

Crown of the Continent and Greater Yellowstone Initiative

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UM 2020 Public Lands Survey Results

Support for public lands and outdoor businesses strong amidst COVID-19 pandemic

(MISSOULA) - A new survey from the University of Montana shows voters consider public lands and outdoor businesses to be more critical than ever to Montana's economy and quality of life.

[The 2020 Voter Survey on Public Lands](#) was commissioned by UM's Crown of the Continent and Greater Yellowstone Initiative (COCGYI). The biannual survey is intended to understand what voters think about public land issues and has tracked opinions since 2014.

UM initiative director Rick Graetz said this year's results are unique because voters were surveyed in late-March amidst growing awareness of the COVID-19 outbreak.

"COVID-19 was front and center in the news when we surveyed, so I was surprised to see support for public lands and conservation issues remain steady and even grow in some cases," Graetz said. "I think it shows Montanans view our public lands and outdoors as a refuge, especially in times of national crisis, and they especially acknowledge the value of outdoor businesses when the economy is suffering."

As in past years, the 2020 poll was conducted by Republican pollster Lori Weigel of New Bridge Strategy and Democratic pollster Dave Metz of Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates.

The bipartisan team of pollsters said the big takeaway in 2020 is more voters than ever consider public lands to be a boost for Montana's economy. Acknowledgment of the economic contribution of public lands grew by 7% since it was last asked on the 2018 survey.

It's part of a longer-term trend, Weigel said.

"If you look at all the issues we have tracked since 2014, the perception that public lands help Montana's economy has seen the biggest bump over the years," she said. "The trend has played out in other western states, but it's particularly pronounced in Montana."

The pollsters also said this awareness translates into support for related state policy. For example, 86% of voters say they are in favor of Montana's Office of Outdoor Recreation work to support the outdoor recreation economy.

As in past years, the survey also found cross-party support for a variety of policy debates and public land proposals that would require congressional approval. These include:

- 75 percent of voters want to increase or maintain protections for the seven national forest Wilderness Study Areas in Montana.
- 77 percent of voters support a proposal to protect one such Wilderness Study Area in the Gallatin Range near Yellowstone National Park.
- 75 percent of voters support the Blackfoot Clearwater Stewardship Act to expand protections on public lands adjacent to the Bob Marshall Wilderness, similar to past survey years.
- 79 percent of voters support stronger protections for the Badger-Two Medicine area near Glacier National Park and support designating it as a Cultural Heritage Area.
- 79 percent of voters support the proposed Montana Headwaters Legacy Act to expand the number of federally protected rivers in southwestern and central Montana.

When it comes to enacting these proposals into law, two-thirds of voters say they want Congress to act within one year of receiving a proposal developed through a public process with community input.

UM initiative director Rick Graetz said that's not necessarily the case in practice.

"Montanans like to get things done, and they are in favor of politicians acting quickly once everyone has said their piece," he said. "There is a real discrepancy between how quickly voters want Congress to act and how quickly they move on these proposals in reality."

A summary of the results and the full survey is available for download at [2020 Voter Survey](#). The 2020 Public Lands Survey polled 500 voters by landline and cellphone between March 19-24th, with a margin of error of +/- 4.38 percent.

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