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# Wyoming Public Opinion on Natural Resource Conservation and Development

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Housing and industrial development in Wyoming, especially in rural areas, has been the subject of statewide polls and surveys during the past several years to assess citizen opinions on issues such as water and preserving Wyoming's family farms and ranches, open spaces, wildlife habitat, and scenic vistas. As one Wyoming resident explained, citizens are concerned with preserving what makes Wyoming "Wyoming." This publication presents results from a poll conducted in 2007, supplemented with summaries of similar studies recently conducted in Wyoming.

## 2007 Poll

A statewide poll was developed through a partnership among the Ruckelshaus Institute of Environment and Natural Resources at the University of Wyoming, the Wyoming Stock Growers Association, and the Wyoming Chapter of The Nature Conservancy. The poll was conducted by two independent polling firms: Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin & Associates; and Public Opinion Strategies. The Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and the global office of The Nature Conservancy provided funding for the survey. Six hundred telephone interviews were conducted in May 2007 with randomly-selected registered voters across Wyoming, with a margin of sampling error of +/- 4.0 percent. The intent of the poll was to gauge the public's support or opposition to various broad conservation concepts. Specific details on the funding or implementation of these concepts were not discussed in the survey.

Overall, the poll reflected Wyomingites' views that the current and future condition of the state is very positive. Voters advocated using some of the state's current wealth to invest in programs that would keep water in the state and protect wildlife, farms, and ranches. They regard "boom times" as an opportunity to preserve characteristics that make Wyoming a special place.

*Wyoming voters view the availability of water (particularly for agricultural purposes), loss of family farms and ranches, and the fragmentation of natural areas and ranch lands by development as the most serious conservation issues.*

Poll participants were read a list of various issues and asked to rank each as "extremely serious," "very serious," "somewhat serious," or "not a problem." The issue of greatest concern among Wyomingites was the availability of water for farming and ranching, with 57 percent of respondents regarding it as either an extremely or very serious problem. Other conservation issues of serious concern included maintaining family farms and ranches, natural areas

being split up by new housing development, availability of water resources, and maintaining big game herds (Table 1).

The existence and productivity of farms and ranches in Wyoming are a primary concern among voters, with 74 percent of voters indicating a personal benefit from the presence of farms and ranches. In addition, 26 percent statewide indicated their household income is dependent on the farming and ranching economy, increasing to 39 percent from those self-identified as living in rural areas.

***Wyoming voters display strong support for dedicating existing revenues to conservation and particularly support the Wyoming Legislature fully funding the Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resource Trust to \$200 million by 2010.***

Seventy-seven percent of respondents agreed with the statement that wildlife is an important part of their daily lives. In addition, 74 percent of voters supported the “setting aside of more state money to protect land, air, water, wildlife habitat, and ranch lands,” with 37 percent indicating they “strongly favor” this concept.

Interestingly, reflective of the voter sentiments stated above, the Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resource Trust (WWNRT) was created in 2005 to fund projects designed to improve and conserve wildlife habitat or natural resource values. In turn, the trust is funded by interest earned on a permanent account, donations, and legislative appropriation. (For more information, see the WWNRT Web site, <http://wwnrt.state.wy.us>.) This poll tested the public’s awareness of the WWNRT and found that only

33 percent of respondents knew a lot or something about the WWNRT, but of this 33 percent, 80 percent indicated support of the WWNRT and its goals. This support is consistent in all demographic sub-groups and geographic regions in the state.

