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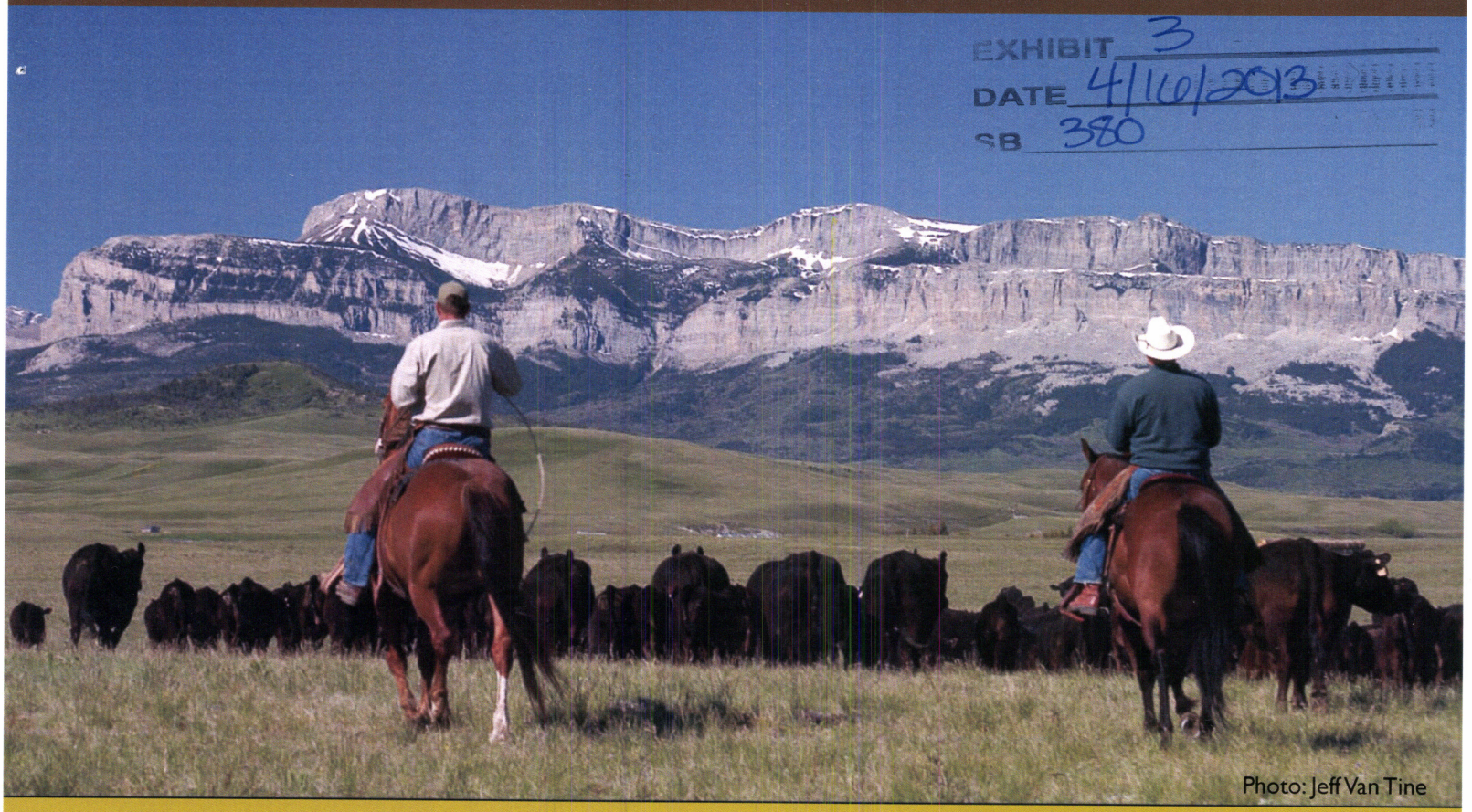


Photo: Jeff Van Tine

Working Together for the Front

How Working and Wild Lands Contribute to the Region's Steady Economic Performance

Natural Assets are Economic Assets

Communities along the Rocky Mountain Front have stayed true to their agricultural roots while performing well economically. On the Front, large ranches and farms give way to mountain vistas and public lands, forming an unbroken landscape that supports abundant wildlife, unparalleled opportunities for hunting and outdoor recreation, and a vibrant rural heritage. This landscape and all it offers are important economic assets, the value of which goes beyond agricultural production and visitor spending. In today's economy, people are increasingly able to choose where they live, and research suggests that areas like the Front can benefit from their natural appeal to business owners, workers, investors, and retirees.

