

A hidden gem in the Organs

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Land and resource management goes hand in hand with economic development, according to a group of panelists who visited from across the West to speak at the “Wilderness Economics” forum Saturday, Dec. 5, at the New Mexico Farm & Ranch Heritage Museum.

More than 150 business persons, members of the community and area legislators came out to learn about capitalizing on the economic opportunity of the Organ Mountains Desert Peaks-Wilderness Act, legislation introduced to Congress in September by U.S. Sens. Tom Udall and Jeff Bingaman aimed at protecting more than 350,000 acres of wilderness from development in Doña Ana and Luna counties.

The forum, sponsored by the Hispano Chamber of Commerce de Las Cruces, the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance and the High Tech Consortium of Southern New Mexico, featured a variety of speakers, including representatives from the Headwaters Economic Institute, Jackson Hole Chamber of Commerce, New Mexico Wildlife Federation, Sierra Business Council and the New Mexico Department of Tourism, among others.

“The Organ Mountains identify us as a community in southern New Mexico,” said John Muñoz, Hispano Chamber board member. “When entrepreneurs and environmentalists can get together to collaborate on creating jobs, that’s a wonderful thing.”

An evolving role

Ben Alexander, associate director of the Headwaters Economic Institute, a nonprofit research group based in Bozeman, Mont., said historically public lands have been tied to economy prosperity.

“When we think about the economic history of public lands we think of food, shelter, forage and clothing for our pioneers and settlers,” he said. “And subsequently, those lands have generated a tremendous amount of wealth for our communities today.” He said commodity-based uses directly tied to public lands have been diminishing in importance for years, and dramatically so in the last several decades, accounting for less than 10 percent of total personal income in the rural West. One of the best ways to make the lands profitable, he said, is to protect them so that they can provide the scenery, weather, amenities and recreation to make Las Cruces an “attractive” place to do business.

It's hard to imagine a plume of black smoke wrapped around the peaks of the Organs or toxic sludge dripping from the canyons in the Robledos, but protection is not just about keeping developers at bay, he said, but about keeping wilderness areas pristine to attract newcomers.

"The money is in people bringing businesses with them or starting businesses in the place they choose to live," he said. "Having amenities is important to economic development in the West."

Alexander continued by saying that according to a survey of population growth and total income in the rural West using economic data from the past 30 years, communities that are adjacent to public lands significantly outperform those without.

"It's not prohibiting uses on public lands that cuts out economic opportunity," he said. "We now find that eroding national character erodes our competitive position."

Enchantment now comes in green

Jennifer Hobson, deputy cabinet secretary of the New Mexico Department of Tourism, told attendees that Doña Ana and Luna counties could soon benefit from a state-developed program to bring more "eco-tourists" to the state, those looking to spend "big bucks."

"This (project) has garnered support from a great number of industry leaders as well as legislators and the governor," she said. "We are the only new initiative in the 2009 legislative session that received funding. It will put us on the map as one of the top eco-tourism destinations in the world."

The initiative is based on eco-tourism, a nature-based form of specialty travel defined as responsible tourism to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well being of local communities, she said.

Specifically, Hobson said as part of the project, the state will set up a series of tented camps across New Mexico in key wilderness areas for visitors to follow and explore.

"Think of it as a domestic safari experience," she said. "We have a great opportunity to capitalize on this trend and travel in the tourism industry."

She said southern New Mexico's cultural heritage, history and scenic beauty is a prime place to set up a series **Sierra Business Council President Steve Firsch tells attendees about the economic benefits of public lands.**

of camps, hopefully attracting thousands to the area each year.

"People don't want the sand and sun experience anymore," she said. "When they travel, they want to have an authentic experience."

The state's tourism department, in partnership with the Santa Fe-based company Eco-New Mexico, will work throughout 2010 to make the camps a reality and market them across the country and world, she said.

It's OK to brag

Kim O'Donohue, executive director of the Jackson Hole Chamber of Commerce in Wyoming, offered the public a variety of ways to market Las Cruces to outdoor buffs.

"First, it's important that you decide your community character. Really think about what kind of character you want to protect in terms of your community, people, economy and your environment," he said.

Jackson Hole, which sits in a 6,000-foot altitude valley encompassed by the Teton Mountains and boasts 97 percent of public land within its county, relies heavily on the outdoor recreation industry and has built a very strong economy by banking on its natural assets, O'Donohue said.

"Without these lands our community would not have the economy it does now," he said.

Much of the tourist attention comes from self-promotion and marketing, he added.

"Brag, be out there with your message," he said. "Anything that elicits a feeling, there is power to that place. What is the power of your place? It's not just the natural environment, but your community. That has been central in organizing a brand for us."

Tying it all together

Steve Firsch, president of the Sierra Business Council, who represents more than 800 businesses in an economically troubled inner-mountain region of the Sierra Nevada in California, said stepping away from commodity-based wilderness economics and turning to sustainable business practices has helped his community weather the latest recession.

"The bottom line is, where are the jobs? If the employment in the region is based solely on low-wage jobs, then we're not going to be able to make the case that land and resource restoration should be an economic priority," he said. "Focus on cultivating innovation, spurring entrepreneurship, supporting the social fabric of the community and preserving a sense of place."

He said success cannot be attained unless economic, social and community capital work to support each other.

"You need to be inclusive, respectful, you need to look beyond your own point of view," he said. "These things are critical to success."

Entrepreneurship and innovation related to public land use will attract new business, he said.

Some forms of generating new revenue or creating new industry in the area, he said, are to focus on existing land use such as crop production and livestock management.

“Crops are a big piece of the value of your land, you want to keep that going,” he said. “Another opportunity might be biomass utilization, using waste products from crop production like we use timber in our region for biomass energy. Or it might be livestock production, and tying that to creating a market of local food production.”

He said creating a local food network could build a job market to support it.

“Then there’s renewable energy production, crop subsidies and recreational uses,” he said. “It’s about looking at land management and tying economic opportunity and benefit at every level of the planning stage.”

Among the legislators in attendance Saturday were state Rep. Jeff Steinborn, state Sen. Steve Fischmann and City Councillors Nathan Small and Gill Sorg. Udall and Bingaman, who were scheduled to speak at the forum, were unable to attend and instead sent a televised message voicing their support for the forum’s sponsors and for the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks Wilderness Act.