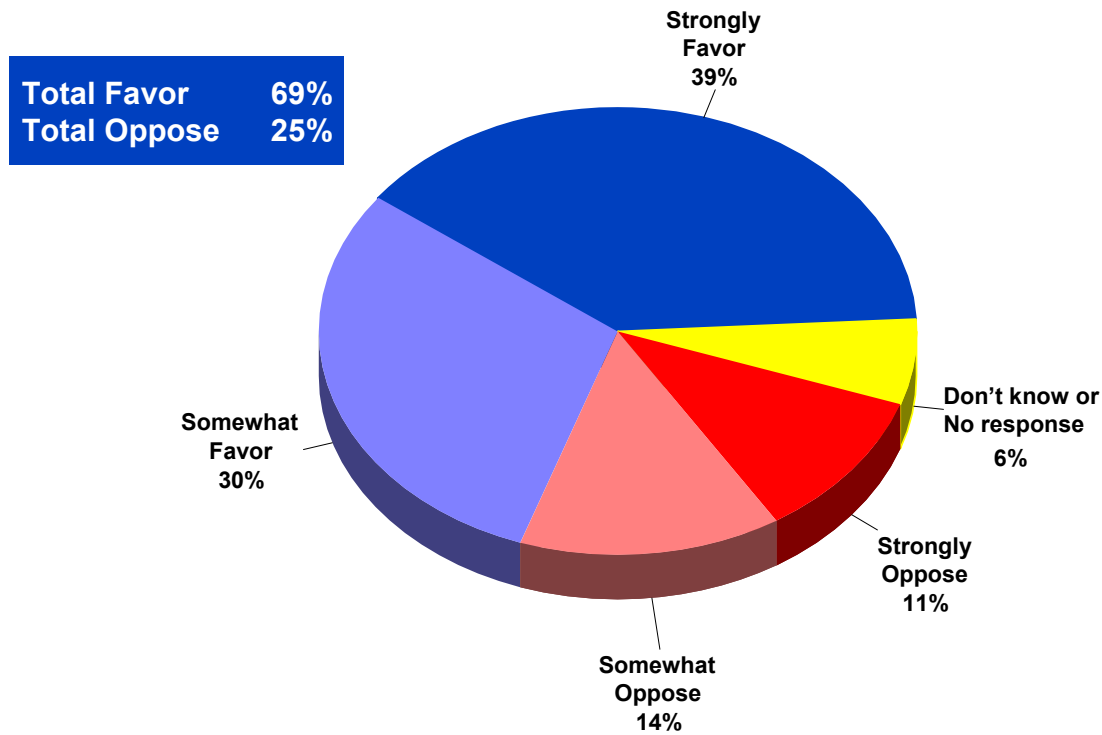
After asking about voter familiarity with the WWNRT, all voters were read a short statement about the WWNRT (as described on the WWNRT Web site), and then asked to what degree they would support funding the WWNRT to its full amount of \$200 million by 2010. Seven in 10 voters either strongly or somewhat favored fully funding the WWNRT by 2010 (Figure 1).

Wyoming voters who support full funding of the WWNRT indicated a desire to take advantage of the strong economy to preserve unique or special characteristics of the state. They consider wildlife, wide open spaces, and other types of natural areas as part of Wyoming’s unique character, and they recognize the recreational and economic value of the outdoors.

In contrast, 25 percent of voters did not support full funding for the WWNRT and typically expressed three main concerns. They felt Wyoming faces other more important issues (such as education and highway construction/maintenance) that have a greater need for funding. They expressed concern that the funds could be misused, or they stated the current \$57 million in the trust is enough and they do not see a need for additional money to be placed into the trust. It is important to note that only the annual interest gained from the \$57 million currently in the trust is available to spend on habitat projects.

**Table 1. Conservation issues of greatest concern to Wyoming voters.**

| Conservation Issue                                                       | Extremely or Very Serious Problem |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Availability of water for farming and ranching                           | 57 %                              |
| Loss of family farms and ranches                                         | 47 %                              |
| Natural areas and ranch lands being split up by new housing development  | 44 %                              |
| Availability of water for recreation and wildlife                        | 40 %                              |
| Decline in number of big game animals, such as elk, moose, and mule deer | 32 %                              |
| Natural areas and ranch lands being split up by oil and gas development  | 31 %                              |



**Figure 1. Support for full funding of the WWNRT (\$200 million) by the year 2010.**

*A majority of voters are willing to pay increased local taxes in order to obtain matching funds from the WWNRT for conservation projects in their communities.*

Poll participants were presented with the following information and then asked to what degree they would favor or oppose the increase of local taxes to obtain state matching funds from the WWNRT for local conservation needs.

*“Additional funds raised at the state level could be used to help local communities preserve wildlife habitat, ranch lands, and water close to home by matching money generated at the local level, thereby cutting in half the costs of local efforts.”*

The majority (55 percent) of respondents supported the increase of local taxes to “obtain state matching funds to protect water, wildlife habitat, and ranch lands in their county or community.” Of that 55 percent who are willing to increase local taxes, 39 percent are willing to pay an additional \$50 to \$100 per year toward a matching-fund program to protect water, wildlife, and habitat.