Four Factors that Link the Front's Economic Success to the Land

Economic performance and future prospects for the Front's small towns and larger cities are tied to the land.

Agriculture

Agriculture is the main land use, especially adjacent to the public lands of the Front. Over the last four decades, farm employment shrank while the rest of the economy grew. Still, agriculture supports many smaller communities. In Cascade and Lewis and Clark counties, farming and ranching account for about one in fifty jobs, and one in five jobs in Teton County.

Travel and Tourism

One in five private-sector jobs in the region is related to travel and tourism. Between 1998 and 2009, travel and tourism accounted for a quarter of all new jobs in the private sector. Many visitors pass through the Front on their way to or from Glacier National Park. Others come to hunt, fish, hike, watch birds, and simply enjoy the area's natural beauty and small towns. Great Falls and, to a lesser extent, Helena, serve as gateways to the Front's small towns and wild areas.

Outdoor Recreation

Hunting, fishing, and other outdoor recreation are important to residents and visitors alike, and generate significant economic activity. Hundreds of thousands of visitors enjoy outdoor activities on the Front's national forests, spending about $75 daily per person. Across the

Employment on the Front

The biggest employers in Front communities are government, education, health care, and trade. In the following breakdown, each human figure represents one percent of the region's jobs in 2010.

Government

Education & health services

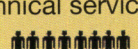
Wholesale & retail trade

Leisure & hospitality

Financial & real estate

Manufacturing & construction

Professional, business, information & technical services



Administrative support & waste services

Transportation & utilities

Farm

Forestry, fishing & mining

"Most of our guests are traveling to Glacier or Yellowstone national parks. On the way, the Front has everything to draw them in—wildlife, horseback tours, and the kind of wild country they may never have seen. People look to innkeepers to direct them to restaurants, historical tours, recreation, and the most interesting and scenic way to get where they are going."

Liane Jacques

Liane manages the Barrister Bed and Breakfast in Helena, an inn that her brother, Nick Jacques, has owned for 22 years. Their family has been in Helena for six generations.

Slow, Steady, Long-term Growth Positions the Rocky Mountain Front for the Future

Over the last 40 years, the Rocky Mountain Front region—represented here by Cascade, Lewis and Clark, and Teton counties—has shown remarkable economic resilience and stability. This steadiness helped the region weather the most recent recession better than many other parts of Montana and the West. In 2011, the Front's unemployment rate of 5.7 percent beat Montana's by a fifth and the U.S. average by a third (7.2 and 8.9 percent, respectively). And from 2000 to 2010, average earnings per job grew 15 percent on the Front, a third faster than the state.

This steadiness rests on the foundation of a relatively diverse services economy. Over the last decade, the private sectors that added jobs most quickly are all service industries that pay relatively well: health care and social assistance; professional and technical services; and finance and insurance. Also key to the region's steady growth are an above-average share of government employment and growth in non-labor income from sources such as retirement and investments.

From small towns such as Augusta and Choteau to the larger cities of Great Falls and Helena, the Front's communities face their share of challenges and uncertainties. But they also share advantages that help position them for future growth. The spectacular public lands of the Rocky Mountain Front give the region a natural competitive advantage—dramatic vistas where mountains meet wide open plains, plentiful wildlife, and outdoor recreation that appeals to locals and visitors alike. Along with economic stability, friendly communities, and deep agricultural roots, these natural assets give the Front's communities leverage to attract people, businesses, and investment while sustaining the way of life that long-time residents enjoy.

"The Rocky Mountain Front has hunting, fishing, and agriculture. I love knowing that people come to the Front from all across the globe for the landscape, hunting, pack trips, and guest ranches. For me, living here is all about values. This is a great place to raise kids."

