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The Jobs Case for Conservation

Creating Opportunity Through
Stewardship of America's Public Lands

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Introduction and summary

Most Americans know our public lands as the places we go to get away from it all and enjoy ourselves in the outdoors. Whether it is strolling through a national park, hiking in the backcountry, skiing, hunting, fishing, wildlife watching, or going boating, these places provide immense enjoyment. Conservation, however, also has enormous economic value, supporting a specific economy in recreation, restoration, and renewable energy development, all of which support numerous jobs. What's more, these jobs in outdoor retail, the concessionaire business, outfitters and guides, and the construction industry to repair damaged lands and build renewable energy are frequently located in rural areas.

Americans are feeling the pinch of tough economic times and know that jobs are the key to supporting our families and lifestyles. They know what the August 2011 U.S. unemployment rate of 9.1 percent means to them, whether they have a job or not.¹ And rural America, the location of the majority of public lands, was the hardest hit by the Great Recession, with many rural counties losing more jobs than the national average in late 2009 and early 2010.² Rural America began to feel the effects of the recession early on, which was amplified by the fact that 90 percent of the poorest counties in the United States are rural.³ Luckily, public lands can provide a vast number of jobs that cannot be outsourced.

One of the biggest and best-studied categories of jobs linked to conservation of public lands is in recreation and tourism. Federal public lands, owned by all Americans, see hundreds of millions of visitors every year. People from all across the world come to enjoy unique landscapes and the recreation opportunities they offer. The Department of the Interior, the nation's largest land manager, administers 500 million acres of land that serve 414 million visitors annually.⁴ The Forest Service manages 193 million acres of land and sees on average 177 million visitors per year.⁵ These sightseers and outdoor enthusiasts, who spend significant amounts of money during their travels, help create jobs and stimulate local economies, which are frequently rural gateways to destinations like national parks.

Additional jobs can be found in renewable energy development, which is just beginning to take place on many federal lands across the West and in forests across the country as we move toward a clean energy economy and energy independence. Public lands should play a role in renewable energy development just as they have historically played a role in other forms of energy development. If solar, wind, and geothermal energy can be carried out in a way that takes environmental impacts into account, renewable energy can be compatible with land conservation. From manufacturing parts to installing projects in the ground, renewable energy has the potential to create hundreds of thousands of jobs.

Finally, restoration and sustainable management of forests and watersheds can also create jobs because they are hugely labor intensive. This type of employment is particularly important to rural communities, which have traditionally been dependent on the timber and forest products industry. Sustainable management of lands—such as combining timber harvesting and restoration objectives into one large project—can ensure rural communities stay resilient. Restoration is also extremely valuable because Americans reap additional benefits from healthy public lands where objectives such as clean drinking water and clean air have traditionally not been valued in economic terms.

In this report we identify 15 policies that have created or will create jobs by supporting conservation and restoration. No national studies on employment stimulated by restoration and sustainable forest management activities have been undertaken. Thus, one key recommendation in this report is that the government and independent analysts undertake a federal agencywide study on the jobs that have been and could be created from restoration and sustainable management of forests and watersheds.

It is important to note that this paper is not a comparison of the relative benefits of developing versus conserving public lands. Rather, we seek to highlight and draw attention to the often-overlooked conservation economy, made up of professions in the recreation, renewable energy, restoration, and sustainable land management industries. Also, the conservation of lands provides social and economic benefits that are additive to job creation. Clean air, clean water, crop pollination, and services that are provided by intact landscapes are valuable public health and social welfare advantages that should be kept in mind when valuing conservation and land protection.

If political leaders support and promote the policies identified in this report, more jobs will be created. But many of these policies are threatened from multiple angles, including budget cuts, corporate interests, and aggressive antigovernment rhetoric. It is important to resist attacks on policies that are already creating hundreds of thousands of jobs in addition to protecting the air we breathe and the water we drink.

For increased job creation from conservation on public lands, stronger leadership is specifically needed in five crucial categories:

- Recreation
- Rural economies and protected lands
- Renewable energy development
- Restoration of treasured landscapes
- Sustainable forest management

Together these policies stimulate a conservation economy that provides a strong and vital economic impact. In this paper we will look at all five of these job-creation categories in more detail, but briefly, here are our recommendations to make these jobs happen.

Recreation

Protect more habitats to encourage recreation—Hunting and fishing are both strong economic drivers, with 34 million people participating in the activities every year.⁶ Many people are drawn to public lands to view wildlife, something that is only possible with protected habitats. Communities surrounding Yellowstone National Park, for example, reap \$70 million every year due solely to the public's interest in viewing wolves.⁷ Prime fish and wildlife habitat should be protected in order to leverage the jobs and economic impacts that come from wildlife viewing, hunting, and fishing.

Codify the Roadless Rule—The 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule has successfully preserved millions of acres of high-quality land for recreation, water purification, and habitats. Roadless areas support 24,000 jobs every year but these places are under continued threat from industrial and political interests.⁸ Codifying the rule would make protection of roadless areas and associated jobs more permanent.