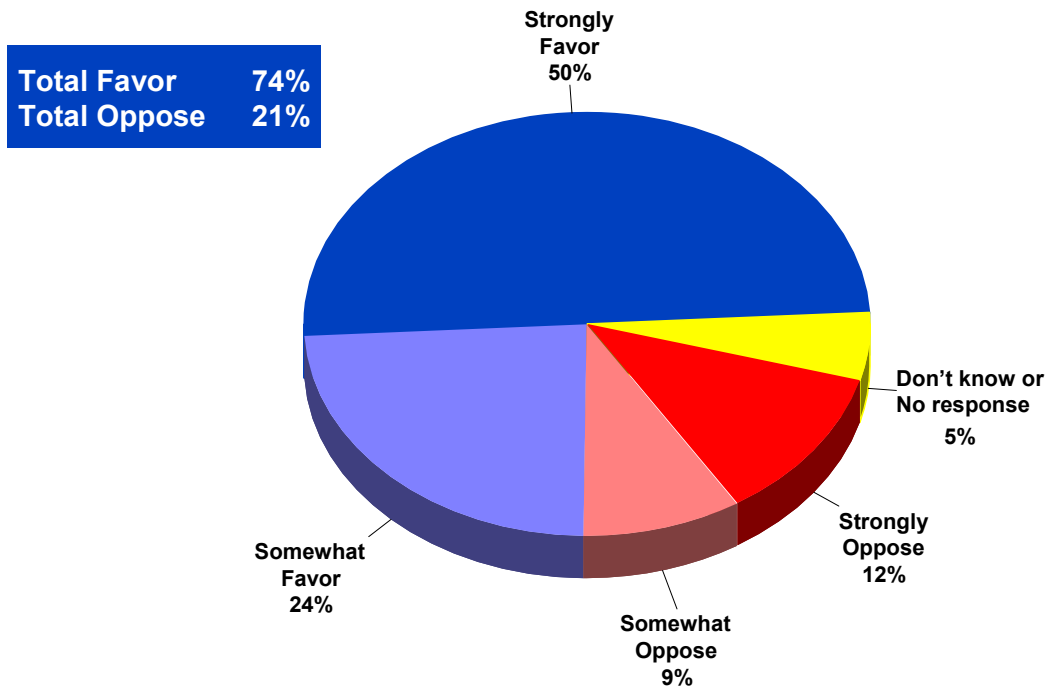
*Three-quarters of Wyoming voters support the authorization of impact fees on developers who build in areas*

*where development may impact water, wildlife, and/or working ranches.*

Fifty percent of participants reported they “strongly favored,” and 24 percent “somewhat favored” the creation of a state law authorizing impact fees on developers who build in areas where development may impact water, wildlife, and/or working ranches (Figure 2). Such a fee may act as a deterrent to development on environmentally sensitive lands. In addition, imposing impact fees at local levels was supported by a majority of both self-identified conservatives (67 percent) and liberals (86 percent).

*Voters support state funding of many specific conservation projects, including preserving water, agriculture, tourism, open spaces, and scenic vistas.*

Voters indicated that keeping and storing Wyoming water was a top concern, closely followed by maintaining the strength of Wyoming’s agricultural and tourism industries (Table 2). A majority of voters also gave priority to protecting open spaces, water quality, our Western heritage and rangelands, the greater Yellowstone region, fish and wildlife habitat, and small town character.



**Figure 2. Support for authorization of local development impact fees.**

**Table 2. Top state-funded conservation priorities of Wyoming voters.**

| Conservation Project                                                     | Extremely or Very Important |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Keeping and storing more Wyoming water in the state                      | 86%                         |
| Maintaining the strength of Wyoming’s agriculture and tourism industries | 77%                         |
| Preserving wide open spaces and scenic vistas                            | 73%                         |
| Protecting the water quality of rivers, lakes, and streams               | 70%                         |
| Preserving family farms and ranches                                      | 67%                         |
| Protecting the greater Yellowstone region                                | 66%                         |
| Protecting fish and wildlife habitat                                     | 66%                         |
| Protecting our farming and ranching heritage                             | 66%                         |
| Preserving our Western way of life                                       | 61%                         |
| Protecting the character of our small town communities                   | 60%                         |
| Preserving historic trails and ranches                                   | 60%                         |
| Protecting rangelands                                                    | 57%                         |



## Additional Studies and Surveys, 2004 to 2007

Results of the 2007 poll reinforce other recent studies and surveys that posed similar questions to Wyoming residents.

### 2004 Statewide Poll

A statewide poll conducted in 2004 of 500 randomly-selected registered Wyoming voters revealed messages consistent with this 2007 poll about the importance of working family farms and ranches, wildlife habitat, open spaces, and private property rights (Boelter and Mays 2004). Participants in the 2007 poll were asked some of the same questions asked in 2004 to assess change in voter attitudes over time. Voters in 2004 also highly ranked efforts to protect water quality and provide water for agriculture and municipalities. These messages have not changed in importance to Wyoming voters from the 2004 to 2007 poll.