Lisa Flowers

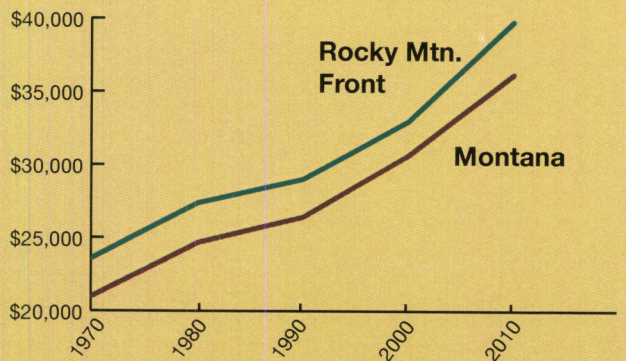
Lisa and her family own a farm north of Choteau. Lisa works for the McLaughlin Research Institute, a biomedical research center based in Great Falls.

Signs of Success

The Front's population has not boomed, but its slow, steady economic growth has kept up with—and even surpassed—the state on key measures of well-being.

- **Job Growth** Relative to population growth, job growth along the Front outpaced Montana (1970-2010).
- **Per-Capita Income** At $39,749, per-capita income on the Front is ten percent higher than the state average. Per-capita income includes wages as well as non-labor income sources such as retirement and investments.
- **Earnings per Job** Average earnings per job on the Front are $44,527, 15 percent higher than in Montana. (Although earnings per job are lower in Teton County, its per-capita income is on par with the Front's average.)

Per-capita income growth, 1970-2010



United States, job earnings in rural recreation counties such as Teton County are $2,000 more per worker than other rural counties.

During the last several years, while many industries suffered, America's outdoor recreation industry grew roughly five percent per year. Along the Front, hunters' expenditures have been relatively stable, even in the midst of the recession. Four out of five non-resident hunters in Montana come for an outfitted trip, spending nearly $120 million each year.

A Changing Economy

In the last two decades, 94 percent of new jobs in the West were service-related, with some of the fastest growth happening in high- and medium-wage jobs such as professional, technical, and health services. This trend is mirrored in the Front's communities, where, at the same time, income from retirement, investments, and other non-labor sources has grown rapidly in importance. In 2010, these sources accounted for nearly two of every five dollars of personal income.

"The ripple effects of outfitting are often overlooked. Our customers spend money on last-minute provisions, gas, meals, rental cars, taxidermy, and gifts. Outfitters buy feed, tack, camping supplies, food, and veterinary services. We employ people, and offer year-round ways for visitors to enjoy Montana's outdoors."

Pat Tabor

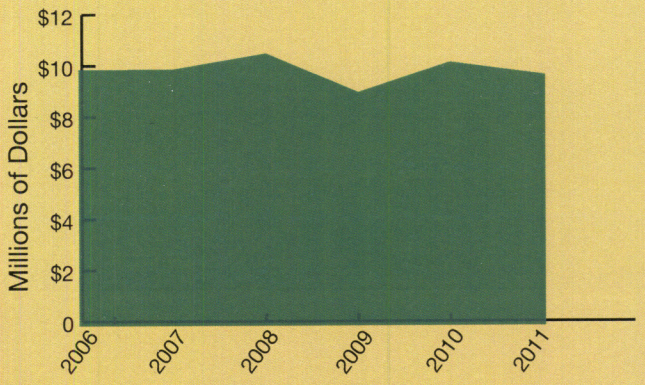
Pat is a full-time outfitter who owns Swan Mountain Outfitters. Pat is president of the Professional Wilderness Outfitters Association and president-elect of the Montana Outfitters and Guides Association.

Recession-Resistant: Front Hunters' Spending Consistent through Downturn

Across the United States, the outdoor recreation industry supports more than six million jobs. Between 2005 and 2011, while many other sectors struggled, outdoor recreation grew an average of five percent each year.

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks data suggest that hunting has been a relatively stable source of economic activity on the Front, despite rough times.

