

Calaveras is part of study linking fed lands to growth

By Tim Marema / The Daily Yonder

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Western rural counties with the highest proportion of federally owned land tend to have faster growth than areas with the least amount of federal land, according to a study that included data from Calaveras County.

The study looked at Calaveras and every other nonmetropolitan county in the 11 contiguous states from the Rockies to the west. It found that rural counties with the highest percentage of federal land averaged quicker expansion in population, jobs and income than other western counties.

In Calaveras County, about 18 percent of the land - 118,037 acres – is owned by the federal government. Across the rural West, 41 percent of the land is federally owned.

Calaveras County ranked 198th out of the 276 counties in the study in the proportion of its land area that is federally owned.

Calaveras County's economic performance was positive over the period of the study.

The county's population grew more than threefold, from 13,658 in 1970 to an estimated 44,624 residents in 2014.

During the same period, jobs in Calaveras County increased more than threefold, from 4,824 to 16,814.

Per capita income increased by 77 percent, from \$24,303 to \$43,099 in 2014 dollars.

By comparison, the average county in the study saw its population grow by 79 percent. Average employment increased by more than 150 percent, and average per capita income climbed by about 80 percent.

Megan Lawson, the lead researcher for the study, said her research does not prove that federal lands cause economic growth. But it does contradict claims that federal land is a detriment to the local economy, she said.

"We don't see any evidence that federal lands are impeding local growth," said Lawson, an economist at Headwaters Economics, the independent, non-partisan organization based in Montana that conducted the study.

Another economist, Paul Jakus, a professor of applied economics at Utah State University, said he thinks the study reveals more about historic land-use patterns than the influence of federal land on local economies. Counties with less federal land are more likely to depend on agriculture, he said.

“What the study is telling me is that rural counties with large private land holdings are relying on production agriculture, and those counties are growing more slowly than other parts of the West,” he said.

But Jakus did say his own research concurs with Lawson’s findings that counties with more federal land are growing more quickly than other counties on average. “The study suggests that the assertion federal land ownership harms rural communities unambiguously is not as clear cut as some claim,” he said. “The situation is much more nuanced.”

Lawson said the role of federal lands in local growth has shifted in the past 40 years. Instead of merely providing commodities like timber and oil, the natural amenities and recreational uses of federal lands help attract entrepreneurs and skilled service workers to rural areas, she said.

“Federal lands are an asset,” Lawson said. “It’s not just about natural resource extraction or just recreation. There can be a mix of uses, and diverse economies tend to do better.”

The study examined rural counties in Arizona, California, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wyoming. It ranked 276 rural counties in those states according to the percentage of land owned by the federal government. The study compared the top quarter of the counties with the biggest proportion of federal land to the bottom quarter of counties with the smallest proportion of land.

The study found a substantial difference in the growth of population, employment and personal income from 1970 to 2014 between top and bottom groups. Growth in per capita income was less pronounced, suggesting that economic growth was tied to population gain, Lawson said.

The complete study is available at <http://headwaterseconomics.org/>.

Tim Marema is editor of Daily Yonder.com, a national online news platform that covers rural issues. The Daily Yonder is published by the Center for Rural Strategies