### 2007 Community Assessment Summary

In 2007, the Wyoming Rural Development Council (WRDC) published a synopsis reviewing seven years of community assessments. The WRDC strives to provide

communities with an affordable means of “assessing their problems and challenges, identifying their assets, and defining issues and projects that they would like to see accomplished in the next two, five, 10 and 20 years” (WRDC 2007).

Overall, some of the common problems and challenges identified in the assessments include lack of affordable housing, needed infrastructure improvements, the out-migration of youths due to lack of jobs and opportunities in their hometowns, overall lack of good paying jobs in rural communities, the need for beautification in rural communities, lack of vision and planning, growth in the rural communities being decided by external forces, and an overall lack of activities and services for youths, families, and seniors.

The overall major strengths and assets include the people (biggest asset), friendliness, people pulling together in times of need, great volunteerism, small size of the community, low crime, the location and rural atmosphere, natural resources, outdoor recreational activities of every possible type, and good community leadership. Thirty



percent of communities listed open spaces or scenery as a strength or asset, and 56 percent similarly listed location and recreation.

### 2007 Albany County Comprehensive Plan Survey

This survey of 500 Albany County residents distributed geographically throughout the county, conducted by Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin & Associates, is being used to help develop the Albany County Comprehensive Plan, which will be used to help guide future growth and development.

Poll participants were asked to evaluate several statements and indicate whether they “strongly agree,” “somewhat agree,” “somewhat disagree,” or “strongly disagree.” Participants either strongly or somewhat agreed with the following statements:

- *Albany County should promote continued agricultural uses of land (64 percent strongly agreed; 26 percent somewhat agreed).*
- *Albany County should guide development to protect natural resources such as groundwater, floodplains, wetlands, and crucial wildlife habitat (80 percent strongly agreed; 16 percent somewhat agreed).*
- *Albany County should encourage development to occur in areas that are “growth efficient,” meaning*

*they are easy for sheriff, fire department, and emergency medical services to reach (60 percent strongly agreed; 33 percent somewhat agreed).*

Participants also responded to a list of approaches Albany County could take to guide future growth and development. Participants strongly or somewhat supported the following approaches:

- *Requiring developers to pay higher fees if they develop in areas of the county less suitable for development, for example, in very remote areas of the county (41 percent strongly supported; 23 percent somewhat supported).*
- *Providing incentives for developers to locate new development in areas appropriate for development (44 strongly supported; 38 percent somewhat supported).*
- *Preserving large areas of open space in the county (61 strongly supported; 26 percent somewhat supported).*

### 2007 University of Wyoming Study

In 2007, a master’s student at the University of Wyoming analyzed 2,291 survey responses from Wyoming and Colorado landowners on the important factors affecting producers’ preferences regarding the provision of open space. In general, the survey showed landowners ac-

knowledge open space is important. They recognize the value of having such a resource available, not only for themselves but for the general public as well. Landowners believe conserving open space is important for the provision of aesthetics, to maintain production, and for maintaining wildlife habitat. Although they agree on the aesthetically appealing value of open space, landowners also believe the general public thinks open space is important because of the recreational opportunities it provides (Miller 2007).

## Conclusion

Overall, the 2007 poll sponsored by the Ruckelshaus Institute, the Wyoming Stock Growers Association, and the Wyoming Chapter of The Nature Conservancy reflected a positive outlook on Wyoming's future. Voters want to act now to protect what makes Wyoming special for future generations by dedicating existing state revenues to conservation while the state has the financial means to do so. The characteristics of Wyoming that voters wish to protect are water, wildlife, and family farms and ranches. This is consistent with the results from other polls and community assessments. Every region and voter subgroup expressed strong support for fully funding the WWNRT. Furthermore, voters indicated their willing-



ness to raise local taxes to obtain matching funds for state-funded conservation projects. Wyoming voters also support the authorization of local impact fees on development in certain areas.

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The Ruckelshaus Institute of Environment and Natural Resources is a University of Wyoming program to advance effective decision-making on environmental and natural resource issues through research, policy analysis, education, process support, and outreach.

The Wyoming Stock Growers Association is the 135-year-old trade association of the state's cattle industry providing advocacy on industry issues at the state and national levels, producer information, and public education while fostering stewardship of both private and public natural resources.

The Nature Conservancy is a leading conservation organization working around the world to protect ecologically important lands and waters for nature and people. The Wyoming Chapter collaborates with a broad range of organizations throughout the state on public policy initiatives, voluntary conservation agreements with willing landowners, and research and stewardship on the Conservancy's ranches and preserves.



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