Hunters' expenditures, 2006-2011



According to Pat Tabor of the Montana Outfitters and Guides Association, about two dozen businesses provide outfitting and guide services along the Rocky Mountain Front. Guest ranching is common along the Front, where private ranches abut public lands and offer easy access for hunting, fishing, and other forms of outdoor recreation.

Outfitters on the Front offer year-round services ranging from winter snowmobiling and cross-country skiing, to spring bear and turkey hunts, to fishing, backpacking, and big game hunting in the summer and fall.

Preparing the Front for the Future

While the Front's communities have a number of economic strengths and assets, there is also cause for concern. Population growth has been slow and uneven. While that has helped the region maintain its character, more in-migration and stemming the loss of young people would help spark greater economic vitality. The once-large agriculture sector is stagnant, and future military employment remains in doubt. In the face of these challenges, how Front communities capitalize on the area's natural assets and human resources will be central to the region's future prosperity.

Leveraging Strengths to Sustain Economic Stability and Growth

The economy of the Front has not undergone the dramatic shifts much of the West has seen in the past several decades, though changes are evident. People moving into the area are not yet a significant source of population growth, but the Front's communities are positioned to leverage spectacular public lands, recreation, and quality of life to attract business owners, employees, and retirees—and to keep the area attractive for long-time residents.

Other factors such as economic stability, air service connections to larger markets, a relatively well educated workforce, and high-quality health care will also be important. Better promotion of the area's features and high quality of life to visitors could help capture more permanent residents, investors, and local business owners, fueling economic growth.

Advances such as recent improvements to air service will help Helena and Great Falls function better as gateways while serving local business needs. Improving education and other opportunities for young people and ensuring that the aging population has health care and other services will help the region retain both younger and older residents.

Protecting the Front's public lands will help sustain—and perhaps expand—the considerable economic footprint of tourism and outdoor recreation. There is an economic upside to efforts like the Rocky Mountain Front Heritage Act, which includes noxious weed management provisions and protective public lands designations (see box below for more detail).

Economic stability and intact landscapes give the Front a unique opportunity to maintain things the way they are, and leverage that way of life into a healthy economic future.

"Easy access to outdoor recreation and public lands is a huge benefit for local businesses—and a big part of attracting talented, skilled people. Lifestyle is key, and in Great Falls, it is absolutely enhanced by the Front. My husband and I thought we would retire to the Gallatin River area, but now we have no intention of leaving."

Beth McFadden

Beth and her husband have lived in Great Falls for 18 years. Beth is vice president of contact center operations for N.E.W. Customer Services Companies, a provider of extended warranties and other services for electronics retailers.

