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Owyhee County report shows strong support for agriculture, livestock grazing, recreational activities from residents four counties in SW Idaho

MURPHY, Idaho -- (Dec. 27, 2016) – The rural-urban divide over natural resources issues can be steep in some parts of America, but a recent Social and Community Assessment for Owyhee County showed widespread approval of livestock grazing, hunting and fishing, mountain biking and horseback riding among more than 450 people surveyed in a four-county area in Southwest Idaho, including Idaho’s most populated urban center.

Support for livestock grazing, for example, ran close to 90 percent among Owyhee County residents, and nearly 80 percent among urban residents and rural residents from Ada, Canyon and Elmore counties. The support was strong, even though the SW Idaho region has grown by an average of 65 percent overall, and more than 91 percent in Ada County and 109 percent in Canyon County during the last 25 years.

While the word “neighbor” might have different meanings and contexts, “Owyhee County leaders and residents should take solace in that many of those neighbors across the region – rural and urban counterparts alike – do perceive the risks and challenges and the benefits of living on and in a working landscape such as the Owyhees,” the report said. “The results reported here demonstrate that many southwestern Idahoans have perspective about costs, benefits and tradeoffs of what it means to live and work here.”

Put another way, the report provides evidence that urban residents of the four-county area in SW Idaho also have strong empathy for Owyhee County ranchers and farmers. In one of the survey questions, more than 60 percent of the respondents in the four-county area indicated that they had friends who farmed or ranched in southwestern Idaho, including 20 percent from the urban zone.

“There seems to be a lot of mutual support and trust for ranchers,” said Neil R. Rimbey, one of the four report authors and a University of Idaho economist in Caldwell. The other authors are J.D. Wulfhorst, Scott Jensen and Paul Lewin.

“This study is unique in that it repeats a design used in a series of assessments in the same landscape, so these results are standing the test of time,” said J.D. Wulfhorst, lead author of the report. “That this region sustains such a high degree of cohesion amid so much social change is a significant finding in contrast to what many studies in the West have documented in energy “boomtowns” or other rapid-growth contexts.”

The report, jointly funded by the Owyhee County Commission, USDA-National Institute of Food and Agriculture, and University of Idaho Extension, was conducted by the University of Idaho Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology. Residents of the four-county area were polled via a random sample of phone numbers, including land lines and cell phones. The report had a 6-7.5 percent margin of error, the authors said.

Owyhee County commissioners were pleased to see the public support for livestock grazing and multiple-uses on public lands and for agriculture overall, since that industry is vitally important to the county, making up approximately 80 percent of the county’s economic output, officials said.

“We were really pleased to see the level of public support for not only ranching and livestock grazing on public lands, but also agriculture in general,” said Kelly Aberasturi, chairman of the commission.

The report also noted that the 280,000-acre Soda Fire revealed strong neighbor-to-neighbor support and outreach to Owyhee County from rural and urban residents alike as well. “Everyone came together to help each other out after the fire,” Aberasturi said. “That was a good thing to see. People in the entire Treasure Valley wanted to do something to help.”

Scott Jensen, an agricultural extension educator for the University of Idaho in Owyhee County, said the contributions from neighboring communities after the Soda fire seemed to be emblematic of the report’s findings. “We sent out 16 pickup loads of donated water, Powerade, and high protein/energy snacks to firefighters (both volunteers and professionals) during the fire,” Jensen said.

After the fire, 200 tons of hay, \$150,000 in cash donations and 40,000 pounds of grass seed were donated from people throughout the region, Jensen said. The materials were provided to ranchers in need in a timely fashion.

Poll respondents expressed deep concern about range fires. More than 60 percent of the respondents – urban and rural alike – indicated that wildfire risk was more of a “severe problem,” compared to other rangeland issues such as sage-grouse habitat, juniper encroachment, livestock grazing and wild horses.

In another interesting survey question, 40-50 percent of the residents said the issue of sage-grouse habitat was “not at all a problem,” despite the focus on that issue at the state and national level. Public support for energy development and off-highway vehicle use was about 20 points below the other uses, coming in at a little less than 60 percent among urban, rural and Owyhee County respondents.

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