

Using Mountain Ecosystem Services to Provide Sustainable Economic Growth and Job Development in Rural Communities

Colorado State University Project Funded by the USDA National Research Initiative

This goal of this project is to create sustainable job growth in Park and Lake Counties. Many of the jobs will relate to the region's environment and natural resources. In 2009, we will gather community input by focus group interview and surveys. We will also coordinate our efforts with the other economic development and environmental studies currently taking place in both counties. In 2010, we will conduct several field projects to determine the sustainability of potential projects in these regions. At this time, we will begin to implement the job growth initiatives.

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Study Background: We are asking for your participation in a 3-year study of sustainable economic development in Lake and Park Counties. Rural Park and Lake Counties face unique challenges in achieving sustainable economic development. In the past, these communities have relied on traditional mineral and energy extraction to drive economic prosperity, which is often followed by times of "economic down-turn". In recent years, opportunities have emerged for sustainable mountain recreation, agri-tourism (chiefly hunting, fishing, and historic ranch visits), and heritage tourism. There is also residential development pressure on these communities, particularly from part-time residents and those with a desire to commute to the Denver-metro area. Thus, in order to drive a sustainable economy, the "newer" economic focus must be balanced with the traditional economic activity. All of this is driven by the vision and preferences of community members.

Local residents and community leaders have shown a great deal of enthusiasm and commitment to utilizing the areas resources in a sustainable manner. There have been several successful examples of this, including the recent designation of South Park as a "National Heritage Area". We believe that local momentum significantly contributed to the funding of this grant, by generating attention and support of policy makers in Washington D.C. We are fortunate for the opportunity to study and contribute to sustainable economic development in Park and Lake Counties.

Study Process: During the week of May 18, 2009, we will conduct at least two discussion groups (one in Park County, and one in Lake County) to conduct a formal evaluation of community stakeholder preferences. Your participation is strictly voluntary.

However, as a leader of the community, your opinion is important to us. We ask that you to attend one of these meetings so that we can understand your preferences about job creation and job growth. In Fall 2009 we will send out surveys to several thousand residents of both communities to assess their preferences on the trade-offs between different economic development activities in each of their respective communities, with a specific focus about how to manage the regions' natural, cultural, and environmental endowments. Results from our study will enable us to work with local community leaders to communicate and implement the communities' visions. We will also work with community and state leaders on local job creation initiatives to balance and support the communities' preferences for economic development and resource sustainability.

Anticipated Outcomes:

- 1) Scientific study and systematic determination of community stakeholder preferences in Park and Lake Counties for economic development, natural resource and environmental management, and sustainable job creation.
- 2) Coordination of study results with the current and future regional initiatives of policy makers to develop strategic community plans that are inclusive, transparent, and research-based.
- 3) Economic development that is balanced with maintaining the community's sense of place and cultural identity.
- 4) Sustainable job growth and development, with particular concentration on job creation and grant writing in 2010 and 2011.

Research Team: The study is led by Colorado State University professor Dr. Catherine Keske, a former Park County resident. The research team also consists of local collaborators Mr. Gary Nichols (Park County Director of Recreation and Tourism) and Ms. Cara Doyle (Alma-based Mosquito Range Heritage Initiative), with researchers Dr. John Loomis (CSU) and Dr. Steve Smutko (North Carolina State University). This 3-year study was funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. For additional information or questions, please feel free to contact Dr. Keske at Catherine. Keske@colostate.edu