The Rocky Mountain Front Heritage Act

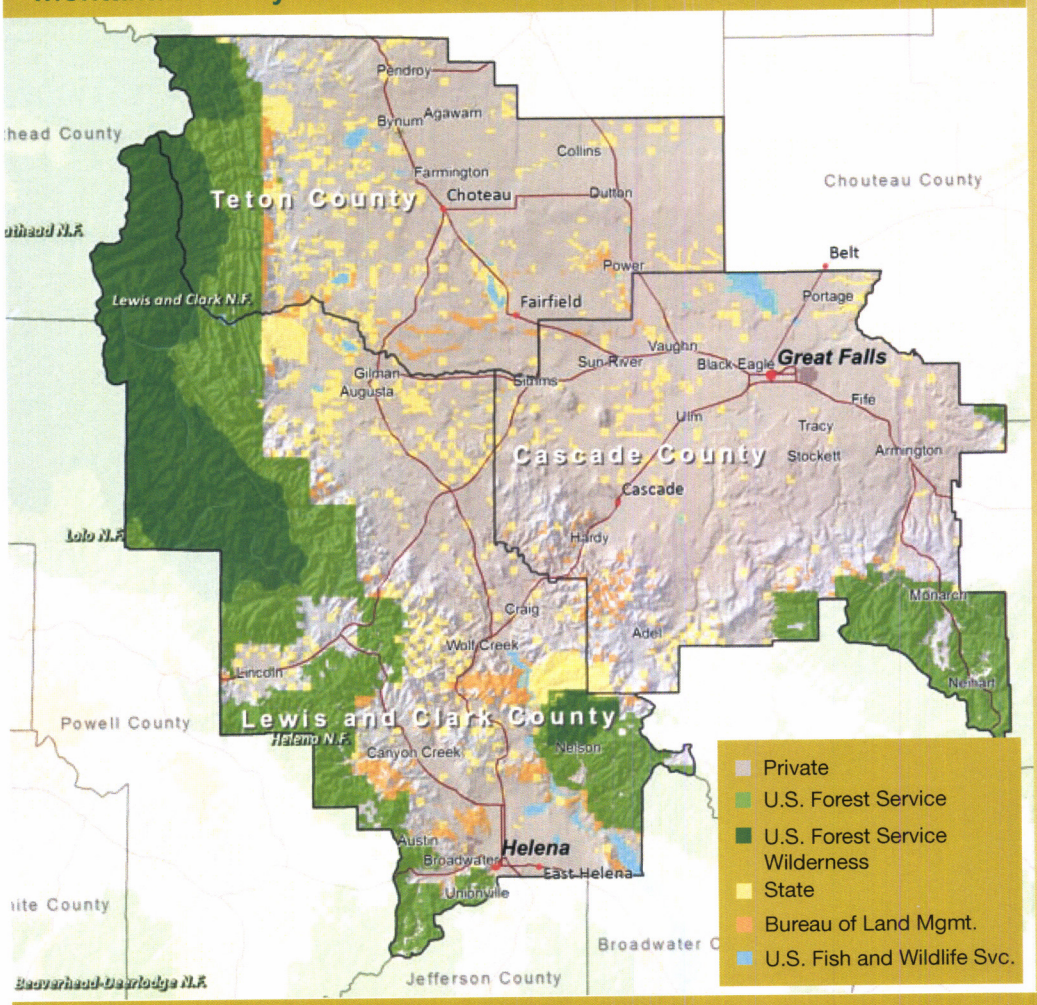
The Rocky Mountain Front Heritage Act, introduced by Senator Max Baucus, aims to protect the Front's public lands managed by the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management, while maintaining traditional uses. Private property rights and existing energy development would not be impeded.

The Heritage Act:

- Promotes cost-effective management on public lands to protect prime farmland, range lands, and wildlife habitat from the spread of noxious weeds;
- Adds 67,000 acres of roadless lands to the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex and places 208,000 acres into a unique, locally developed Conservation Management Area designation;
- Ensures that public access, grazing, outfitting, timber management, hunting, fishing, and recreational opportunities remain much as they are today.

Learn more about the Heritage Act at www.savethefront.org/why_heritage.html.

A Three-County Economic Analysis: Montana's Rocky Mountain Front



The Rocky Mountain Front Economy: Stable, Resilient, and Well Positioned

In 2012, Headwaters Economics released a report about the economy of the Rocky Mountain Front. Three counties—Cascade, Lewis and Clark, and Teton—represented the larger Front region.

Key findings:

- During the last 40 years, economic growth along the Rocky Mountain Front has been slow, steady, and stable.
- The Front weathered the recent recession well, compared to many other parts of Montana and the West.
- Travel, tourism, and outdoor recreation are reliable parts of the Front's economy.
- The Front's working landscapes and spectacular public lands are important assets, giving the region a competitive economic advantage.
- Although the Front has not experienced dramatic growth, the region is well positioned to leverage its economic advantages to attract new business owners, employees, and retirees.

Download the Headwaters Economics report at *headwaterseconomics.org/land/reports/montanas-rocky-mountain-front/*.

COALITION TO PROTECT THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN FRONT

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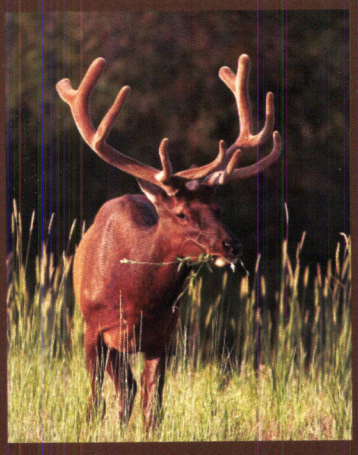
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