a more sustainable and resilient economic future.

For rural communities such as the North Fork, where public lands are closely intertwined with the region's identity and economy, progressive natural resource policies are critical. Access to healthy, protected public lands; standards that support clean air and water; and policies that ensure that local priorities are reflected in land management are the building blocks that will enable the North Fork—and communities like it—to make the prudent transition from a fossil fuel-based economy to a diverse and sustainable economy.

About the author

Jenny Rowland is a senior policy analyst for Public Lands at the Center for American Progress.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Kate Kelly, Nicole Gentile, Mary Ellen Kustin, Ryan Richards, Matt Lee-Ashley, Meghan Miller, Tricia Woodcome, and Chester Hawkins for their contributions to this report. The author would also like to extend thanks to the members of the North Fork Valley community who shared their time and experience with our team.

Endnotes

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