Fully fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund—Funded by offshore oil-and-gas drilling revenues, the LWCF leverages money for land acquisition, matching state and local grants, and conservation easements. Adding parcels to existing parks and refuges and assisting in the creation of new ones protects resources and generates jobs because there are more places for people to visit, recreate in, and spend money to stimulate surrounding communities. In 2010 alone 2,980 jobs were created just from the Department of the Interior’s land acquisition activities.⁹

USDA Forest Service Explorers water a newly planted tree at the Angeles National Forest near the Tujunga area of Los Angeles.

Rural economies and protected lands

Additional protected areas—Recreation on national parks, national forests, wildlife refuges, and other types of protected lands sustains more than half a million jobs every year. Recreation and tourism supported 388,000 jobs on Department of the Interior lands and 224,000 jobs were on national forests in 2010.¹⁰ Additional protected areas, including national parks, wilderness areas, and others, are critical ways

to grow the conservation economy, create even more jobs, and help rural communities thrive. Although there is enough space for all kinds of activities on federal lands, protected places are a finite commodity.

Expansion of the National Landscape Conservation System—The national monuments, wilderness areas, and other designations within the National Landscape Conservation System are some of the West’s best-hidden treasures. Recreation on Bureau of Land Management lands, much of which took place on parts of the National Landscape Conservation System, created almost 59,000 jobs in 2010. Expansion of this system will drive jobs and economic development to the mostly rural areas near the units managed as part of this system.

A strong budget for the National Park Service—The centennial celebration of the National Park Service is in 2016 and yet maintenance and land acquisition backlogs are very high. Spending in and around national parks stimulated 247,000 jobs in 2010.¹¹ Ensuring a strong budget for the park service will drive more visitors to these areas and provide additional jobs in upkeep as the parks prepare for their anniversary.

Renewable energy development

Certainty in financing—Time and time again renewable energy developers and investors cite the lack of a comprehensive renewable energy policy in this country as the number-one reason more projects are not getting built. Without policies like tax credit extensions, support for the Loan Guarantee Program, and a Clean Energy Deployment Administration, job creation in this sector won’t meet its potential.

State and national renewable electricity standards—Renewable electricity standards, which require utilities to generate a certain percentage of electricity from renewable resources by a specific date, are one of the best ways to create a market for renewable energy manufacturing, development, and operations. A national clean energy standard, as proposed by President Obama, would provide consistency across states and create jobs in the renewable energy industry. California’s aggressive renewable electricity standard has been predicted to create 500,000 jobs over time.

Guided renewable energy development—At this point, more than 15,000 jobs have been created from renewable energy projects built on public lands. In order

to ensure future sustainable growth, they must be done in a way that takes other values and uses of lands into account, such as habitats and recreation. The first step is for the Obama administration to create enduring renewable energy programs at the Department of the Interior and the Forest Service that will provide regulatory certainty for developers. Additionally, renewable energy development on public lands should be guided to places with the best resources and the least conflicts so projects can be built efficiently and cost effectively.

Restoration of treasured landscapes

Agency capacity to conduct restoration—The Forest Service and the Department of the Interior must have significant funds available to support and maintain the various types of restoration activities that occur on forests, bays and estuaries, rivers and lakes, and other locations. Careful attention to and support for specific restoration line items such as the Integrated Resource Restoration will ensure construction, engineering, contracting, and other restoration jobs can continue to be generated.

The Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program—This program identifies large-scale forest restoration projects and provides directed funds, assistance with stakeholder involvement, and collaborative planning efforts. The 10 projects funded in fiscal year 2010 have already created 1,550 direct and indirect jobs.¹²

Trails program—The Legacy Roads and Trails Remediation Initiative decommissions superfluous and unused roads and trails, and updates those that are the most heavily used. The program supported 1,530 direct and indirect jobs in 2010, most of which were related to construction and small business contracting.¹³

Sustainable forest management

Stewardship contracting—This program is designed to help communities with timber-based economies transition to sustainable management of forests and maintain the value of the timber products industry. Stewardship contracts are agreements with private companies and non-profit organizations that can combine sustainable timber practices with restoration during and after wood products are harvested. Timber, construction, and contracting jobs are created, while forest resources are managed as truly “renewable.” On just one project in Arizona, 319 direct and indirect jobs were created.¹⁴

Sustainable biomass and forest thinning—Woody biomass, especially through hazardous fuels reduction in forests, is a key way to create electricity and fuel that will help transition our country to a clean energy economy. Biomass must be harvested in a manner that provides a net benefit to the forest, especially when it is paired with hazardous fuels reduction via forest thinning. Jobs can be created from harvesting wood products, reducing fire, and maintaining combustion facilities.

Watershed management—Water is one of the most important resources that national forests provide, as 66 million people get clean drinking water from watersheds in the national forest system.¹⁵ Watershed-level management and restoration must be the focus of planning in the future in order to protect this precious resource and create jobs in restoration, recreation, and community-based projects.

With these policies in place, we will be able to support and maintain the hundreds of thousands of jobs that already exist, and create new ones. Protecting public lands can help our economy recover from its past troubles and provide employment in the rural places that need them the most.

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