

Crown of the Continent and Greater Yellowstone Initiative

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UM Poll: Conservation Support Strong, Quality of Life Down

MISSOULA - A University of Montana voter survey reveals a staggering 62% of Montanans report a decline in their quality of life over the past five years, driving continued strong support for conservation efforts that protect public lands and access.

The [2024 Voter Survey on Public Lands](#) is commissioned by the Crown of the Continent and Greater Yellowstone Initiative (COCGYI) and has tracked public opinion on land and resource issues since 2014. University Professor Rick Graetz points out that despite Montana's changing landscape, bipartisan demand for conservation solutions has remained remarkably consistent over that span.

"Montanans recognize and value our state's natural beauty and heritage and strong bipartisan demand for conservation solutions continues to grow," said Graetz. "Yet, some of the proposals we've tested for a decade are still languishing in Congress. Given the growing concerns over growth and development, it is time for more lawmakers to embrace conservation efforts that preserve some of Montana's natural beauty and heritage and involve local communities."

Quality of Life Down

This year's survey, conducted jointly by Republican and Democratic pollsters, reveals a seven-point increase in the last two years in those saying their quality of life has gotten worse. Pollster Lori Weigel points to a "big jump" in concerns over sprawl, drought, and the changing character of the state, which may be contributing to the reported decline in quality of life.

"We see a big jump this year in the number of Montanans who say they are concerned by development and the changing character of the state," said Weigel. "While the number of residents who say growth is happening too quickly has remained stable at fifty-seven percent, residents are growing more concerned about the impacts of this growth in their communities."

Six in ten Montana voters also say that drought and low snowpack levels are serious problems this year. Last week, the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation released the 2024 Water Supply Outlook Report, which showed much of Montana facing abnormally dry to severe drought conditions following an unusually warm and dry winter.

Recreation and Conservation Support on the Rise

The survey also reveals over the past decade, there has been a slight but steady increase in the number of Montanans visiting public lands. In 2018, the survey showed 89 percent of Montanans had visited national public lands. Only five percent of those surveyed say they have not visited public lands this year. This growing popularity highlights the deep connection Montanans feel towards public lands, says pollster Dave Metz.

"Montana has some of the highest levels of outdoor recreation in the entire country, which translates to high levels of support for protecting public lands," he said.

For example, the survey shows seven in ten Montana voters support the new Public Lands Rule finalized last week by the Bureau of Land Management, which puts conservation on equal footing with extraction. This year's survey also reveals strong backing for several other regional conservation efforts:

- Over seventy percent of voters want a say in whether the U.S. the Forest Service should allow new hardrock mining at the headwaters of the Smith River.
- There is higher support than ever (82%) for the use of national monuments to protect public lands.
- The Blackfoot Clearwater Stewardship Act continues to receive support from over four-in-five voters, which would expand protections on public lands adjacent to the Bob Marshall Wilderness.
- Over four-in-five voters also support the Headwaters Legacy Act to designate additional rivers as Wild and Scenic.
- Nearly a third of voters would prefer Congress increase protections in seven Wilderness Study Areas, which is higher than previous years.

A summary of the results and the full survey is available for download at [2024 Voter Survey](#). The 2024 Public Lands Survey polled 500 voters by phone and online March 23-28, with a margin of error of +/- 4.38%.

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