

Executive Summary

The Potential Economic Impacts of Wilderness in Doña Ana County

A growing number of people and businesses are drawn to Doña Ana County, New Mexico because of the stunning natural environment, ample recreation opportunities, and high quality of life afforded in part by public lands. And more of them are able to stay and succeed in business because the area also offers educational opportunities, access to larger markets, and a resilient and expanding economy.



The city of Las Cruces, framed by the magnificent Organ Mountains

As a result of this growth, the people, economy, and land-use patterns of Doña Ana County are changing:

- Families, retirees, and business owners from across the U.S. and neighboring Mexico are joining long-time county residents, resulting in a rapidly expanding population.
- The economy is evolving from a heavy reliance on government and agriculture, and becoming more diversified. A range of services and professional jobs account for most new employment, and the largest source of personal income now comes from non-labor sources such as retirement and investments.
- The growing population causes the development and subdivision of more land, resulting in the remaining open lands becoming more precious. Recognizing this, county residents have worked together to produce an open space and trails system plan for Doña Ana County.

Doña Ana County residents are also considering a legislative bill to preserve permanently eight Wilderness Study Areas, and a citizen proposal to include Broad Canyon, East Portillo Mountains, and the Organ Mountain foothills. There is considerable interest in the likely economic impacts of newly designated Wilderness, and how protected public lands will contribute to the area's competitive advantage.

The Report

The full Doña Ana County report (available at www.sonoran.org) uses several types of analysis to evaluate how Wilderness designation might benefit the county.

The report analysis includes:

- Comparison to the West as a whole
- Examination of the economy over 30 years
- Peer county evaluation
- Examination before & after designation

Based on this investigation, the report concludes that protecting a portion of the county's public lands as Wilderness (and a related National Conservation Area) is likely to have positive effects on future prosperity—and that the more public lands afforded these protections the better for the local economy.

The report also finds that protecting important public lands should be one piece of a larger strategy to enhance economic prosperity, including higher paying jobs, in Doña Ana County. This larger strategy includes advanced education and workforce training opportunities, better access to capital, stimulating entrepreneurship, support for industry clusters, and, perhaps most importantly, cooperation among community leaders to carry out these initiatives.

This report is designed to stimulate informed discussion by the public, elected officials and business owners on the future of Doña Ana County's economy, the importance of natural amenities, and the need to work together to achieve common goals.

As Doña Ana County residents consider the decision about whether—and to what extent—to protect and manage public lands in the county as Wilderness, they are interested in the effect designation could have on future economic development.

The analysis in this report suggests that there are many reasons to believe the county would benefit from Wilderness designation. They are as follows:

- The entrepreneurs who will bring higher-wage jobs to the county, or create them locally, often prioritize areas with a high quality of life, especially protected natural amenities and outdoor recreational opportunities. This high quality of life and sense of place are also key elements in keeping existing businesses and talented young people in the area.
- Doña Ana County already has all of the factors in place that correlate West-wide with faster-than-average economic growth and increased earnings, and these factors are more potent when packaged with Wilderness and other forms of public lands protection.
- The establishment of 200,000+ acres of Wilderness Study Areas (lands effectively managed as Wilderness) in 1980 coincided with a period of sustained economic growth and had no visible negative effects on the Doña Ana economy.
- Counties similar to Doña Ana with designated Wilderness tend to be more prosperous than those without designated Wilderness.
- The economies of Doña Ana's peer counties have grown and prospered after Wilderness designation.



Upper Left: People who live in Dona Ana County have an opportunity to look at the big picture, work collaboratively, and create practical solutions to the changing land-use patterns in southern New Mexico.

Lower Left: Petroglyphs in Broad Canyon

Pictured above: Mount Riley from the Potrillos Wilderness Study Area.